

## TO KILL A MOCKING BIRD BY HARPER LEE

### **Brief introduction to the author and her novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird***

Nelle Harper Lee, the author of the American novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird* is the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. She was born in 1926 at Monroeville, Alabama. She is the younger of the three children of Amasa Coleman Lee and Frances Lee. Her father is a lawyer and she received her early education in Monroeville public schools and studied law in the University of Alabama. She spent one year in England at Oxford University as an exchange student. She left Alabama university without completing her course. She moved to New York and worked for a short period as a reservation clerk first with the Eastern Airlines and later with the B.O.A.C. She developed interest in writing and logical thinking.

In 1957 she submitted her manuscript to J.B.Lippincott and was asked to rewrite it. Finally *To Kill a Mocking Bird* was published in July 1960 and at once became a best-seller. It was chosen as a Literary Guild selection and also by the Book-of-the-Month Club. In 1961, it received the Literary Award of the Alabama Library Association and the same year won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

### **Key Facts of the novel**

Title : *To Kill a Mocking Bird*

Author: Harper Lee

Genres: Bildungsroman; civil rights movement

First published in 1960 by J.B.Lippincott

Setting : Maycomb, Alabama

Main characters: Scout Finch, Atticus Finch, Jem Finch, Tom Robinson, Bob Ewell, Boo Radley and Mayella Ewell.

Major Themes: Jim Crow Laws, prejudice, civil rights, racism, bravery, maturity, feminine vs masculine, Women's roles in the South, effects of the mob mentality, perception, inconsistency of humanity, gender roles and integrity.

Motifs: Superstition, Boo Radley, weeds, education in the classroom vs small town education

Major symbols: Mocking birds, snow, birds, fire

The three most important aspects of *To Kill a Mocking Bird*

1. The title refers to the local belief that it is a sin to kill a Mocking bird. In the novel, the author subtly implies that the people of the town who are responsible for killing Tom Robinson is unjust, immoral and sinful.

2. The narrator is Scout Finch who tells the story many years after she has grown to adulthood.
3. The story is an examination of both racism and bildungsroman. Within the framework of bildungsroman( coming- of -age story), the author examines a very serious social problem and blends these two different kinds of stories.

### **List of Characters**

**Scout (Jean Louise Finch)** Narrator of the story. The story takes place from the time Scout is aged 6 to 9, but she tells the story as an adult. Scout is a tomboy who would rather solve problems with her fists than with her head. Throughout the course of the book, Scout comes to a new understanding of human nature, societal expectations, and her own place in the world.

**Atticus Finch** Maycomb attorney and state legislative representative who is assigned to represent Tom Robinson. A widower, Atticus is a single parent to two children: Jem and Scout.

**Jem (Jeremy Atticus Finch)** Scout's older brother who ages from 10 to 13 during the story. He is Scout's protector and one of her best friends. As part of reaching young adulthood, Jem deals with many difficult issues throughout the story.

**Aunt Alexandra** Atticus' sister. Aunt Alexandra lives at Finch's Landing, the Finch family homestead, but she moves in with Atticus and the children during Tom Robinson's trial. She is very concerned that Scout have a feminine influence to emulate.

**Francis Hancock** Aunt Alexandra's grandson. He taunts Scout about Atticus, getting her in trouble.

**Uncle Jack Finch** Atticus and Aunt Alexandra's bachelor brother who comes to visit every Christmas. He is a doctor who, like Atticus, was schooled at home.

**Calpurnia** The Finchs' African American housekeeper. She grew up at Finch's Landing and moved with Atticus to Maycomb. She is the closest thing to a mother that Scout and Jem have. One of the few Negroes in town who can read and write, she teaches Scout to write.

**Zeebo** The town garbage collector who is also Calpurnia's son. He's one of four people who can read at the First Purchase African M.E. Church.

**Boo Radley (Mr. Arthur Radley)** The mysterious neighbor who piques the children's interest. They've never seen him and make a game of trying to get him to come outside.

**Nathan Radley** Boo Radley's brother who comes back to live with the family when Mr. Radley dies.

**Mr. and Mrs. Radley** Boo and Nathan Radley's parents.

**Dill (Charles Baker Harris)** Jem and Scout's neighborhood friend. Living in Meridian, Mississippi, Dill spends every summer with his aunt, Miss Rachel Haverford.

**Miss Rachel Haverford** Dill's aunt who lives next door to the Finches.

**Miss Maudie Atkinson** One of Maycomb's most open-minded citizens, Miss Maudie lives across the street from Jem and Scout. An avid gardener, she often spends time talking with the children — especially Scout — helping them to better understand Atticus and their community.

**Miss Stephanie Crawford** The neighborhood gossip.

**Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose** A cantankerous, vile, elderly woman who teaches Jem and Scout a great lesson in bravery.

