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# *To Kill a Mockingbird*

by

**Harper Lee**

**1960**



MonkeyNotes by TheBestNotes Staff

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The novel is set in the 1930's in a small community in Maycomb County, located in the South. Although slavery has been legally abolished for many years, the Southerners in Maycomb continued to.....

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**Atticus Finch** - A highly respected and responsible citizen of Maycomb County. He is the father of Scout and Jem. An attorney by profession, he is very particular about delivering justice.

**Scout Finch** - Atticus' darling daughter. An impulsive girl by nature, she keeps rushing into fights and is more emotional than her brother.

**Jem Finch** - He is the son who is deeply motivated to follow his father's footsteps. The important idea of maturity is well depicted in his character as he gains maturity by the end of the novel.

**Arthur Radley** - He is called 'Boo' by Scout and Jem. He is an enigmatic character, who never steps out of his house, nor maintains any relation with the townsfolk. Yet, he attempts an indirect friendship with the children. He is a pathetic figure in his need for love and attention.

**Bob Ewell** - An uncultured, uncouth, inherently evil character, who drinks up all the relief money, beats up his children, and has no qualms in resorting even to murder to restore his lost dignity among the community members.

#### Minor Characters

**Aunt Alexandra** - Atticus' sister who comes to live with them, since it seemed necessary that there should be some feminine influence in the house. Aunt Alexandra seems too stern and forbidding at the beginning, but later on, her soft-heartedness is revealed.

**Calpurnia** - The family's black housekeeper who has looked after the family since the children had lost their mother. Her presence has contributed to the molding of the children's character to a great extent.

**Dill** - The closest friend of both Jem and Scout. Through habitually weaving long fantasies, he reveals himself to be a child, deprived of love and attention.....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - The protagonist of the novel is Atticus Finch, who is the prime initiator and coordinator of various events in the novel. In his involvement with the poor whites of the community, like Walter Cunningham, as well as the deprived blacks, like Tom Robinson, he is portrayed as a just, sincere and .....

**Antagonist** - Bob Ewell serves as the perfect villain in the novel, with his laid-back way of living and the utter disregard he has for other human beings. In the beginning he comes across only as a slovenly figure, uncaring about his family and brash in his dealings with others. But after the .....

**Climax** - The events in the novel build up to the singularly important and climactic scene of the courtroom, where Atticus tries to defend Tom Robinson from the allegations of Bob and Mayella Ewell. The tension is maintained throughout the trial as to whether Atticus would or would.....

**Outcome** - The most surprising and touching thing is that instead of rebuking Atticus for losing the case, the black community showers him with food, as a gesture of their appreciation for.....

### SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* mainly revolves around a small family of three -- Atticus Finch, an attorney,

and his two children, Scout and Jem. As the novel proceeds certain characters are linked with the three main characters to form a dramatic story of events, attitudes, prejudices and values.

The novel is set in the quiet town of Maycomb; but the serenity is only superficial. The town is comprised of three communities: the white folk, the black community, and the 'white trash'. Outwardly there is peace among the three, but underneath prevails a combination of hostility, racial prejudices, and friendlessness.

Jem and Scout go to school together. On their way to school, they pass the Radley house; it is a terrifying place to them, for it houses Boo Radley, who has been labeled a lunatic. At the same time, their curiosity pushes them to try out ways to make Boo come out of the house. Their overtures are, however, suppressed by Atticus who does not want them to torment Boo.

The main plot of the novel revolves around the trial in which Atticus defends Tom Robinson, a black, who has been accused of having molested a white girl, Mayella Ewell. She is part of the 'white-trash' community. The children follow the case proceedings avidly and are inconsolable when their father loses the case.

The case is lost simply because it was still impossible (despite statutory laws protecting them) for a black man to attain victory over a white in the South. This amply reveals the deeply ingrained.....

## **THEMES**

### **Major Theme**

The main and underlying theme in the novel is that of **black slavery**, its abolition and the subsequent lack of its acceptance in the southern community. Harper Lee has portrayed the deep-set traditional way of thinking of the southerners who are unable to accept that the blacks have been released from the bonds of slavery. So, even if externally there are no slaves, the blacks have not yet been openly admitted into.....

