There are actually two things that define a key: the key signature is the most obvious one, but another important part of a key is the tonic... the note around which the key centers.

But what if we change the tonic? What if we use the same notes for the key signature, but change the note that the key is centered around?

If we center the key around the sixth scale degree of the major scale, we get a new scale: the minor scale.

This scale is great for building chords, so we refer to it as the harmonic minor scale. However, composers didn’t use it for writing melodies, because it had a problem: an augmented second between the sixth and seventh scale degrees.

So, for melodies, they made another change: they added another accidental to raise the sixth scale degree by a semitone.

Now, remember... the reason we raised the leading note in the first place was to create tension from the seventh scale degree to tonic. But in a melody, if the seventh scale degree is followed by the sixth scale degree, we don’t need that tension, so we don’t need to raise the leading note at all.

The way we illustrate this is by differentiating between ascending melodic minor and descending melodic minor; for descending melodic minor, we don’t raise anything!