**Mrs. Grace Merriweather** A devout Methodist, Mrs. Merriweather writes the Halloween pageant.

**Mrs. Gertrude Farrow** The "second most devout lady in Maycomb" belongs to the local Missionary Society.

**Tom Robinson** The black man who is accused of raping and beating Mayella Ewell.

**Helen Robinson** Tom Robinson's wife.

**Link Deas** Tom and Helen Robinson's employer. He makes sure that Helen can pass safely by the Ewells' after Tom is arrested.

**Bob Ewell** The Ewell patriarch, Bob Ewell spends his welfare checks on alcohol. He claims to have witnessed Tom attacking Mayella.

**Mayella Violet Ewell** Tom's 19-year-old accuser.

**Burrus Ewell** One of Bob Ewell's children. He attends school only one day a year.

**Reverend Skyes** The pastor at First Purchase African M.E. Church. He helps Jem and Scout understand Tom's trial and finds seats for them in the "colored balcony."

**Judge John Taylor** The judge at Tom's trial. He appoints Atticus to represent Tom.

**Mr. Horace Gilmer** The state attorney representing the Ewells.

**Sheriff Heck Tate** Maycomb's sheriff who accompanies Atticus to kill the mad dog and who delivers the news about Bob Ewell.

**Mr. Braxton Bragg Underwood** The owner, editor, and printer of The Maycomb Tribune. Although he openly dislikes blacks, he defends Tom's right to a fair trial.

**Dolphus Raymond** Father to several biracial children, Mr. Raymond lives on the outskirts of town. When he comes into Maycomb, he pretends to be drunk.

**Walter Cunningham, Sr.** One of the men who comes to lynch Tom Robinson, he's also one of Atticus' clients. After speaking with Scout, he calls off the mob.

**Walter Cunningham, Jr.** One of Scout's classmates. Jem invites him to have lunch with them after Scout accosts Walter on the playground.

**Miss Caroline Fisher** New to teaching and to Maycomb and its ways, Miss Caroline is Scout's first grade teacher.

**Cecil Jacobs** A schoolmate of the Finch children, he scares Jem and Scout on the way to the Halloween pageant.

**Little Chuck** Little One of Scout's classmates who stands up to Burris Ewell in defense of Miss Caroline.

**Miss Gates** Scout's second grade teacher.

**Lula** A parishioner at First Purchase African M.E. Church who is upset when Scout and Jem attend services there.

**Eula May** The local telephone operator.

**Mr. Avery** A boarder at the house across from Mrs. Dubose's.

### **A brief summary**

*To Kill a Mocking Bird* concerns the predicament of white southerners working for racial equality. It is built round Jean Louise Finch, better known as Scout, who is six year old at the beginning of the story and grows to eight years by the time the novel ends. It is the story of Scout's adventure in the company of her brother Jem four years older and a visiting boy Dill a year older. It is told in the first person by Scout looking back in maturity on her childhood years. The Principal adult character is Atticus Finch, the children's (Scout and Jem) father.

Atticus is a lawyer by profession. He is known for his honesty and courage. He exhibits fairness and courage to defend a Negro accused of raping a white girl. The fairness and sobriety he exhibits throughout the trial and its aftermath influence strongly the development

of the personalities of the Finch children. A variety of relations and neighbours are sketched with remarkable verisimilitude and the most likable of these characters is Miss Maudie who is a lover of all Natural beauty and who agrees with Atticus that it is a sin to kill a Mocking Bird.

Another interesting character is Boo Radley, a mysterious recluse who has lived shut away in his house for many years. Part of the adventure of the Finch children relates to their attempt to draw Boo Radley out of his house. Boo Radley emerges as a public benefactor at the end of the story.

Scout Finch lives with her brother Jem and their father Atticus in the fictitious town of Maycomb, Alabama. Maycomb is a small, close-knit town, and every family has its social station depending on where they live, who their parents are, and how long their ancestors have lived in Maycomb.

A widower, Atticus raises his children by himself, with the help of kindly neighbours and a black housekeeper named Calpurnia. Scout and Jem almost instinctively understand the complexities and machinations of their neighbourhood and town. The only neighbour who puzzles them is the mysterious Arthur Radley, nicknamed Boo, who never comes outside. When Dill, another neighbour's nephew, starts spending summers in Maycomb, the three children begin an obsessive — and sometimes perilous — quest to lure Boo outside.

Scout is a tomboy who prefers the company of boys and generally solves her differences with her fists. She tries to make sense of a world that demands that she act like a lady, a brother who criticizes her for acting like a girl, and a father who accepts her just as she is. Scout hates school, gaining her most valuable education on her own street and from her father.

