

## Part B: Essay

Set in the early 1930's of Alabama, a rural southern state in the United States, "To kill a mockingbird" is a novel about the social struggles of a town full of racism and prejudice. The novel is constructed of many events and characters which were directly derived from or influenced by the personal and historical context of the author, Harper Lee. Context is a major factor which affects the characters and plot of a literary work. In this novel, there were many examples including Atticus Finch, Tom Robinson and his trial, Alexandra Finch and Dill Harris, who were all impacted by real-life events and people.

One of the most important characters in the novel is Atticus Finch, the father of the protagonist and a lawyer who fights for the justice of a black man. The character of Atticus was greatly impacted by Lee's personal context, as he was based upon Harper Lee's father, Amasa Coleman Lee. An example which represents this is the quote spoken by Atticus while explaining the true meaning of courage to his son: "It's when you know you're licked before you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what." Application of inclusive language through the use of the specific pronoun, "you", reflects Atticus' belief that courage can come from anybody, not just a certain gender or age group. Lee has used this quote to show the real courage of people who stood up to the discriminative treatment of people of different races. Furthermore, it displays Amasa Lee's attitude as a lawyer who unsuccessfully defended two African American men who were falsely accused of crimes. Like Atticus, Amasa Lee must also have known that the trial was unlikely to end well because of the racism and injustice in the court at the time. However, he persisted and defended them to the best of his ability. Therefore, personal context of the author has been used to portray the character of Atticus Finch.

As well as personal context, the plot and characters of "To kill a mockingbird" were also impacted by the historical context of the era the author grew up in. The character of Tom Robinson and the event of his trial is a major part of the novel which was largely influenced by the personal experiences of Harper Lee and the historical events which occurred before or during the time she wrote the novel. This is shown in the quote "In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins" which is spoken by Atticus Finch who is explaining to his children about the inequity in court, a place where everyone should be treated equally. The technique of a high modality word "always" portrays the social struggles of the unjustly and prejudiced way which people of coloured skin were treated in the Southern United States in the 1930's. The Scottsboro Boys and their trial in Alabama, 1931, is a historical event which demonstrates this. Harper Lee would have known of the group of 9 young African American men who were tried and sentenced to death over alleged rape of two white women, as it was in Alabama and well known to the public. Additionally, as a lawyer's daughter, she would have been conscious of the injustices and unfair treatment of African Americans from observing her father's court case and just from growing up in that era and environment. In conclusion, the historical context of the wrongful trial of the Scottsboro Boys and the authors personal context through her experiences in court helped to shape the character of Tom Robinson and his trial.

Alexandra Finch is another character in "To kill a mockingbird" whose representation was affected by historical and personal context. The historical theme which the characterisation

of Aunt Alexandra was largely dependent upon is the Southern Belle. When Aunt Alexandra arrives at the Finch home, she explains to Scout, "We decided that it would be best for you to have some feminine influence." In this quote, the technique of diction is used to show the character's decisive attitude about the conventions of raising a female child during the early 1900's in the Southern States while also depicting the gender roles which were played in the society of that time which Lee grew up in. The choice of the word "best" indicates this. Furthermore, the quote reflects the imposition of femininity on girls from a young age and the pressure which existed for them to conform to society's standards of the southern belle. Southern belles were expected to be respectable, lady-like women who were dedicated to their family by raising children and supporting the family, as well as serving the community. As Scout mentions in another part of the novel, she was expected to wear dresses and play with toys and dolls. Therefore, this indicates the effect of both personal and historical context on the representation of Alexandra Finch.

Harper Lee's childhood experiences which form part of her personal context were the basis of the character Dill Harris: he was directly based off Lee's childhood friend Truman Capote. This is evident in the quote "The thing is, what I'm tryin' to say is - they do get on a lot better without me, I can't help them any." Spoken by Dill about his parents, it reflects the representation of Truman as Dill. In the extract "I can't help them any," Lee uses tone to depict Dill's feelings of downheartedness and helplessness about being neglected by his parents. Like Dill and Scout, Capote met and became friends with Lee as her neighbour in Lee's hometown, Monroeville, where Capote was sent to live with his cousins, as he was unwanted by his mother. As a result, Lee's personal context of her childhood experiences has once more affected the portrayal of one of the characters in the novel: Dill Harris.

"To kill a mockingbird" is a novel which reflects society's issues of race and class which were present in the early 1900's of the Deep South. Harper Lee has based many of the characters and events upon her personal experiences in that era. These include the characters of Atticus Finch and Dill Harris who Lee's father and friend were the basis of, Tom Robinson and his court case which was influenced by the Scottsboro boys trial, and Alexandra Finch who was represented as a Southern Belle. Therefore, it is evident that the portrayal of the plot and characters of "To kill a mockingbird" were influenced by the personal and historical context of the author, Harper Lee.