### **Minor Themes**

Along with the major theme, Harper Lee has introduced smaller but no less important themes in the novel. The legend of the mockingbird, which only sings to please others and therefore the sense of sin associated in shooting a mockingbird, has been intricately woven into the plot. Tom Robinson's death is likened to this sin since even Tom was an innocent, harmless person who would never hurt.....

## **MOOD**

The mood of the novel on a general level is light and humorous, especially when it relates Scout's impulsive actions, Dill's antics and Jem's brotherly demeanor. However, the underlying mood throughout the novel is somber and profound, because certain important issues are being valued.....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY**

Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926 in Monroeville, Alabama. She was the youngest daughter of the three children of Amassa Coleman Lee and Francis Lee. She completed her schooling in the Monroeville Public School, and later entered the University of Alabama to study law. Having failed to complete her degree, she moved on to New York. Her experience and knowledge of law, however, aided her a great deal in her writing career.

Harper Lee was part of the generation of writers that emerged after the.....

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES**

### **PART 1**

#### **CHAPTER 1**

##### **Summary**

In this chapter, a brief introduction of the Finch family is given by Scout. Simon Finch established a homestead, 'Finch's Landing', on the banks of the Alabama River. He died a rich and prosperous man. One of his sons,

Atticus, studied law; the other had studied medicine. Although both sons left Finch's Landing, Alexandra, their sister, remained.

Atticus practiced law in Maycomb, where he lived with his two children, Jem and Scout, and the cook, Calpurnia. Atticus' wife died when the children were young, and Scout hardly remembers her.

The children's boundaries for roaming were Miss Henry Lafayette Dubose's house and the Radley house. The Radley house had always fascinated the children with its spooky exterior. The children used to imagine that a vicious phantom resided in the house. In fact, Mr. and Mrs. Radley were a couple who kept to themselves. Their son, Boo Radley is believed by children to have maniacal tendencies and so is kept at home. The children played games around the Radley house and dare one another to touch the wall of the house to prove how brave they are.

### **Notes**

This chapter merely gives the reader a view of the Maycomb society and its inhabitants. The main characters, of course, are Atticus and his family. Scout, his daughter, narrates the entire story in first person. Since the entire novel is a narrative seen through Scout's eyes, the visualization is purely from a child's point of view. This includes the depiction of her morbid fear of the Radley house, about which she has heard a number of stories, drawn out of proportion by the local gossips. The description of Boo, therefore, is a larger than life one: "he was six-and-a-half feet tall, dined on row squirrels -- there was a long jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped and he drooled."

The father's relation with his children seems superficial in the beginning -- "he played with us, read to us, and treated us with courteous detachment," yet the fact that the children call him by his name, and even later, as his outlook and conduct are revealed, they only point to the genuine love he has for his children.

Dill is introduced in the chapter. He is a child searching for love in a loveless family; he also has a tendency to fantasize and exaggerate. During the course of the novel, he will prove to be a good friend to both Jem and Scout.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Summary**

Scout is to begin school, and Jem is assigned to escort her on the first day. Jem makes it clear to Scout that she is to stay with the first graders and not try to follow him or ask him to play with her. Scout is excited about her first day at school but is disillusioned because she is rebuked for already knowing how to read and write. It turns out that Atticus and Calpurnia had introduced her to reading and writing at a very early age, but the teacher is unable to see the genuineness of this attempt and feels that it is only a hindrance to further learning.

When Scout tries to explain the reason why Walter Cunningham would not accept her money for buying lunch, she is punished by the teacher.

### **Notes**

In this chapter, the reader is made aware of the narrow-minded and idealistic approach to learning which insists on a step-by-step approach. The fact that Scout already knows how to read and write is not appreciated, but is judged by the teacher an irritant to further learning.

