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## Lesson Two

### FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in the mid-1930s during the Great Depression. Throughout the decade jobs were scarce, bread lines were long, and movies cost only a nickel—a time that left an indelible impression on the young Harper Lee. Culturally, the swing era, movies, and radio drama were the talk of the nation. Writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald chronicled the lives of the rich and famous, while writers such as John Steinbeck recounted the tale of America’s downtrodden. Women could vote, and the prohibition of alcohol was finally repealed. Government programs such as the Works Progress Administration and Social Security were established. But some things endured even the chaos of economic depression. Jim Crow laws continued to prevent African Americans from enjoying equal rights with other citizens, even if the Old South seemed to be slowly changing.

### Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide, Track Two. Based on the Audio Guide, why does former Justice Sandra Day O’Connor say that Atticus “represents the best of the legal profession”? According to O’Connor, how might “the idea of justice pervade everything”? Have you seen any indicators of this in your first reading assignment?

Go to NEA’s Jazz in the Schools Web site at [www.neajazzintheschools.org](http://www.neajazzintheschools.org). Click on “Listen” and scroll down to Billie Holiday’s 1939 “Strange Fruit,” a description of the practice of lynching. Play the music of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong.

Jazz crossed racial boundaries, drawing audiences from all walks of life. If you have additional time, you can teach Lesson Two of the NEA Jazz in the Schools curriculum, covering the decades before and after the Great Depression.

### Writing Exercise

Read Handout Two and the Reader’s Guide essay “Historical Context: The Jim Crow South” (pp. 8–9). Have students write a one-page, in-class essay on how the book reflects historical realities.

### Homework

Read Chapters 4–7 (pp. 32–63). What role does reading play in Maycomb? Why is Boo Radley such a mystery to Scout, Jem, and Dill? What is the significance of the hole in the tree?