

## Sample Answer – Setting

From a novel you have studied, choose one in which the setting (time and place) is either similar to or different from the time and place in which you live.

- (a) Give a detailed description of the setting of the novel.
- (b) Explain how the setting of the novel is similar to or different from the time and place in which you live.

### **Answer**

- (a) The novel I have studied is Harper Lee's 'To Kill A Mockingbird'. The story takes place in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The narrator is Scout Finch, who lives with her brother Jem and her widowed father Atticus.

Maycomb is a 'tired old town' where there is little to do. The Depression has left the people with 'nothing to buy and no money to buy it with'. The people in the town know each other well, and they know everyone's family history. This small-town attitude shapes the characters and the plot. Certain people are viewed as being possessed of certain traits simply because of their family background. Even the rational Atticus says of the Ewell family that they have been 'the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations', and so it is pointless to attend school.

The Ewells are at the bottom of a complicated class hierarchy in Maycomb. Near the top are the Finches as they are quite well-off and educated. Aunt

Alexandra does her best to ensure that the social order remains as it is and tells Scout not to play with Walter Cunningham because 'he is trash'. Everyone in Maycomb feeds into the system. The townspeople are seen as superior to the farmers. White trash, like the Ewells, are at the very bottom of the pecking order, even below the Cunninghams. Mayella Ewell is lonely and isolated because the white people consider her too low-class to mix with and the black people won't have anything to do with her as she is white.

Maycomb, like any other town in the American South during the 1930s, is segregated. Black people do not have the same rights as white people, nor do they attend the same schools or churches. Racism and prejudice are rife, and when Tom Robinson, a black man, is accused of raping Mayella Ewell, he is found guilty despite an almost total lack of evidence. The fact that Tom Robinson is even allowed a trial infuriates some of the white people, who would prefer to see the black man lynched by a local mob.

Maycomb may appear little more than a sleepy old town, but it is a place where poverty and prejudice hold sway and where the setting has an enormous influence on the lives of everyone in the novel.

(b) Maycomb, Alabama in the 1930s is a very different place from twenty-first century Ireland. Certainly, there are small towns in Ireland where everybody knows everybody else's business and families have connections which go back for many generations, but I do not believe this is a limiting factor in people's lives in the same way it is for the people of Maycomb. For example, Burris Ewell's family's refusal to send him to school is not something which would be so readily accepted in present-day Ireland. Atticus says that 'it's silly to force people like the Ewells into a new environment', but I disagree. By simply

allowing the Ewells to continue living in ignorance and squalor, the people of Maycomb unwittingly allow a situation to develop in which the lonely, abused Mayella causes Tom Robinson's wrongful imprisonment and death.

Another aspect of the setting of the novel which is different from the world in which I live is the class system. Again, this is seen as a limiting factor in people's lives and people from a higher class are not meant to associate with people from a lower social class. I have never come across someone like Aunt Alexandra: a woman who is so prejudiced that she only wants Scout and Jem to mix with 'fine folks' and is prepared to speak cruelly about young children like Walter Cunningham and Dill.

While the snobbery and class system in Maycomb might be unpleasant, it is nothing like as horrible as the racial prejudice shown so clearly in the shameful treatment of Tom Robinson. Racism does exist in Ireland, unfortunately, but it is not written into law as it was in the southern states of the US in the 1930s. It is not just the poorly educated people in 'To Kill A Mockingbird' who support segregation and racial hatred. The teacher, Miss Gates, says that Hitler is evil for persecuting the Jews, but Scout has heard her saying that black people are getting above themselves and need to be taught a lesson before they believe they are as good as white people. I have never heard anyone speak this way and, if they were to do so, I do not believe it would be as easily and readily accepted as it is in Maycomb.

In conclusion, I think the setting in 'To Kill A Mockingbird' is restrictive and unfair and does not allow people to reach their full potential unless they are lucky enough to be born the right colour and social class. This, I believe, is the difference between the world of the novel and the world in which I live. Even though life in Ireland may not be perfect, everybody has a right to be treated fairly and equally.

