To Kill a Mockingbird is composed of two plots told by two narrative voices, the adult Jean Louise Finch, a grown-up Scout remembering three years of her childhood, and the young Scout Finch when she is around six until she is nine. The opening story is of three children, Scout; her brother, Jem; and their friend, Dill, who try to ferret out their invisible, mysterious neighbor, Boo Radley. Imprisoned in his house by his mean father for years, Boo has become a Maycomb, Alabama, legend—a fear-inducing, night-stalking, shape-shifting bogeyman. The children are curious and fearful but determined to confront their strange neighbor. They suspect he is aware of them and is the secret giver of trinkets they find in the hollow of a tree. There are encounters with other eccentric neighbors, a mad dog, a house that burns, shots fired in the night, and eventually Boo Radley himself. At the beginning of the ninth chapter, Boo Radley fades into the background as a second plot is introduced. Atticus Finch has been appointed to defend Tom Robinson, an African-American man falsely accused of rape by a poor white woman. The children watch as their father is targeted as a "nigger lover," withstands an angry mob set on doing harm to Robinson, and is then defeated in his skillful courtroom defense of Robinson.

The two stories converge at the end of the novel when Scout and her brother, Jem, are attacked because of their father’s courtroom tactics but are rescued by Boo Radley, who kills Mr. Ewell. This concluding incident is foreshadowed by the first sentence of the novel: "When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow." Three hundred pages later readers know how fortunate Jem is to have only a broken arm. In the beginning, the adult narrator signals to readers that she is remembering her childhood and the near-disastrous encounter that caused her brother always to have a shorter left arm. All is said to begin one summer several years earlier when Dill "came to us." Scout is almost six and Jem nearly 10 when they first meet a short almost seven-year-old boy nicknamed Dill, from Mississippi. He has arrived in Maycomb, Alabama, in 1933 to stay with his aunts for the summer. By the novel's end, the children are older and wiser, having learned of prejudice, injustice, tolerance, and understanding. They know what it is to be a mockingbird, a defenseless outsider, who deserves respect and understanding even if that outsider is an eccentric recluse, a poor child who cannot read, a farmer with no money, or an African-American man in Alabama in the 1930s. The novel concludes with a wiser, more-mature Scout remarking there is little else for Jem and her to learn except algebra.

Harper Lee used her family, acquaintances, hometown, and childhood experiences in South Alabama to write To Kill a Mockingbird. Yet the novel is more than a thinly veiled remembrance of the past. Rather Lee shaped her content not only mindful of the 1930s but also clearly aware of the 1950s. As in much fiction, some of the historical details Lee incorporates are not factually accurate. Lee includes in chapter 3, set in 1933, a reference to the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which was created in 1935. She has Mrs. Merriwether scornful of Eleanor Roosevelt's sitting with black people at the Southern Conference on Human Welfare in Birmingham in 1938, but Mrs. Merriwether's remarks take place in 1935. Critics have noted that these and other real events, such as the complicated legal wrangling over the Scottsboro case and the impoverishment of much of the nation, particularly the South, in the years after the 1929 stock market crash, are important in understanding Harper Lee's world. Though they may be reshaped to happen at another time, real events stored in a writer's memory influence her imagination and thus her fiction.

