

FILM STUDY GUIDE FOR TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD SEEING THE FILM THROUGH THE LENS OF MEDIA LITERACY

SETTING

Historical Background

Students should be encouraged to explore [the Depression](#) period in US history. In the opening narration by Scout, she refers to the Depression twice when she says:

"Maycomb was a tired old town, even in 1932 when I first knew it.....Although Maycomb County had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself."

The phrase "nothing to fear but fear itself" refers to a line in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first inaugural speech to Congress in 1933, broadcast nationally by radio.

Atticus refers to the Depression in the scene which follows: after accepting payment from Mr. Cunningham, he explains to Scout "the crash hit them the hardest."
(see recommended websites, lesson plans, readings below)

Students should also be encouraged to consider the time period in American history in which this film was released, 1963: the early days of the [Civil Rights movement](#). Teachers can encourage student exploration of topics like: [Scottsboro Boys Trial](#); [Montgomery Bus Boycott](#); [Rosa Parks](#); and [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)

"The Maycomb courtroom in *To Kill A Mockingbird* is an almost perfect copy of one in Monroeville, Alabama, where author Harper Lee grew up. Scout is certainly the author herself and Atticus Finch is modeled on her father, A.C. Lee, a lawyer in Monroeville. Jem and Scout's peculiar friend Dill is based on author Truman Capote, who was a childhood friend and neighbor of Harper Lee's. Harper Lee attended law school at the University of Alabama but did not graduate. The story is fictional, although A.C. Lee once represented two blacks who killed a merchant and were hanged in the Monroeville jail."¹



photo of actual courtroom in Monroeville, Alabama
image from: <http://www.frontiernet.net/~mchm/>



Publicity still showing interior courtroom set

"Although *To Kill A Mockingbird* is literally a story that presents a new South evolving out of the old, this metaphoric transformation in terms of race relations was something the entire mass audience understood in 1962. Despite Universal's initial hesitations about the movie, the picture proved to be a major critical and commercial success, and [Horton's Foote's](#) reputation as a screenwriter was

established in Hollywood for the remainder of the decade." 2 (Additional note: according to the text *Box Office Champs*, TKAM was #8 of the top grossing films of 1963, earning \$7.5 million.)

ART DIRECTION/PRODUCTION DESIGN

"the art director must convince viewers that the world of the film is undeniably real ..." 3

"...it is the art director who stands between the screenplay and the director of the film, turning the printed page into a place real or fanciful, constructed or found, and who does so for a price the producer can live with."

"...if an art director is going his or her job well, we as spectators are not consciously admiring the 'look' as separate from the story unfolding and the characters involved." 4



Henry Bumstead
Art Director
To Kill A Mockingbird

[Storyboards](#)-
a major tool
of the art
director

See original
storyboards
from the film
and compare
them to
actual
frames
taken from
the motion
picture

Setting involves time and location. The challenge for the Art Directors of *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Alexander Golitzen and Henry Bumstead, who won the Academy Award that year) was to create a setting that was not only authentic and believable but also realistic. The setting for the film is the Depression era South in the state of Alabama. The producers of the film traveled there but decided the cost of taking the production "on location" was too high. So, the question became, how to create the fictional Macomb, Alabama on a studio back lot in California?

"Art directors I think are one of the first people to get scripts, many times even before the director for *Mockingbird*. I went to Monroeville Alabama and I guess we rode for 3 or 4 hours and we took pictures. And I came home and designed the set all on the lot. We finished the film and I began getting calls from many different top art directors of MGM..and 'where did we shoot that picture', 'whereabouts in Alabama'? And I said 'we did it on the back lot', and they said come on Bobby you're kidding' and said 'no, it's all on the backlot'...and they said 'God that's a helluva job'...And so I guess I began to realize then maybe it was a very good job, so I guess it was because I won the Oscar that year for it..."5

Watch an edited two minute highlight reel from TKAM [here](#); notice the set design.
(Real Player required)



Frame (above) taken from opening scene; showing homes on street, part of exterior set for TKAM.



Publicity still photo also showing exterior set, same scene.

FROM THE 1963 PROMOTION KIT

"One of the largest outdoor sets to be built in Hollywood in recent years is \$225,000, 15 acre southern village built for use in 'To Kill A Mockingbird,'....to avoid taking an entire production company into the deep south for exterior sequences in the picture, (producer) Pakula and (director) Mulligan decided to 'bring the south to Hollywood.' Under the supervision of art directors Alexander Golitzen and Henry Bumstead, a complete southern village was erected on the Universal back lot. The set contains more than 30 buildings and is divided into two principal sections---a downtown area with courthouse and surrounding stores and a residential street. This town actually duplicates sections of Monroeville, Ala., present home of Harper Lee.....Cost of the set would have been at least \$100,000 more had it not been for the ingenuity of Golitzen and Bumstead. Learning that a number of clapboard houses of the same general style as many Monroeville homes were being demolished to make room for a new Los Angeles Freeway, Golitzen and Bumstead made arrangements to buy a dozen of these houses. After they had been moved to the studio back lot and slightly remodeled to match specific Monroeville houses, the total cost to Universal was approximately \$25,000. To have built them from the ground up would have cost close to \$125,000, according to Golitzen." 6

" You know something strange is that the world that production designer Henry Bumstead had created not only the street but here on what is the square on the backlot at Universal, I had people for years after the movie opened, come to me and say 'I know exactly where you shot that,' and they would mention some town in the South.....and they were very dismayed when I said 'I'm sorry, but it was done at Universal Studios.'" (Robert Mulligan, Director, TKAM) 7

Background on the Setting



Representation: what do the clothes worn by Mr. Cunningham and Atticus communicate to us about the social status of the characters?

Notice too, how Atticus is strategically placed higher in the frame than Mr. Cunningham, again sending a message about status. Even Scout looks down on him.

"The story takes place in a southern town in the 1930's. Our first impression is that of a poor yet charming town in which people extend general courtesies to one another. An example (above) of this is seen when Mr. Cunningham pays Atticus for his legal work with chestnuts. Mr. Cunningham is embarrassed by his need to barter

for the legal services, while Atticus attempts to reassure him of his gratitude.

Another important aspect to the setting is that we are introduced to the town through the eyes of children. And like the children, we see a seemingly simple society unraveling to reveal its darker side; while other previously held fears are proven wrong.

An analysis of the setting cannot be complete without mentioning the symbolic use of black and white film stock. *To Kill A Mockingbird* was produced in 1962. Color film had been used extensively prior to this production. Why would such an ambitious project not employ the latest technological advancements of the time? It seems that the use of black and white film stock had two purposes. First, it emphasizes the fact that the film took place in the past. Since this is actually a period piece, the film stock gives the picture an historical feel. Also, in 1962, the south was still dealing with serious forms of segregation. Perhaps the use of black and white allowed southern white viewers the luxury of examining racism in a historical and academic context. Second, the basic symbolic element of black and white film stock supports the racial viewpoints of the time that simplistically categorized the world into two camps consisting of black and white. In this backdrop we are introduced to Scout, Jem, and Atticus." 8

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See [bibliography](#) for all source material cited here