

Standards Focus: Exploring Expository Writing*Author Biography: Harper Lee (1926-)*

Nelle Harper Lee was born in the small town Monroeville, Alabama on April 26, 1926 to Amasa Coleman Lee, a lawyer and former newspaper editor, and Frances Finch Lee. The youngest of four, Harper Lee was a self-confessed tomboy who enjoyed reading and writing at a very young age. She went to the local grammar school and high school in Monroeville with author Truman Capote (*In Cold Blood*), upon whom the character Dill is said to be based.

After high school, Lee attended Huntingdon College in Montgomery, then transferred to the University of Alabama to study law. After three years, Lee realized her passion was not law, but writing, and she quit school to move to New York just one semester short of receiving her law degree.

After moving to New York, Lee supported herself by working as an airline reservation clerk while writing short stories about her life in the South. In 1957, she submitted her short stories to the J.B. Lippincott publishing company. Agents of the firm encouraged her to take a year to string her short stories into one major work. After two and a half years, Lee completed the novel and in 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published.

To Kill a Mockingbird became an international success, and was eventually translated into over thirty languages. It won the *Pulitzer Prize* for fiction in 1961 and was adapted for screen in 1962. The film, starring Gregory Peck, was nominated for eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Peck received the Academy Award for Best Actor.

In 1966, Lee was appointed to the National Council of Arts by then President Lyndon B. Johnson, and has received several honorary doctorates from universities such as the University of Alabama, Sewanee University, and Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama.

Today, Lee prefers a private existence, giving few interviews and speeches. After decades of silence, Lee was prompted by Oprah Winfrey to put pen to paper yet again, writing a letter which appeared in the July 2006 issue of Oprah's *O* magazine. The letter describes a time in Lee's life in which books were scarce, and there were no public libraries, yet her parents continued to read anything they could get their hands on to the young Lee. She lamented our modern-day lack of attraction to books, asking Oprah, "Can you imagine curling up in bed to read a computer?" and declaring "I still plod along with books. I prefer to search library stacks because when I work to learn something, I remember it."

Lee has also been recently seen at the annual essay writing contest for high school students, held for the last six years at the University of Alabama. In January of 2006, she gave her first interview since 1964 to the New York Times at the essay contest award ceremony. "They always see new things in it," she said of the student essays about *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "And the way they relate it to their lives now is really quite incredible." To date, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has remained her only published novel.

Standards Focus: Historical Context*The Great Depression*

One of the worst periods in United States history was a time called the Great Depression. The many theories about the specific causes of this era are debated, however the widespread poverty and social despair that resulted are indisputable.

During the 1920s, America was experiencing a time of great prosperity and living a life of excess; people had a lot of money and weren't afraid to spend it on new inventions such as automobiles, refrigerators, and the radio. For the first time, people had credit cards, and were spending more than they made. Individuals were living life to the fullest, and the U.S. economy began to thrive at an unprecedented rate.



from the *Migrant Mother* Collection
by Dorothea Lange

In 1929, on a day that came to be called "Black Tuesday," the stock market crashed. This meant that the value of money had lost its worth. Essentially, what someone could have bought with one dollar the day before now cost three to five dollars. Businesses could no longer afford to pay their workers and began laying off hundreds of thousands of people. Banks could not afford to give people their money, and were forced to declare bankruptcy. People's life savings suddenly disappeared, and as a result, people could not afford to pay their house payments or buy food, clothing, or other necessities.

The downward spiral continued. Because people had no money, harvesting and manufacture of new crops and products slowed drastically. Since no one had money to buy food, production slowed, and even more people lost their jobs. By 1932, 30% (about 16-20 million people) of the American population was unemployed. Since people couldn't work, they couldn't pay their debts, and many were left homeless. When inflation (a rise in prices) hit, even more people were homeless and jobless, forced to beg, borrow, and steal food just to survive. Because the American people could no longer afford to spend money, the economy worsened.

In 1932, Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected President of the United States in the hopes he could turn the economy around and help those who were suffering. Despite changes such as the New Deal, which helped instill faith in the government by introducing new programs such as Social Security, unemployment insurance, and disability insurance, mass unemployment and economic stagnation continued for several years. The onset of World War II soon sparked the economy as foreign countries began buying from American producers. While the Great Depression officially ended after the United States entered World War II in 1941, the scars of extreme poverty and despair had left their mark, and the Great Depression continues to be viewed as one of the most difficult periods in U.S. history.

Standards Focus: Historical Context*Plessy versus Ferguson and the Jim Crow Laws*

On January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln (from the North) formally issued the *Emancipation Proclamation*, which declared freedom for all slaves residing in states who were in rebellion against the federal government. This meant that at least in the Southern States (the rebels of the Confederacy), slavery was considered illegal. The intention of the Proclamation was to weaken the South's power and strengthen support for the North during the United States Civil War. While the Proclamation was initially purely political, it was seen as an enormous victory and defining moment for slaves throughout the country.

