To Kill a Mockingbird

Harper Lee

SparkNotes

Key Facts

- Genre: Coming-of-age story; social drama; courtroom drama; Southern drama
- Time and Place Written: Mid-1950s; New York City
- Date of 1st Publication: 1960
- Narrator: Scout narrates the story herself, looking back in retrospect an unspecified number of years after the events of the novel take place.

More Key Facts

- Tone: Childlike, humorous, nostalgic, innocent; as the novel progresses, increasingly dark, foreboding, and critical of society
- Setting: 1933–1935: the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama
- Major Conflict: The childhood innocence with which Scout and Jem begin the novel is threatened by numerous incidents that expose the evil side of human nature, most notably the guilty verdict in Tom Robinson's trial and the vengefulness of Bob Ewell. As the novel progresses, Scout and Jem struggle to maintain faith in the human capacity for good in light of these recurring instances of human evil.

Plot Overview

Scout Finch lives with her brother, Jem, and their widowed father, Atticus, in the sleepy Alabama town of Maycomb. Maycomb is suffering through the Great Depression, but Atticus is a prominent lawyer and the Finch family is reasonably well off in comparison to the rest of society. One summer, Jem and Scout befriend a boy named Dill, who has come to live in their neighborhood for the summer, and the trio acts out stories together. Eventually, Dill becomes fascinated with the spooky house on their street called the Radley Place. The house is owned by Mr. Nathan Radley, whose brother, Arthur (nicknamed Boo), has lived there for years without venturing outside.

Scout goes to school for the first time that fall and detests it. She and Jem find gifts apparently left for them in a knothole of a tree on the Radley property. Dill returns the following summer, and he, Scout, and Jem begin to act out the story of Boo Radley. Atticus puts a stop to their antics, urging the children to try to see life from another person's perspective before making judgments. But, on Dill's last night in Maycomb for the summer, the three sneak onto the Radley property, where Nathan Radley shoots at them. Jem loses his pants in the ensuing escape. When he returns for them, he finds them mended and hung over the fence. The next winter, Jem and Scout find more presents in the tree, presumably left by the mysterious Boo. Nathan Radley eventually plugs the knothole with cement. Shortly thereafter, a fire breaks out in another neighbor's house, and during the fire someone slips a blanket on Scout's shoulders as she watches the blaze. Convinced that Boo did it, Jem tells Atticus about the mended pants and the presents.

To the consternation of Maycomb's racist white community, Atticus agrees to defend a black man named Tom Robinson, who has been accused of raping a white woman. Because of Atticus's decision, Jem and Scout are subjected to abuse from other children, even when they celebrate Christmas at the family compound on Finch's Landing. Calpurnia, the Finches' black cook, takes them to the local black church, where the warm and close-knit community largely embraces the children.

Atticus's sister, Alexandra, comes to live with the Finches the next summer. Dill, who is supposed to live with his “new father” in another town, runs away and comes to Maycomb. Tom Robinson's trial begins, and when the accused man is placed in the local jail, a mob gathers to lynch him. Atticus faces the mob down the night before the trial. Jem and Scout, who have sneaked out of the house, soon join him. Scout recognizes one of the men, and her polite questioning about his son shames him into dispersing the mob.

At the trial itself, the children sit in the “colored balcony” with the town's black citizens. Atticus provides clear evidence that the accusers, Mayella Ewell and her father, Bob, are lying: in fact, Mayella propositioned Tom Robinson, was caught by her father, and then accused Tom of rape to cover her shame and guilt. Atticus provides impressive evidence that the marks on Mayella's face are from wounds that her father inflicted; upon discovering her with Tom, he called her a whore and beat her. Yet, despite the significant evidence pointing to Tom's innocence, the all-white jury convicts him. The innocent Tom later tries to escape from prison and is shot to death. In the aftermath of the trial, Jem's faith in justice is badly shaken, and he lapses into despondency and doubt.

Despite the verdict, Bob Ewell feels that Atticus and the judge have made a fool out of him, and he vows revenge. He menaces Tom Robinson's widow, tries to break into the judge's house, and finally attacks Jem and Scout as they walk home from a Halloween party. Boo Radley intervenes, however, saving the children and stabbing Ewell fatally during the struggle. Boo carries the wounded Jem back to Atticus's house, where the sheriff, in order to protect Boo, insists that Ewell tripped over a tree root and fell on his own knife. After sitting with Scout for a while, Boo disappears once more into the Radley house.

Later, Scout feels as though she can finally imagine what life is like for Boo. He has become a human being to her at last. With this realization, Scout embraces her father's advice to practice sympathy and understanding and demonstrates that her experiences with hatred and prejudice will not sully her faith in human goodness.

Analysis of Major Characters

Scout

Scout is a very unusual little girl, both in her own qualities and in her social position. She is unusually intelligent (she learns to read before beginning school), unusually confident (she fights boys without fear), unusually thoughtful (she worries about the essential goodness and evil of mankind), and unusually good (she always acts with the best intentions). In terms of her social identity, she is unusual for being a tomboy in the prim and proper Southern world of Maycomb.

One quickly realizes when reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* that Scout is who she is because of the way Atticus has raised her. He has nurtured her mind, conscience, and individuality without bogging her down in fussy social hypocrisies and notions of propriety. While most girls in Scout's position would be wearing dresses and learning manners, Scout, thanks to Atticus's hands-off parenting style, wears overalls and learns to climb trees with Jem and Dill. She does not always grasp social niceties (she tells her teacher that one of her fellow students is too poor to pay her back for lunch), and human behavior often baffles her (as when one of her teachers criticizes Hitler's prejudice against Jews while indulging in her own prejudice against blacks), but Atticus's protection of Scout from hypocrisy and social pressure has rendered her open, forthright, and well meaning.

