

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD: STUDY GUIDE

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 believe in white supremacy, and the novel projects the social snobbery and the prejudice attached to these southern values.

CHARACTER LIST

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.

Mr. Radley

Their neighbor. He is an unrelenting father in that he punishes Boo to a stern solitary confinement. He is a complete contrast to Atticus in the role of a father.

Miss Stephanie Crawford

Their neighbor and local gossip, who cannot help trying to be the first one to pass any rumor or to speculate on any piece of gossip.

Nathan Radley

Boo Radley's older brother. Shares some of the cruel traits of his father.

Miss Maudie

The children's confidante who always takes pains to explain human character and its whims to the children.

Mayella Ewell

Bob's young daughter, who in her search for company and affection, puts the innocent Tom Robinson into deep trouble.

Tom Robinson

A young Negro laborer. He is honest and helpful but is unfairly convicted and even found guilty for crime he has not committed. The inequality towards blacks reaches a peak in the treatment given to him by the whites.

The Cunningham family

They are what are termed as the 'poor whites', but they are decent self-respecting, hardworking people who always try to pay off their debts in whatever manner possible.

Mr. Heck Tate

The sheriff of Maycomb county who is a sincere and respected man of society. At the end of the novel, he uses his discretion over the death of Bob Ewell to save a lot of unnecessary speculation.

Judge Taylor

The seemingly lethargic and disinterested judge for the Tom Robinson - Mayella case but who underneath, is a very alert and perceptive judge .

Mrs. Dubose

The bitter tongued, garrulous old neighbor of Atticus, who presents herself as an irritating and corrosive woman to the children, but who really is a very strong-willed and considerate person.

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 a greatly considerate human being. He has clear-cut values and beliefs, and it is his sincere wish that his children too grow up with a broad outlook and an unprejudiced way of thinking. He is indifferent to what others have to say or think about his actions, and he is steadfast in his beliefs of equality and liberty.

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 Tom Robinson episode, it is alarming to discover him an unfeeling, pretentious no-gooder who has no qualms about sending an innocent bystander to the gallows. Even after winning the case, on realizing that he has lost his respect in the people (because of Atticus), he even attempts harming Atticus' children, thus leaving not an iota of sympathy for himself in the reader.

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 not win the case. Though the audience feels strongly for Tom's plight and it is apparent that he is innocent, the jury delivers the verdict that Tom is guilty. The immediate response to this is extreme disappointment and dejection, but the jury's verdict is final.

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 having at least taken up the case and defending Tom. Tom is obviously the most upset, but Atticus is only quiet and exhausted. Ewell, on realizing his lost standing in the community, tries to make life miserable, first for Helen Robinson, Tom's widow, and then even Atticus. He finally resorts to harming Scout and Jem, but in the process loses his own life. Simultaneously, Scout's long cherished dream of meeting Boo Radley is also fulfilled. Thus the trial reveals a number of accidental as well as expected outcomes.

SHORT 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 racial prejudices still prevalent among the white society which cannot give an equal status to a black.

The relation between the children and Boo Radley resurfaces at the end, when it is Boo who saves them from imminent death at the hands of the vicious Bob Ewell. It is ultimately revealed that Boo is not a lunatic, but a simple-minded person with failing health and a childish attachment for Scout and Tom.

The story of the mockingbird recited by Atticus is linked to the theme of the novel. It is considered a sin to kill a mockingbird, since it is a harmless bird which only sings to please others. Boo Radley and Tom Robinson are also harmless people. By letting Tom die, the sin of killing a mockingbird has been committed. But by not revealing the facts of Boo's heroism in rescuing the children, the sin is avoided, and Boo is left to his seclusion. Tom's death is a defeat of justice and an insult to humanity, and the readers can judge for themselves how much of a sin it is.

The maturing of Scout and Jim is portrayed as well as the exemplary character of Atticus, who is without any racial prejudices or biased views. He is a highly ethical character, who chooses to fight against the 'old traditions' of his own community.

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 the whites' fold and are denied the equality they deserve and even have a right to. The whites find it difficult and unacceptable to consider them equal. This theme has been illustrated while depicting the lifestyle of the black community and the varied problems they face from the white community.

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 anybody and his death was unnecessary. Similarly, when it is revealed that Arthur Radley is the one who had killed Bob while saving the children's lives, Mr. Heck Tate refuses to hold him responsible because he feels that it would invite unnecessary speculation, interest and undue attention to Boo Radley, which he does not wish for. To bring him into the limelight would again be like killing a mockingbird, just as Scout, very intelligently surmises.

The theme of morality is also introduced. Morals such as love for human beings, importance of living things, and an open attitude towards others' beliefs and actions are well demonstrated. These are the subsequent themes in the novel.

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 and dealt with. Atticus' dealings with the blacks, the negative attitudes of some other members of the community, the trial of Tom Robinson and his gruesome end, depicts a seriousness and a grave reconsideration of accepted norms, which is expected of the readers by the author.



Harper Lee - 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 Second World War. She wrote several essays and three short stories. On her literary agent's advice, she expanded one of her stories into the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It was on the best seller lists for over eighty weeks and won the Pulitzer Prize and the Alabama Library Association Award. In spite of her success, Lee had no desire to write a sequel to the novel.

Maycomb County, where her novel is set, closely resembles the place where Harper Lee was born and spent most of her life. Though she insists that her novel is not autobiographical, her father was a lawyer and was the inspiration for the character of Atticus Finch.