Scholars have frequently noted the similarities of the trial of Tom Robinson in To Kill a Mockingbird and the 1931–37 trials of the Scottsboro Boys, nine young African-American men accused of raping two young white women on March 25, 1931 (see Johnson Student Casebook, 15–82). However, Charles Shields, author of a 2006 biography of Harper Lee, cites a letter written by Lee to Hazel Rowley, author of Richard Wright: The Life and Times. In this correspondence, Lee says she had another trial in mind. Rather than the ongoing drama of the Scottsboro case spanning two decades, Lee explains that she remembered a crime that occurred in Monroeville, reported on November 9, 1933, in the Monroe Journal, the local newspaper owned and edited by Lee's father. Walter Lett was accused of raping a white woman, Naomi Lowery. Lett, an African-American man in his thirties, had already served time in prison. Lowery, a poor white woman in her twenties, claimed Lett had raped her near a brick factory south of Monroeville. Lett, tried in March 1934, was found guilty of the capital crime of rape and sentenced for execution that May. However, prominent citizens of Monroeville appealed his case, and after several stays of execution, the governor commuted his sentence from death to life imprisonment. Lett then suffered a mental breakdown while on death row and was committed to a mental institution, where he died of tuberculosis in 1937.
Patrick Chura acknowledges the relevance of events that happened when *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set but argues that those happening as Harper Lee wrote the book are also influential:

In other words, racial events and ideology of the 1950s/early civil rights era—the period concurrent with the novel’s production—leach into the depiction of Lee’s 1930 history, orienting large sections of the text not to the Depression era but to social conditions of the civil rights era. The mid 1950s/early civil rights era is therefore the context from which the novel is best understood as the intersection of cultural and literary ideology.

Chura's premise is that discovering the historical and imaginative truth of the novel depends on knowing both the historical present of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the time of its production. To the Scottsboro and Lett cases, Chura adds the lynching of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy from Chicago, brutally murdered by a Mississippi Delta mob on August 28, 1955. This shocking event and the trial in 1955 in which Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam, accused of murdering Till, were acquitted made national headlines and coincided with the time when the adult Scout was considering her childhood. The narrator's creator, Harper Lee, would have been most aware of the growing racial unrest of the nation, particularly in the South. All states were concerned with the May 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* striking down the legal fiction of decision of "separate but equal." America was being forced to examine its political and social injustices, and race relations were under scrutiny as they had never been before.

The real-life trials of the Scottsboro Boys and Walter Lett and the fictional trial of Tom Robinson are strikingly similar; they share juries who judged more on race than evidence. All took place in the Deep South in the 1930s, centered around interracial rape charges—black men and white women. The defendants pled not guilty but were found to be guilty by an all-white male jury on the basis of the accuser's testimony rather than substantive evidence. The accusers were poor white women with questionable backgrounds; juries chose to believe the white women's testimony despite contradictions in their accounts. Eight of the nine Scottsboro Boys were sentenced to death (only the 12-year-old was spared), as was Walter Lett and Robinson in the novel. In the Scottsboro case, two diligent attorneys continued to argue for their clients and eventually won parole, pardon, or freedom for eight of the nine. In the case of Lett, petitions from many leading citizens of Monroe County persuaded the governor of Alabama. Harper Lee's father, A. C. Lee, may well have been one of these influential people standing up for the rights of a black man. Mr. Lee, as a young attorney in his twenties, had defended two black men accused of murder in his first criminal case. Lee lost the case, his clients were hanged, and their bodies mutilated after death. According to Charles Shields in *Mockingbird*, A. C. Lee never accepted another criminal case (121). Harper Lee, aware of her father's haunting experience and of other trials involving black men and white women, was able to reshape her material into the unforgettable injustice of Tom Robinson and Mayella Ewell.

Patrick Chura adds that the Emmett Till case and the fictional case of Tom Robinson also share striking details such as the suspected affront of a white woman by a black male; the all-white, all male juries; verdicts that upheld the white power structure; and the mutilation of the bodies. He also believes it is no coincidence that Till is killed on August 28 and that Robinson is killed when "August was on the brink of September" (Lee 260). Tom Robinson's trial in the novel and film has been the focus of a number of scholars interested in law and literature. Harper Lee herself suggested that justice was a major theme of the novel. In her 1966 letter to the Richmond News Leader after the Hanover County Board of Education banned her book from county schools, Lee wrote, "Surely it is plain to the simplest intelligence that 'To Kill A Mockingbird' spells out in words of seldom more than two syllables a code of honor and conduct, Christian in its ethic, that is the heritage of all Southerners" (quoted in Shields 255).

