

1. Choose a novel or short story or a work of non-fiction which explores a theme which you find interesting.

By referring to appropriate techniques, show how the writer explores this theme.

Harper Lee published her highly acclaimed novel 'To Kill a Mockingbird' in 1960 at a time when black Americans were struggling for their Civil Rights in a segregated society. By **setting** the story in 1930's Alabama, Harper Lee was able to call on her own experiences and memories of a very racist small town. Though the story is fictional, we can assume that Maycomb is loosely based on the town, Monroeville, where Lee was brought up by her father (a lawyer). Lee explores the **themes** of growing up and racism, through the eyes of the **narrator**, Scout, a brave, intelligent tomboy who is only five years old when the story begins. The town and the theme come alive for us as Scout narrates the story using believable **dialogue** (with appropriate and entertaining use of dialect), **describing** local **characters** and small events that **foreshadow** the **climax** of the story, which is the trial of Tom Robinson - a black man accused of the rape of a white woman, Mayella Ewing.

From the first description the setting, we are introduced to the narrator and the town: 'Maycomb ... was a tired old town when I first knew it.' The words 'when I first knew it' tell us that she's starting this tale of her memories much later in her life. This clever choice of narrator allows us to see the senseless but *ordinary and largely unquestioned* quality of racist attitudes from an innocent child's point of view with the added benefit of interjections from the grown up Scout. Initially, Lee's **description** uses **imagery** to give a sense of heat and lethargy: 'by nightfall' she says that ladies 'were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum'. The **simile, alliteration** of 's' and **connotations** give the impression of safe, delightful sensations - we could almost consume these edible ladies. However she goes on to emphasise some of the problems of this **setting**, 'there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with'. By repeating 'no' she is referring to the negative economic and social effects of the Great Depression. Much later in the novel, after the horrible disappointment of the verdict in the trial of Tom Robinson, Jem (Scout's brother) reflects a similar feeling about the town before he understood the effects of what their father Atticus called 'Maycomb's disease' (racism). Jem says, 'It's like bein' a caterpillar in a cocoon...Like somethin' asleep wrapped up in a warm place.' Maycomb seemed like such a sweet, wholesome place **but Harper Lee makes us, the readers, wake up and question 'normality' just as the children have to do - what are the neighbours thinking and doing when it comes to big moral issues like good and evil, justice and the law - and racism?** The story goes on to describe how these likeable townsfolk can become a lynch mob, in a place where little children use the word 'nigger' and even a ladies 'Christian Missionary Society' regularly refer to their black servants (all of the black people in the novel are in subservient jobs) as 'sulky darkies'.

Lee uses the structure of the book and the character of Atticus to open our eyes to the truth of the situation. Throughout Book One she **foreshadows** the important events of the trial of Tom Robinson in Part two by having Scout and Jem learn lessons that will help them later. In the creation of their father, Atticus Finch, Harper Lee has developed a **character**, who, with his words and actions, instills in them his own liberal, honorable, open-minded approach to the racist world of Maycomb. When he tells Scout to try to understand her teacher's point of view, he tells her 'climb into his skin and walk around in it.' This is the basis of Atticus' approach to life - to attempt to understand and empathise with EVERYONE. For example, he uses it to help them understand a horrible racist old neighbour, Mrs Dubose, who, it transpires, is fighting a morphine addiction. **He sees the brave person behind the mad racist (who has told his children that Atticus is, '... no better than the niggers and trash he works for!') to show the children the 'true bravery' of her struggle to die 'clean'. He helps them to appreciate the situations of the two innocent 'mockingbirds' in the story - Boo Radley, whose family situation has damaged his mind and Tom Robinson, the black man who, though obviously innocent, is killed by the society in which he lives. Atticus brings this insight and integrity to every aspect of his life - especially his role as defender of Tom Robinson.**

By the time Lee has built up to the trial in Part Two, we have a very clear understanding of the dangerous yet 'everyday' nature of racism in Maycomb. Atticus is criticized as a "nigger-lover" for having taken on Tom's case and actually giving it his full attention. Even little children at school attack Scout with this phrase. He has to guard the prisoner from a lynch mob made up of his neighbours and 'friends'. He explains to Jem that 'a mob is made up of people', he doesn't agree with them but he tries to understand why they behave in this way. He uses all his intelligence and experience to prove that Tom Robinson, a respectable black man, did not rape Mayella Ewell, a lonely, uneducated, poor white woman who is abused by her father. The case has been fabricated because, in this society, it cannot be accepted that a white woman would approach and be rejected by a black man. So the black man has to die to keep her (white) reputation 'pure'. Tom Robinson is mocked by the prosecuting council and called 'Boy' and 'Son'. **Our narrator is still too young to follow the complexities of the trial so Lee has her describe Jem's absorption in**

the case and we share his shock and disillusionment over the treatment of Tom, over the verdict and over Tom's subsequent shooting (as mentioned earlier).

Lee creates tension in us through the narrator, Scout's, reports of Jem's excitement and dawning understanding of his father's tactics. Along with Jem we assume that Atticus must win the case - his evidence and questioning put Tom's innocence beyond doubt. In his summing up he appeals to the integrity and patriotism of the jury by saying:

' all men are created equal. I'm no idealist to believe firmly in the integrity of our courts and of our jury system. That's no ideal to me. That is a living, working reality.'

However, his only triumph is that he created enough doubt that the jury debated for five hours before bringing in the only verdict they, in that society, could - guilty. Our only comfort is to listen to Miss Maudie, the Finches' wise neighbour who points out that: by the judge choosing Atticus to defend; by having a fair Sheriff and through the work of Atticus himself, 'well, we're making a step - it's just a baby step, but it's a step.'

This could be left out

Lee has created a memorable, moving novel, which explores the theme of racism without giving any false or easy conclusions. Through Scout's engaging **narration** and the creation of believable **characters** and **setting**, Lee makes us accept how a quiet little town can actually be a seething mess of intolerance. Perhaps it might encourage us to look at our own small town 'everyday' behaviour? The use of the two part **structure** and **foreshadowing** mean that by the time of the **climax** we have an understanding of why the verdict was **guilty** even while we share Jem's horror when he asks Atticus, 'How could they do it, how could they?'

You could discuss characters:

- ☒ Calpurnia - subservient yet respected. Self educated. Has to speak differently with them and with her own folk? Why?
- ☒ Dolphus Raymond - married to a black woman. Looks after his family well yet pretends to be alcoholic to 'explain' this preference. Makes it easier to accept for the white community.
- ☒ Aunt A's 'polite' racism - talks about 'them'/attitude to Calpurnia and the case.

Are any of the black character fully rounded or do they just fit roles? Cal - wise old woman. Tom - respectable, decent martyr figure. Reverend - holy, respectful, knows his place.