

Overview: To Kill a Mockingbird

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Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* has remained enormously popular since its publication in 1960. Recalling her experiences as a six-year-old from an adult perspective, Jean Louise Finch, nicknamed "Scout," describes the circumstances involving her widowed father, Atticus, and his legal defense of Tom Robinson, a local black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. In the three years surrounding the trial, Scout and her older brother, Jem, witness the unjust consequences of prejudice and hate while at the same time witnessing the values of courage and integrity through their father's example. Lee's first and only novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published during the Civil Rights movement and was hailed as an exposé of Southern racist society. The heroic character of Atticus Finch has been held up as a role model of moral virtue and impeccable character for lawyers to emulate. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has endured as a mainstay on high school and college reading lists. It was adapted to film in 1962 as a major motion picture starring Gregory Peck.

Plot and Major Characters

To Kill a Mockingbird is set in the small, rural town of Maycomb, Alabama, during the early 1930s. The character of Atticus Finch, Scout's father, was based on Lee's own father, a liberal Alabama lawyer and statesman who frequently defended African Americans within the racially prejudiced Southern legal system. Scout and her brother Jem are raised by their father and by Calpurnia, an African-American housekeeper who works for the family. Scout and Jem meet and befriend seven-year-old Dill Harris, a boy who has arrived in Maycomb to stay with his aunt for the summer. Lee has stated that the character of Dill is based on young Truman Capote, a well-known Southern writer and childhood friend. Together with Dill, Scout and Jem make a game of observing "Boo" Radley, a town recluse who has remained inside his house for fifteen years, trying to provoke him to come outside. Local myth holds that Boo eats live squirrels and prowls the streets at night, and the children's perception of him is colored by such tales. In the fall, Dill returns to his family in the North and Scout enters the first grade. Scout and Jem begin to discover mysterious objects, designed to intrigue children, hidden in a tree on the Radley property.

When Tom Robinson, an African-American man, is accused of raping Mayella Ewell, Atticus is appointed as the defense attorney. Mayella and her shiftless father, Bob Ewell, live in abject poverty on the outskirts of town. The family is known as trouble and disliked by townspeople. Despite this, Atticus's defense of Tom is unpopular in the white community, and Scout and Jem find themselves taunted at school due to their father's defense of a black man. Atticus consistently strives to instill moral values in his children, and hopes to counteract the influence of racial prejudice. The children view their father as

frustratingly staid and bookish, until he is asked by the sheriff to shoot a rabid dog that is roaming the street. After Atticus kills the dog, Scout and Jem learn that their father is renowned as a deadly marksman in Maycomb County, but that he chooses not to use this skill, unless absolutely necessary. Scout's aunt, Alexandra, unexpectedly arrives to reside with the Finch family, announcing it is time someone reined in the children. She makes it her mission to counteract Atticus's liberal influence on the children and to instill ladylike virtues in the tomboyish Scout.

The night before the trial of Tom Robinson is to begin, a group of local men threaten a lynching, but Scout inadvertently disrupts their plan when she recognizes the father of a schoolmate in the crowd of would-be lynchers. When the trial begins, Atticus tries to protect his children from the anger and prejudice they would hear; however, Scout, Jem, and Dill sneak into the courtroom and sit in the balcony with the black community. Mayella and her father testify that Tom raped Mayella after he was asked onto their property to break up an old chifforobe into firewood. Atticus, however, proves Tom's innocence by demonstrating that while Mayella's face was beaten and bruised on her right side, Tom's left arm had been rendered completely useless by an earlier injury. Therefore, Atticus concludes, Tom could not possibly be the left-handed assailant who struck Mayella on the right side of her face. Atticus further suggests that it was Bob, Mayella's father, who beat her, and that, in fact, no rape occurred. Before the jury departs to deliberate, Atticus appeals to their sense of justice, imploring them not to allow racial prejudice to interfere with their deliberations. However, after two hours, the jury returns with a guilty verdict, sentencing Tom to be executed for rape. Later, Tom is shot to death during an attempt to escape from jail.

The following fall, Bob Ewell, incensed by Atticus's treatment of him during the trial, attacks Scout and Jem with a knife as they are walking home from a school Halloween pageant. Boo Radley, secretly observing the scene, intervenes in the scuffle, and Bob Ewell is stabbed and killed in the process. Called to the scene, the Sheriff and Atticus agree to not report Boo's involvement to the police, because a trial against him would likely be prejudiced. Intimately aware of issues of prejudice due to the Tom Robinson case, Atticus and the children agree to report that Ewell fell on his knife in the scuffle, sparing Boo the consequences of a legal trial. Scout realizes in retrospect that Boo has never been the threatening figure the children had imagined, and that he was responsible for leaving the mysterious gifts for them to find on his property. After walking Boo home, Scout stands on the porch of his house looking out, finally seeing the world through a wider perspective.

To Kill a Mockingbird also can be read as a coming-of-age story featuring a young girl growing up in the South and experiencing moral awakenings. Narrated from Scout's point-of-view, the novel demonstrates the now-adult narrator's hindsight perspective on the growth of her identity and outlook on life. In developing a more mature sensibility, the tomboyish Scout challenges the forces attempting to socialize her into a prescribed gender role as a Southern lady. Aunt Alexandra tries to subtly and not-so subtly push Scout into a traditional gender role--a role that often runs counter to her father's values and her own natural inclinations. However, as events around the trial become ugly, Scout realizes the value of some of the traditions Alexandra is trying to show her and decides she, too, can be a "lady."

To Kill a Mockingbird explores themes of heroism and the idea of role models as well. Lee has stated that the novel was essentially a long love letter to her father, whom she idolized as a man with deeply held moral convictions. Atticus is clearly the hero of the novel, and functions as a role model for his children. Early in the story, the children regard their father as weak and ineffective because he does not conform to several conventional standards of Southern masculinity. They eventually realize that Atticus possesses not only skill with a rifle, but also moral courage, intelligence, and humor, and they come to regard him as a hero in his own right.

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