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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Some events in the novel mirror circumstances in Harper Lee's life. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee infuses the adventure with her experience as a lawyer's daughter and a tomboy growing up in the South. Although a work of fiction, the novel reflects a small Southern town during the Great Depression.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide, Track One. Students should take notes as they listen. What do the students learn about Harper Lee from her biographer, Charles J. Shields, and other contributors? What are the three most important points on the Audio Guide?

Read Reader's Guide essays "Harper Lee" (pp. 4–6) (or Handout One in this Teacher's Guide), "The Friendship of Harper Lee and Truman Capote" (pp. 6–7) and "How the Novel Came to Be Written" (pp. 10–11). Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they learned from the essay. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentation memorable.

Writing Exercise

The novel begins with an epigraph by Charles Lamb: "Lawyers, I suppose, were children once." Based on what you've learned from the Audio Guide, why do you think Lee chose this quote to begin her novel? Have students write two paragraphs on how this statement relates to what they have learned about Lee's life.

Homework

Read Chapters 1–3 (pp. 3–32). Prepare your students to read approximately thirty pages per night in order to complete this book in ten lessons. What happens to Scout on her first day of school? What kind of teacher is Miss Caroline, Scout's first grade teacher?