But what about codes, complicated and contradictory, that do not protect the mockingbirds of society, even when they have the counsel of honorable defenders? The paradox of how differently black people are treated than white people under the same set of laws is a difficult lesson for Scout and Jem to absorb. That they question this contradictory code is a valuable part of the narrative. Events before and during the trial allow Scout, Jem, and Dill to encounter other characters besides Calpurnia who are black. They attend Calpurnia's church, sit with the minister during the trial, hear Tom Robinson's reasons why he was submissive to a young white woman, and talk with Mr. Dolphus Raymond, the white man who has mixed-race children. These characters become real people for the children, not just subservient folks unworthy of their attention. The children also become very aware of what Claudia Durst Johnson calls "disjunctive legal codes: the codes people profess and those they choose to live by" (94). In her 1994 study of the novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries*, Johnson cites Atticus's closing speech to the jury when he reminds them of the most important principle of America's judicial system: All men are created equal. Atticus acknowledges inequalities in social status, wealth, and intelligence but thinks that such inequality should not exist in the courts of law. Yet the members of the jury, the people who live in Maycomb, and even the good church ladies who sympathize with the children of
Africa do not live by this code. Rather, their behavior follows their belief in white supremacy, not equality.

There are many other methods of analysis for *To Kill a Mockingbird* beyond the thematic approaches of justice and race. Maycomb's social pattern that Harper Lee incorporates suggests a caste system—those with education and professional jobs, proud but poor farmers, white trash who are mean and racist, and blacks. It is impossible to miss the motif of birds and mockingbirds; readers learn, as do Scout and Jem, that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird. Other critics have explored the gothic elements of the novel, particularly in the Boo Radley sections. Superstition, elements of fear, hypocrisy, and education are recurring motifs interwoven in the two plots. Other studies analyze characters who cross boundaries delimiting gender, race, and social patterns. The children call their distinguished father by his first name. Calpurnia chastises Scout for her poor manners, especially with the lunchless Walter Cunningham, who goes home from school to eat with the children. Scout's character offers numerous examples of transcending boundaries; she does not act like the young southern lady Aunt Alexandria thinks she should be.

When it was first published, some reviewers criticized the novel for the use of stock characters and sentimental tone, others criticized the use of two plots, while some found fault with the narrative voices and the two-plot structure. However, the critics Theodore and Grace-Ann Hovet, in their article "'Fine Fancy Gentlemen' and 'Yappy Folk': Contending Voices in *To Kill a Mockingbird*," note that in recent years, Lee's novel, always popular but not critically acclaimed, has received increasing critical respect. Scholars have praised it for its complexity, evocative use of place, skillfully drawn characters, and critique of racism and prejudice. The Hovets argue that through the contending, contradictory voices of a female child and the child as an adult, Lee demonstrates how a community may oppress and exclude individuals because of their race, gender, and class. The adult narrator in *To Kill a Mockingbird* tells about one small community because the story is an important one for all to hear.

Dean Shakelford also praises Harper Lee's use of the female voice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He argues that because of this critical female voice questioning tradition readers are able to see a parallel with the South forced to question its reliance on racism and tradition. Scout refuses to grow up to be a southern lady; she rejects what has always been accepted. The South too had to refuse to be the Old South any longer and grow beyond its superficial gentility. Scholars such as Shakelford, the Hovets, Claudia Durst Johnson, and many others value Harper Lee's skill in creating her one work of fiction. Their admiration converges with the popular acclaim of readers who have bought millions of copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the thousands of teachers who want their students to read and appreciate it. Forty years after the publication of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee, when asked by Richard Chalfin, owner of the Better Book Getter in New York, why she had never written another novel, replied, "I said what I had to say" (quoted in Shields 280). If a writer is to write only one novel, then saying what one had to say as Harper Lee did in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a worthy goal.