However, the idea of freedom in its purest sense was never achieved. Individual states instilled laws known as "black codes," which denied blacks the civil and political rights held by whites, including restrictions on land ownership, labor, and voting. Clearly, the bitterness of the Civil War remained, as organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan surfaced, and the conflict over slavery continued. Violence and racism were rampant, as newly freed slaves continued their battle for freedom and equality.

In June of 1892, a 30-year-old man named Homer Plessy was jailed for sitting in the "white" section of a railroad car. Plessy was only one-eighth black, but under Louisiana law was considered "colored," and therefore was required to sit in the "colored car." In *Homer Adolph Plessy vs. The State of Louisiana*, Plessy argued that the separation violated the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution. John Howard Ferguson, a lawyer from Massachusetts and acting judge for the Plessy case, found Plessy guilty of refusing to leave the "white car." After an unsuccessful appeal to the Supreme Court of Louisiana which upheld Ferguson's decision, Plessy took his case to the United States Supreme Court. Again, the Court found Plessy in violation. The Supreme Court decision allowed the perpetuation of the concept of "separate but equal," which legally enabled schools, courthouses, libraries, hotels, theaters, restaurants, public transportation, etc. to segregate "coloreds" from "whites." This decision would only serve to strengthen the already popular Jim Crow laws, which allowed states to legally impose punishment for those who crossed the racial barriers.

Some of the Jim Crow Laws are as follows, by state:

Alabama

- All passenger stations in this state operated by any motor transportation company shall have separate waiting rooms or space and separate ticket windows for the white and colored races.
- It shall be unlawful for a negro and white person to play together or be in company with each other at any game of pool or billiards.

Arizona

- The marriage of a person of Caucasian blood with a Negro, Mongolian, Malay, or Hindu shall be null and void.

Florida

- All marriages between a white person and a negro, or between a white person and a person of negro descent to the fourth generation inclusive, are hereby forever prohibited.
- Any negro man and white woman, or any white man and negro woman, who are not married to each other, who shall habitually live in and occupy in the nighttime the same room shall each be punished by imprisonment not exceeding twelve (12) months, or by fine not exceeding five hundred (\$500.00) dollars.
- The schools for white children and the schools for negro children shall be conducted separately.

Name _____ Period _____

Georgia

- No colored barber shall serve as a barber [to] white women or girls.
- The officer in charge shall not bury, or allow to be buried, any colored persons upon ground set apart or used for the burial of white persons.
- All persons licensed to conduct the business of a restaurant, shall serve either white people exclusively or colored people exclusively and shall not sell to the two races within the same room or serve the two races anywhere under the same license.
- It shall be unlawful for any amateur white baseball team to play baseball on any vacant lot or baseball diamond within two blocks of a playground devoted to the Negro race, and it shall be unlawful for any amateur colored baseball team to play baseball in any vacant lot or baseball diamond within two blocks of any playground devoted to the white race.
- All persons licensed to conduct the business of selling beer or wine...shall serve either white people exclusively or colored people exclusively and shall not sell to the two races within the same room at any time.

Louisiana

- All circuses, shows, and tent exhibitions, to which the attendance of...more than one race is invited or expected to attend shall provide for the convenience of its patrons not less than two ticket offices with individual ticket sellers, and not less than two entrances to the said performance, with individual ticket takers and receivers, and in the case of outside or tent performances, the said ticket offices shall not be less than twenty-five (25) feet apart.

Mississippi

- Separate schools shall be maintained for the children of the white and colored races.
- There shall be maintained by the governing authorities of every hospital maintained by the state for treatment of white and colored patients separate entrances for white and colored patients and visitors, and such entrances shall be used by the race only for which they are prepared.

Missouri

- Separate free schools shall be established for the education of children of African descent; and it shall be unlawful for any colored child to attend any white school, or any white child to attend a colored school.

New Mexico

- Separate rooms [shall] be provided for the teaching of pupils of African descent, and [when] said rooms are so provided, such pupils may not be admitted to the school rooms occupied and used by pupils of Caucasian or other descent.

North Carolina

- Books shall not be interchangeable between the white and colored schools, but shall continue to be used by the race first using them.
- The white and colored militia shall be separately enrolled, and shall never be compelled to serve in the same organization. No organization of colored troops shall be permitted where white troops are available, and while white permitted to be organized, colored troops shall be under the command of white officers.

Oklahoma

- No persons, firms, or corporations, who or which furnish meals to passengers at station restaurants or station eating houses, in times limited by common carriers of said passengers, shall furnish said meals to white and colored passengers in the same room, or at the same table, or at the same counter.
- It shall be unlawful for any parent, relative, or other white person in this State, having the control or custody of any white child, by right of guardianship, natural or acquired, or otherwise, to dispose of, give or surrender such white child permanently into the custody, control, maintenance, or support, of a negro.

Virginia

- Every person...operating...any public hall, theatre, opera house, motion picture show or any place of public entertainment or public assemblage which is attended by both white and colored persons, shall separate the white race and the colored race and shall set apart and designate...certain seats therein to be occupied by white persons and a portion thereof, or certain seats therein, to be occupied by colored persons.

