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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



To Kill a Mockingbird

by Harper Lee

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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ISBN: 978-1-58049-048-1

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Item No: 301140

Notes

Nelle Harper Lee was born to Amasa Coleman Lee and Frances Cunningham Finch Lee in 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama, a small Southern town similar in many ways to Maycomb, the fictional setting of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. After graduating from high school in 1944, Lee attended Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama, for one year before enrolling at the University of Alabama to study law. In 1949, she left law school for New York City, in hopes of pursuing a writing career. After many years working as an airline reservation clerk, she finally began writing full time in 1956. Four years later, in July of 1960, she published *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a coming of age novel set against the backdrop of one small town's struggles with racism, classism, ignorance, and injustice.

Although Lee has stated that her goal was not to depict her own childhood specifically, *To Kill a Mockingbird* contains several autobiographical elements. Like Scout, the fictional protagonist of the story, Lee witnessed firsthand the damaging effects of racism and intolerance in her hometown of Monroeville. Also like Scout, her father was a lawyer and served in the Alabama State Legislature. He once defended two black men accused of killing a white store clerk. Despite his defense, the men were found guilty and sentenced to death. Many scholars suggest, however, that the trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird* was inspired by the well-known Scottsboro Boys trial. In Scottsboro, Alabama, in 1931, two white women accused nine young black men of rape. Several of the young men were convicted and sent to prison, where they remained until it was revealed that the women had made up the story. The trial of Tom Robinson and its aftermath contains many similarities to that of the Scottsboro Boys.

Published at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in America, *To Kill a Mockingbird* became a critical success and an instant bestseller, winning for Lee the Pulitzer Prize in 1961.

In July 2015, *Go Set a Watchman* was published, a novel she had written before *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It, too, became a bestseller, but its depiction of an older, racially prejudiced Atticus caused a great deal of controversy.

Nelle Harper Lee died on February 19, 2016 in Monroeville, Alabama.

In this Teaching Unit, we have used the terms “black” and “African American” when referring to race, based on their usage in the book and appropriateness in context.

All references come from the Grand Central Publishing edition of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, copyright 2010.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to

1. discuss the use of first-person narration in the novel, explain its advantages and/or disadvantages, and note how the story may have been different had the author chosen to use an alternate form of narration.
2. identify the setting of the story, discuss how Scout describes her hometown, and explain the effects of the Great Depression on the town.
3. describe how education is presented in the novel, noting the relationship between education and class, as well as education and home life.
4. discuss Atticus Finch as a father, explaining how he acts as a role model for Jem and Scout; identify the moral lessons he teaches his children over the course of the novel, and point out the ways in which many of these lessons relate to the novel's major themes.
5. explain how Calpurnia acts as a substitute mother for Jem and Scout, and trace how Scout's perception of her transforms over the course of the novel.
6. discuss how classism is presented in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, describing the social hierarchy that exists in Maycomb and pointing out its damaging effects.
7. identify examples of both hidden and overt racism in Maycomb County, taking into account the trial of Tom Robinson, the gossip among the ladies of the missionary circle, and the racial segregation apparent in the county.
8. summarize the trial of Tom Robinson, including the testimony of each witness, the evidence brought forth in the case, Atticus's defense of Tom, and the verdict and its aftermath.
9. explain how the trial of Tom Robinson exposes the deep-rooted racism in Maycomb County, as well as certain problems inherent in the American justice system; state an opinion on whether such problems can be solved.
10. trace how Scout's perception of Boo Radley changes over the course of the novel, pointing out the important lesson she learns as she stands on the Radley porch at the end of the story.
11. discuss the role of Atticus as Maycomb's savior, defender, and moral representative; identify both literal and symbolic examples within the text that support this idea.
12. track Jem's maturation over the course of the novel; explain how he deals with the disillusionment and loss of innocence that accompanies growing up. Discuss how his character, in particular, makes *To Kill a Mockingbird* a classic coming-of-age novel.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is narrated in the first person. Explain the advantages and/or disadvantages of this type of narration. How might the story have been different if Harper Lee had chosen a different form of narration?
2. As the novel begins, Scout tells the reader about her hometown of Maycomb, Alabama. How does she describe the town? In what ways has the Great Depression affected the citizens of Maycomb? How has it affected different classes of people in different ways?
3. How is the relationship between education and class presented in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? For example, consider the different educational levels of Scout, Walter Cunningham, and Burris Ewell. How is a child's education affected by both class and home life?
4. How would you describe Atticus as a father? Give examples of his interactions with Jem and Scout. What type of role model does he provide for them? What lessons does he teach the children over the course of the novel, and how do these lessons relate to some of the novel's major themes?
5. Describe Calpurnia. How does she function as a substitute mother for Jem and Scout? How does Scout's view of her change over the course of the novel? For example, consider Scout and Jem's visit to Calpurnia's church. In what ways does this experience alter the way they view Calpurnia?
6. Discuss the incident with Mrs. Dubose. What lesson does Jem learn from his experience with her? Which of the novel's major themes does Mrs. Dubose seem to embody?
7. Describe the scene in which the rabid dog stalks down the street. How might the rabid dog be interpreted as a symbol of the evil in Maycomb, specifically the racism that pervades the town? Who ultimately destroys the mad dog? How does this fit with the symbolic nature of the incident?
8. What role does Aunt Alexandra play in the story? Why does she come to stay with the Finches? Discuss her views on class and race. In what ways does she change over the course of the novel?
9. Discuss how Harper Lee presents class in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. How does Scout describe the "caste system" in Maycomb? Do you think classism can be just as damaging as racism? Give reasons for your opinion.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Chapter 1

VOCABULARY

apothecary – a pharmacist
assuaged – eased, relieved
brethren – brothers
chattels – slaves
dictum – a rule or command
flivver – an old, cheap car
foray – a raid or attack
impotent – powerless
imprudent – bold
malevolent – evil
morbid – gruesome, horrific
nebulous – cloudy; vague
piety – religious devotion
predilection – tendency
strictures – restrictions
synonymous – meaning the same thing
taciturn – quiet
tyrannical – harsh; domineering
unsullied – clean; pure
vapid – dull

1. Who is the narrator of the novel? What type of narration is used? How does the reader know that the narrator is an older person looking back on her youth?

2. The narrator begins her story by giving the reader some background information. What does the narrator reveal about her family history in the first several pages?

4. Who do you suppose is responsible for the gifts in the knot-hole? Why do you think the person is leaving these things?

5. When Jem and Scout return to the tree with the idea of placing in it a thank you note for the anonymous gift giver, they find the knot-hole plugged up with cement. Who plugged the knot-hole, and why?

6. How does Jem find out that the explanation for filling the knot-hole is false? What do you think the real reason is?

7. When Jem finally comes in for the night, Scout notices that he had been crying. Why do you think he was crying?