Not quite midway through the story, Scout and Jem discover that their father is going to represent a black man named Tom Robinson, who is accused of raping and beating a white woman. Suddenly, Scout and Jem have to tolerate a barrage of racial slurs and insults because of Atticus' role in the trial. During this time, Scout has a very difficult time restraining from physically fighting with other children, a tendency that gets her in trouble with her Aunt Alexandra and Uncle Jack. Even Jem, the older and more level headed of the two, loses his temper a time or two. After responding to a neighbour's (Mrs. Dubose) verbal attack by destroying her plants, Jem is sentenced to read to her every day after school for one month. Ultimately, Scout and Jem learn a powerful lesson about bravery from this woman. As the trial draws nearer, Aunt Alexandra comes to live with them under the guise of providing a feminine influence for Scout.

During the novel's last summer, Tom is tried and convicted even though Atticus proves that Tom could not have possibly committed the crime of which he is accused. In the process of presenting Tom's case, Atticus inadvertently insults and offends Bob Ewell, a nasty, lazy drunkard whose daughter is Tom's accuser. In spite of Tom's conviction, Ewell vows revenge on Atticus and the judge for besmirching his already tarnished name. All three children are

bewildered by the jury's decision to convict; Atticus tries to explain why the jury's decision was in many ways a foregone conclusion.

Shortly after the trial, Scout attends one of her aunt's Missionary Society meetings. Atticus interrupts the meeting to report that Tom Robinson had been killed in an escape attempt. Scout learns valuable lessons about achieving the ideal of womanhood and carrying on in the face of adversity that day.

Things slowly return to normal in Maycomb, and Scout and Jem realize that Boo Radley is no longer an all-consuming curiosity. The story appears to be winding down, but then Bob Ewell starts making good on his threats of revenge. Scout is in the Halloween pageant at school, playing the part of a ham. With Atticus and Aunt Alexandra both too tired to attend, Jem agrees to take Scout to the school. After embarrassing herself on-stage, Scout elects to leave her ham costume on for the walk home with Jem.

On the way home, the children hear odd noises, but convince themselves that the noises are coming from another friend who scared them on their way to school that evening. Suddenly, a scuffle occurs. Scout really can't see outside of her costume, but she hears Jem being pushed away, and she feels powerful arms squeezing her costume's chicken wire against her skin. During this attack, Jem badly breaks his arm. Scout gets just enough of a glimpse out of her costume to see a stranger carrying Jem back to their house.

The sheriff arrives at the Finch house to announce that Bob Ewell has been found dead under the tree where the children were attacked, having fallen on his own knife. By this time, Scout realizes that the stranger is none other than Boo Radley, and that Boo is actually responsible for killing Ewell, thus saving her and Jem's lives. In spite of Atticus' insistence to the contrary, the sheriff refuses to press charges against Boo. Scout agrees with this decision and explains her understanding to her father. Boo sees Jem one more time and then asks Scout to take him home, but rather than escort him home as though he were a child, she has Boo escort her to his house as a gentleman would.

With Boo safely home, Scout returns to Jem's room where Atticus is waiting. He reads her to sleep and then waits by Jem's bedside for his son to wake up.

## Study questions

1. Why does Atticus choose not to reveal to his children that Judge Taylor appointed him to Tom's case? How does his decision affect Scout's perception of her father?
2. Do you think that the adult Jean Louise telling the story through Scout's eyes may have added any embellishments to the story? Think of an event from your own life that occurred at least five years ago. Do you see the event differently now? How do memory and education affect your perception of the event?
3. If Scout and Jem's mother were still alive, how might the following people be different: Atticus, Scout, Jem, Calpurnia, and Aunt Alexandra?
4. Would Heck Tate have filed charges against Tom Robinson so quickly if Tom were white? Why or why not? Would Sheriff Tate have been so unwilling to file charges against Boo Radley if Boo was black? Why or why not?
5. Compare and contrast the relationship between Jem and Scout with the relationship between Atticus and Aunt Alexandra.
6. Based on what you know about Scout, describe the adult Jean Louise Finch.
7. Suppose that Mayella had admitted that she was lying when she testified against Tom. What would have happened to her? What would've happened to Tom? How would Scout, Jem, and Dill perceive the situation differently? Would the town have been willing to accept Tom's innocence? Why or why not?
8. What significance do the items that Boo leaves for the children have? What do they tell you about Boo? Why does his brother object so strongly to his leaving items for the children?
9. Harper Lee uses language and grammar that mirrors how the characters actually speak. Is this technique helpful in understanding the characters? Is it distracting? Could Lee have told the same story with the same impact if she'd used proper grammar throughout?
10. Compare the way Miss Caroline treats Scout on her first day of school with the way the town treats Mayella Ewell.
11. What, if any, prejudices do African Americans face in today's world? Have the issues that Lee discusses in *To Kill a Mockingbird* been resolved or are they ongoing? What

forms of prejudice can you identify in your own community? Have you ever been the victim of prejudice? Did the situation end justly? Explain.

12. Why does Boo Radley stay inside all the time?

Ref:

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