

Seeing Maycomb County Objectively: A Look at What the U.S. Census Reveals About Monroe County, Alabama in the 1930s

By Paul Horton

Overview

Students will examine census data on Monroe County, Alabama in the 1930s to be able to make generalizations about the ways that race and class operate in a Deep South county. Although Harper Lee strongly denied that Monroeville and Monroe County, Alabama were the setting for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, statistics on Monroe County are used because they are typical of south Alabama counties below the fertile cotton region, or "black-belt." Census data offers an important balance to the lived perceptions of Scout who learns about race and class in a series of life lessons within the novel. Students will divide into pairs to examine census data and answer questions on a worksheet. Each student will then write a paragraph profile of Monroe County that makes use of the their responses to the worksheet questions. The paragraph prompt is question number 10.

Student Objectives

Students will:

- Analyze and synthesize statistical data
- Evaluate census data
- Write a paragraph that requires students to separate fact from imagined reality

Skills attained:

- Close reading of statistical information
- Working with a partner to analyze statistical information
- Formal paragraph writing
- Contrasting statistical reality and lived reality

Materials Needed

- Census Questions, included below
- Census Data on Monroe County, Alabama, included below

The Lesson

Anticipatory Set

1. Ask students to write a brief response to the prompt: How do we know about a place?
2. Lead the students into a discussion of understanding through experience. Ask students whether individual experience allows us to truly understand the communities in which we live. Within a local context (town, city), what might be beyond our understanding?
3. Transition to the question of Scout's understanding of Maycomb and Maycomb County. Does Scout give us the whole story? Why? Why not?

Procedures

1. Teachers should now offer the notion of using census data to allow us to see beyond individual points of view.
2. Present the assignment. Divide students into pairs and pass out handouts. Go over definitions of "Tenant" and "Owner." Explain that the U.S. Census Bureau collects statistical data every ten years and is required to publish the data. The information that students are given is based on data collected from Monroe, County, Alabama. This county is located in south central Alabama. It is the county where Harper Lee and Truman Capote grew up.
3. Students work together to answer questions on their worksheets using census data information. Teacher assists when necessary. Give the students 10-15 minutes. Tell them to complete questions one through nine.
4. Discuss student responses to handout questions.
5. Read question number 10, and assign paragraph to be drafted in class and word processed and revised for homework. Teacher assists with the drafting process. Handout and paragraph to be handed in tomorrow.

Assessment

Here is a suggested break down of points for the work:

Questions on worksheet completed accurately: two points each (18pts.)

Paragraph:

___ Clear and focused topic sentence (5pts.)

___ Three supporting statements supported with specific evidence (15pts.)

___ Strong synthetic concluding sentence (5pts.)

Other Literary and Sociological Connections

For a poetic and objective view of three west central Alabama white tenant families, students can read selected passages from James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. For a detailed account of the life of an African-American tenant farmer residing in east central Alabama in the 1930s, students can consult *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* by Theodore Rosengarten.

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Census Questions

Use the census information provided to answer the following questions:

How many families live in Monroe County?

1. Of the above total, how many families are listed as "native white" and how many families are listed as "Negro"?
 2. Of the total number of tenant families, families that must rent homes, land, and implements, how many are white and how many are black?
 3. According to the census, how many whites own homes in Monroe County? How many "Negros" own homes?
 4. In 1930, the median family size in Monroe County, Alabama was 4.09. How do you account for such small families in a rural county?
 5. What is the median family size for "white" families? What was the median family size for "Negro" families? What does the difference in family size indicate about the social and economic structure of Monroe County?
 6. Why do the majority of families have no children under the age of ten?
 7. How many families in Monroe County are farm families? How many families are listed as nonfarm families?
 8. According to the census, 3 percent of the "native white" population of Monroe County, Alabama was illiterate in 1930, while 25.8 percent of the "Negro" population of the county was illiterate. How do you account for such a large gap in the illiteracy rate?
 9. Based on all of the above, does what you have read in *To Kill a Mockingbird* reflect a complete picture of Monroe or Maycomb County, assuming that Maycomb County is a typical south Alabama County? Who and what tend to be left out of the picture we see through Scout's eyes?
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Census Data on Monroe County, Alabama

Population--Alabama
Table 19.--Classification of families, by counties: 1930

Subject

COLOR, TENURE, ETC.

All families	6,311
Native white	2,990
Native parentage	2,984
Foreign or mixed parentage	6
Foreign-born white	8
Negro	3,308
Other races	5
Owner families	1,925
Native White	1,242
Native parentage	1,241
Foreign or mixed parentage	1
Foreign-born white	3
Negro	677
Tenant families	3,927
Native white	1,609
Native parentage	1,604
Foreign or mixed parentage	5
Foreign-born white	3
Negro	2,311
Tenure unknown	459
Farm families	4,426
Non farm families	1,885

VALUE OR RENTAL

Owned non-farm homes	454
Value under \$1,500	143
\$1,500 to \$2,999	107
\$3,000 to \$4,999	87
\$5,000 to \$7,499	50

\$7,500 to \$9,999	11
\$ 10,000 and over	11
Not reported	45

**Median value
(Dollars)**

All owners	2,359
Native white owners	2,833
Negro owners	0
Rented non-farm homes	1,278
Rental under \$15	1,052
\$15 to \$29	90
\$30 to \$49	21
\$50 to \$99	2
\$100 and over	2
Not reported	111

**Medial rental
(Dollars)**

All tenants	(1)
Native white tenants	(1)
Negro tenants	(1)

SIZE OF FAMILY

Families comprising	
1 person	329
2 persons	1,195
3 persons	1,052
4 persons	990
5 persons	761
6 persons	608
7 persons	481
8 persons	317
9 persons	242
10 persons	168
11 persons	93
12 or more persons	75

Median size:

All families	4.09
Native white	4.24
Foreign-born white	0
Negro	3.91

**CHILDREN UNDER
10**

Families having...	
No children under 10	2,841

1 child under 10	1,209
2 children under 10	978
3 children under 10	631
4 or more	652

Native white families:

No children under 10	2,841
1 child under 10	628
2 children under 10	978
3 children under 10	538
4 or more	652

Negro Families:

No children under 10	1,560
1 child under 10	579
2 children under 10	440
3 or more	729

(1) Less than \$10.

*Fifteenth Census of the United States, Population, Families, Vol. 6, Table 19, P. 102