In addition to the actual laws, there were also unwritten rules, or rules of etiquette that blacks were expected to follow: For example, blacks were expected to refer to whites with titles of superiority such as "Boss," "Sir," "Captain," "Mrs.," or "Miss." Whites referred to blacks using derogatory terms such as "boy," "lady," or "girl." While the term "nigger" was widely used, often the word "niggra" was used as a more "polite" substitute. Rules of racial etiquette also required blacks to "give the wall" to whites, meaning blacks were expected to step off the sidewalk when walking on the street. In parks, signs such as "Negroes and Dogs Not Allowed" were a common sight. Both the Jim Crow laws and etiquette emphasize the simple rule that all blacks were and must behave as if they were inferior to whites. While the court enforced the Jim Crow laws, self-proclaimed white vigilantes enforced the Jim Crow etiquette with violence, intimidation, and lynchings—certainly worse punishment than for breaking a law.

The Jim Crow Laws remained in existence and in force until the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 finally ended the Jim Crow sanctions.

Comprehension Check

Directions: Answer the following questions on a separate piece of paper using complete sentences.

1. Choose a few of the Jim Crow laws that most strongly affected you and discuss your feelings about them.
2. Abraham Lincoln is credited with being an abolitionist, and with being the person responsible for "freeing the slaves." Based upon the information in the article, what is your reaction to this statement?
3. Why is the Plessy versus Ferguson decision an important landmark in the civil rights movement, even though Plessy was found guilty by the United States Supreme Court?
4. The Jim Crow laws were named after a black-faced character in a popular minstrel show in the mid-1800s. The character of "Jim Crow" was the stereotypical and derogatory image of an ignorant black "fool" who sang and danced for white audiences. What is your reaction to the origin of the name given to these laws?

Standards Focus: Historical Context*Based on True Stories***The Scottsboro Trials**

In 1931, when Harper Lee was only five years old, nine black men were accused of raping two white women. The alleged incident occurred after a fight between black and white men while they were “riding the rails” looking for work. Most of the white men were thrown off the train, and when the train arrived in Paint Rock, Alabama, everyone who was left was arrested for vagrancy. The two women who were on board (one of whom was a known prostitute, the other, a minor), were also accused of violating the Mann Act, which forbade the transportation of minors across state lines for a criminal act, including prostitution. After exiting the train, the women immediately accused all nine black men of rape.

The trial of the nine black men (one of whom was only twelve years old) began twelve days after their arrest, on April 6, 1931, and lasted three days. Eight of the nine men were given death sentences, despite the fact that the defense attorney pointed out that one of the men was blind, the other too elderly and crippled to commit the crime, another underage, and that they were not even in the same rail car. Appeals would continue for nearly two years.

In November of 1932, the United States Supreme Court ordered new trials for the men, stating inadequate counsel and poor representation. In March of 1933, new trials began, and included the testimony of two doctors who refuted the likelihood that a rape occurred, Ruby Bates’s (one of the accusers) retraction of the accusation, and a harsh scrutiny of the life of Victoria Price, the other accuser. Despite the evidence, defendants Charley Weems and Hayward Patterson were again found guilty and given the death penalty. In a surprising and unfavorable turn of events, however, Judge James Horton overturned the conviction and ordered a new trial. Despite the judge’s decision, defendant Clarence Norris was also convicted and given the death sentence in a subsequent trial. In 1935, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the convictions stating that the defendants were not given a jury of their peers, in this case, African-Americans.

The “Scottsboro Boys” as they came to be called, were tried and convicted—for a crime that never happened. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is loosely based on this trial and the discrimination and racism against blacks who were convicted without evidence or a fair trial.

The Trial of Walter Lett

Another event that may have influenced Lee’s novel is the trial and conviction of Walter Lett. In 1933, in Monroeville, Alabama, Walter Lett was accused by Naomi Lowery of rape. With the threat of a lynching, since Lett was African-American and Lowery, white, Lett remained in protective custody. After an extremely brief trial in which Lett pled “not guilty,” he was scheduled for execution May 11, 1934. Later, his sentence of death was repealed and he was given life in prison. He died in prison in 1937 of tuberculosis.

The Murder of Emmett Till

Another incident that may have inspired Lee in her novel was the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in 1955. Till, who was from Chicago, Illinois, whistled at a white woman at a grocery store in Mississippi. Unaware that he had broken a time-honored Jim Crow law, Till was dragged out of his bed, beaten, and shot to death. His killers were acquitted by the all-white Southern jury. A few months later, the killers give detailed descriptions of how and why they killed Till. On the next page is a shortened version of the article from *Look* magazine, January 1956, which is the first time anyone (even the defendants’ lawyer) heard the killers’ gruesome and cold-hearted confessions. (Note: the ***** indicates that part of the article was omitted for the purpose of content and space in this Guide.)