

Power of the Pen: Identities and Social Issues in Fiction and Nonfiction

CLASS TWO • Assignment

Before you begin your assignment 2, consider the week 2 videos' examinations of how setting and character relationships can be used to create an immersive and fully-realized treatment of a social issue.

For example, Kali VanBaale noted Harper Lee's use of setting in *To Kill a Mockingbird*; and Ruel Johnson discussed the use of characters to embody and represent particular ideologies.

To Kill a Mockingbird addresses racism and takes place in a small town in Alabama in the mid-1930s. Lee created a fully-populated world of people—young characters, elderly characters, white characters, Black characters, poor and uneducated characters, well-off and well-educated characters—and showing how the relationships between these people worked during any ordinary day by showing them moving through the setting of their town. For example, in chapters 2 and 3 of the novel, the narrator, Scout (Jean Louise) Finch begins first grade. Her new teacher's interactions with her and with two other students, Walter Cunningham and Burris Ewell, show the reader that these three white children are known, by everyone in their town, to belong to three different types of family and three different socioeconomic classes. Much later, Lee uses the adult Finches, Cunninghams, and Ewells to play three different roles in the racist arrest and trial of a Black man for the rape of a white woman. The Finches essentially represent a social justice ideology, and fight for it, though it has been argued that their behavior is not free from racism and that their awareness of their own racism is limited. The Ewells openly represent a racist ideology and act upon it. Throughout the novel, beginning with the scenes in chapters 2 and 3, Lee uses her setting—the town's history, the geographical distance between Black people's houses and the houses of their white employers, the physical difference between the homes of prosperous white families and the homes of indigent white families—to show the physical and cultural context that each character belongs to. In showing the reader where these people come from, she creates a foundation for illustrating and explaining their flaws and limitations, so that their actions are more than simple representations of two opposing ideologies.

You don't have to read an excerpt of Lee's novel, it is not required for this week's readings and you do not need to be familiar with it in order to apply VanBaale and Johnson's advice as you write your assignment. But if you would like to read it, here are chapters 1-3: <https://sample-ff06bfdf47369147d4961306d1d6dc2d.read.overdrive.com/?p=to-kill-a-7734e6>.

In this week's required readings, Jennifer Percy has reported on a world in which the meaning of fighting for right and wrong, for any ideological mission at all, has become corrupted and essentially invalid. Amber Sparks has created a world in which it is possible, but illegal, to fight for social justice by traveling back in time to prevent humanity's greatest evils.

Goals for assignment 2: Take a look back at what you wrote for assignment 1. Could you create a fuller sense of the historical past of your setting and a fuller immersion into the geographical and physical present of your setting? Could you add more characters to your work, characters who represent different backgrounds and different stances on the social issue you were writing about, in order to show the reader different perspectives on this issue? Could you show how each character's place in the setting—their origins, their education or job, their race or class or nationality—



influences how they speak to each other, how they think of each other, and why they have different perspectives on this issue? What are your characters' limitations when it comes to this issue? What can they do, and what are they incapable of, and why?

How to write assignment 2: You have two choices. You may expand your assignment 1 by considering the goals above and using Johnson and VanBaale's advice. Or you may write a new piece of literary journalism or of fiction, but again, consider the goals above and the advice offered by Johnson and VanBaale. Whether you choose to expand or to write something new, try as hard as you can to make your setting and your character relationships show the reader the complexities and the history of the social issue you are addressing.

You can write a complete piece that goes from beginning to end, or you can write a piece that you think may eventually become part of something longer and larger.

Suggested word range: 1500-3000 words.