The chapter also shows a section of the Maycomb society, where people, like the Cunninghams, are dirt-poor, but honest and hardworking. Scout's teacher, Miss Carolina, who comes from North Alabama, is unfamiliar with Maycomb society, and Scout's simple explanation about Walter Cunningham only serves to irritate the teacher all the more. Gradually, the intricacies of Maycomb society are being unraveled by the author.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Summary**

Jem manages to stop the fight between Scout and Walter Cunningham and on spontaneously invites him for

dinner. Scout makes an involuntary remark about Walter's strange eating habits at the dining table, and is severely reprimanded by Calpurnia.

Back at school, Miss Carolina is disgusted to see a louse in Burris Ewell's hair and sends him home to get clean. The boy's rude behavior shocks the teacher and one student offers an explanation about the lifestyle of the Ewells, who breach all rules and live a life of sloth. Back home, Scout wonders aloud to her father, whether she too could skip school and stay at home like the Ewells. Atticus explains to her that sometimes rules are bent to maintain the harmony in society, but Scout would have to go to school.

## Notes

Another section of the Maycomb County is unveiled here. The Ewells are what was called the 'white trash' who live in dire poverty, yet make no attempts to ascend out of it. The society has to accept their way of life and they are merely evaded as far as possible. The Cunninghams, though as poor, are not like the Ewells, in that they possess self-respect, honesty and perseverance.

Atticus, being a lawyer, has to deal with all kinds of people including such as the Cunninghams and the Ewells, and is therefore aware of their particular failings and strengths.

Calpurnia serves as a surrogate mother for the children, who takes them at hand, teaching them rudimentary reading and the courteous conduct.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Atticus Finch** - Atticus Finch, the father of Scout and Jem, is a highly respected AND responsible citizen of Maycomb County. An attorney by profession, he has always tried to instill good values and a sense of moral propriety in his children.

Atticus' relation with his children is unique. He lets them call him by his name. Though outwardly detached and always busy with his work, he does manage to find the time and patience to explain the intricacies of human nature to his children. When Scout comes home from school, upset at being reprimanded for already knowing how to read, Atticus teaches her to compromise with the situation. By continuing to take lessons from the teacher, and at the same time, reading with her father at home, both could be kept happy. Thus, Atticus teaches his daughter, in her impressionable years itself, the mature demeanor of how.....

**Jem** - Jem has chosen Atticus as his role model, and he emulates him throughout the novel. However, at the same time he gets the opportunity to forming his individuality. Jem is a true brother to Scout, helping her out of scrapes, escorting her to school and back, guiding her at times and comforting her in general. When he is given money to buy something for himself, he buys a gift for Scout too. When he finds out that Scout has.....

**Scout** - Scout, because of her age, and being the youngest in the family, is impulsive by nature and extremely emotional too. She unthinkingly rushes into fights and scrapes, cries when her ego is hurt and is generally is rash in her actions.

Scout is very warm and friendly. Even in the midst of the tension, when the mob gathers in Tom's prison, she attempts at a friendly conversation with Mr. Cunningham. During the ladies' meetings held.....

**Aunt Alexandra** - Aunt Alexandra is Atticus' sister, who used to stay at the ancestral Finch landing before she arrives at Atticus' house to stay. She is very unlike Atticus in all respects, and the children do not take a liking to her in the beginning. For a start, her reason for coming is to bring some 'feminine' influence to.....

**Boo Radley** - Arthur Radley, called Boo by the children, is an enigma in himself. As a young boy, he had been a pleasant, good-natured boy, but had fallen into the company of the unruly Cunningham boys and had created some mischief. As punishment his father had sentenced him to a lifetime confinement to their house.

Though having gained the reputation of a lunatic, Boo is basically a .....

**Bob Ewell** - Bob Ewell is the useless, brutal father of a brood of children who have to live in extreme filth and shabbiness; with hardly any food to eat, surrounded by poverty and disease thanks only to him. Bob drinks away all the money got from the relief checks; is ignorant, foul-mouthed and.....

**Mayella Ewell** - Mayella, though Bob's daughter, is different in some ways. She attempts at keeping the house clean and looking after her younger brothers and sisters. But she has never had any friends, nor any love or affection in her life, and the only person who has been decent to her is.....

**Tom Robinson** - Tom is a young, harmless, innocent, hardworking black. As Scout realizes, he would have been a fine specimen, but for his left hand, which had been.....

**The Black Community** - By including the black community in her novel, Harper Lee has very effectively revealed the striking differences between the two communities: the white and the black. Her main reason in writing about this community is of course to portray the outright oppressive manner in which the blacks were treated during those times. Her book is a bid to the readers to acknowledge the.....

## **PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS**

*To Kill A Mockingbird* is divided into 2 parts. The first part extends from Chapter 1 to Chapter 11, and the second part from Chapter 12 to Chapter 31. Part 1 and Part 2, though connected with events and actions, have separate identities. Part 2 is concerned mostly with Robinson's trial and is well unified. Part 1 contains several episodes which are relevant to the issue dealt with in Part 2.

Part 2, which is longer than part 1, focuses on the novel's main theme: racial prejudice still prevalent in the South, which denied equal status to the blacks and the whites. It entirely consists of the Tom Robinson trial. This begins from the middle of chapter 16 and ends in Chapter 21. However, reference to the case is made before and after these chapters too.

Part 1 mainly deals with the characters of Jem, Scout and Atticus, and the innocent reactions of the children to the racial prejudices prevailing in their town. Scout is surprised that Walter has.....

## **THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS**

### **Main Theme**

In the novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*, various themes can be noticed, which project the intricacies in the novel. The primary theme is evidently the problem of racial prejudice. This is revealed throughout the novel at some point or the other, but is highlighted in the Tom Robinson trial.

Tom Robinson, a poor black laborer has been accused of raping a white girl, Mayella Ewells and is on trial. The jury consists only of whites, and though Tom's innocence is evident, he is.....

### **Minor Themes**

Along with the theme of racial prejudice, is linked the aspect of social snobbery prevalent in the society. This snobbery does not allow Mayella Ewell, to seek companionship with anyone and so she cannot lead a normal life. This same snobbery does not allow Scout to befriend Walter Cunningham because Aunt.....

## **AUTHOR'S STYLE / USE OF LANGUAGE**

Harper Lee in her novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* has utilized Scout, a six-year old girl to relate the facts. Yet, the language she uses is not restricted to her age, since that would have severely limited the expressions which Harper Lee needed to give. She makes it clear that the book is being written by the adult Scout recreating her childhood experience.

A varied use of language is noticed throughout the novel. First of all, there is a difference in the language spoken by the whites and the colloquial use of .....

## **MORALITY IN THE NOVEL**

Harper Lee, through her novel has attempted to present certain moral truths to the reader: the underlying morality of the Maycomb county has been well portrayed.

The primary moral truth that is evident in the book is the prominence given to life and the need to safeguard it. This does not only concern the trial scene where a black man's life is at stake, but various other instances too. Atticus values life fundamentally, even if it is that of a bird's. He refuses to touch a gun, unless it.....

## **SYMBOLISM in To Kill a Mockingbird**

Harper Lee has used symbolism rather extensively throughout the novel and a great deal of it refers to the problems of racism in the South during the early twentieth century. Symbolism can be traced in almost every important episode or event which formulates the story line. Right from the beginning Scout's character and her outlook towards the behavior of the people in Maycomb county symbolizes a.....

## **CONTRASTS WITHIN THE MAYCOMB SOCIETY**

Maycomb county comprises of a conglomeration of various sections of people, who live together in studied harmony. Their differences are noticeable, and therein lies the foundation for all trouble which emerges later on in the novel.

Outwardly, the community is divided into two sections: the white community and the black community. The blacks are simple, honest, hardworking folk, eking out a living by simple labor on the fields. They are god fearing and attend church regularly. Being uneducated, they repeat the hymns sung in the church, by rote. Though poor they have a sense of self-respect and pride and would never take anything from another without paying back in kind. When Atticus takes up Tom Robinson's case, even though he.....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

- Show the growth and maturity of Jem from the beginning of the novel till its end.
- Describe the details of the Tom Robinson trial.
- Elucidate on Harper Lee's presentation of the black community in '*To Kill A Mockingbird*' .....

## ***END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS***

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