At the beginning of the novel, Scout is an innocent, good-hearted five-year-old child who has no experience with the evils of the world. As the novel progresses, Scout has her first contact with evil in the form of racial prejudice, and the basic development of her character is governed by the question of whether she will emerge from that contact with her conscience and optimism intact or whether she will be bruised, hurt, or destroyed like Boo Radley and Tom Robinson. Thanks to Atticus's wisdom, Scout learns that though humanity has a great capacity for evil, it also has a great capacity for good, and that the evil can often be mitigated if one approaches others with an outlook of sympathy and understanding. Scout's development into a person capable of assuming that outlook marks the culmination of the novel and indicates that, whatever evil she encounters, she will retain her conscience without becoming cynical or jaded. Though she is still a child at the end of the book, Scout's perspective on life develops from that of an innocent child into that of a near grown-up.

Atticus

As one of the most prominent citizens in Maycomb during the Great Depression, Atticus is relatively well off in a time of widespread poverty. Because of his penetrating intelligence, calm wisdom, and exemplary behavior, Atticus is respected by everyone, including the very poor. He functions as the moral backbone of Maycomb, a person to whom others turn in times of doubt and trouble. But the conscience that makes him so admirable ultimately causes his falling out with the people of Maycomb. Unable to abide the town's comfortable ingrained racial prejudice, he agrees to defend Tom Robinson, a black man. Atticus's action makes him the object of scorn in Maycomb, but he is simply too impressive a figure to be scorned for long. After the trial, he seems destined to be held in the same high regard as before.

Atticus practices the ethic of sympathy and understanding that he preaches to Scout and Jem and never holds a grudge against the people of Maycomb. Despite their callous indifference to racial inequality, Atticus sees much to admire in them. He recognizes that people have both good and bad qualities, and he is determined to admire the good while understanding and forgiving the bad. Atticus passes this great moral lesson on to Scout—this perspective protects the innocent from being destroyed by contact with evil.

Ironically, though Atticus is a heroic figure in the novel and a respected man in Maycomb, neither Jem nor Scout consciously idolizes him at the beginning of the novel. Both are embarrassed that he is older than other fathers and that he doesn't hunt or fish. But Atticus's wise parenting, which he sums up in Chapter 30 by saying, “Before Jem looks at anyone else he looks at me, and I've tried to live so I can look squarely back at him,” ultimately wins their respect. By the end of the novel, Jem, in particular, is fiercely devoted to Atticus (Scout, still a little girl, loves him uncritically). Though his children's attitude toward him evolves, Atticus is characterized throughout the book by his absolute consistency. He stands rigidly committed to justice and thoughtfully willing to view matters from the perspectives of others. He does not develop in the novel but retains these qualities in equal measure, making him the novel's moral guide and voice of conscience.

Jem

If Scout is an innocent girl who is exposed to evil at an early age and forced to develop an adult moral outlook, Jem finds himself in an even more turbulent situation. His shattering experience at Tom Robinson's trial occurs just as he is entering puberty, a time when life is complicated and traumatic enough. His disillusionment upon seeing that justice does not always prevail leaves him vulnerable and confused at a critical, formative point in his life. Nevertheless, he admirably upholds the commitment to justice that Atticus instilled in him and maintains it with deep conviction throughout the novel.

Unlike the jaded Mr. Raymond, Jem is not without hope: Atticus tells Scout that Jem simply needs time to process what he has learned. The strong presence of Atticus in Jem's life seems to promise that he will recover his equilibrium. Later in his life, Jem is able to see that Boo Radley's unexpected aid indicates there is good in people. Even before the end of the novel, Jem shows signs of having learned a positive lesson from the trial; for instance, at the beginning of Chapter 25, he refuses to allow Scout to squash a roly-poly bug because it has done nothing to harm her. After seeing the unfair destruction of Tom Robinson, Jem now wants to protect the fragile and harmless.

The idea that Jem resolves his cynicism and moves toward a happier life is supported by the beginning of the novel, in which a grown-up Scout remembers talking to Jem about the events that make up the novel's plot. Scout says that Jem pinpointed the children's initial interest in Boo Radley at the beginning of the story, strongly implying that he understood what Boo represented to them and, like Scout, managed to shed his innocence without losing his hope.

Themes

The Coexistence of Good and Evil

The most important theme of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the book's exploration of the moral nature of human beings—that is, whether people are essentially good or essentially evil. The novel approaches this question by dramatizing Scout and Jem's transition from a perspective of childhood innocence, in which they assume that people are good because they have never seen evil, to a more adult perspective, in which they have confronted evil and must incorporate it into their understanding of the world. As a result of this portrayal of the transition from innocence to experience, one of the book's important subthemes involves the threat that hatred, prejudice, and ignorance pose to the innocent: people such as Tom Robinson and Boo Radley are not prepared for the evil that they encounter, and, as a result, they are destroyed. Even Jem is victimized to an extent by his discovery of the evil of racism during and after the trial. Whereas Scout is able to maintain her basic faith in human nature despite Tom's conviction, Jem's faith in justice and in humanity is badly damaged, and he retreats into a state of disillusionment.

The moral voice of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is embodied by Atticus Finch, who is virtually unique in the novel in that he has experienced and understood evil without losing his faith in the human capacity for goodness. Atticus understands that, rather than being simply creatures of good or creatures of evil, most people have both good and bad qualities. The important thing is to appreciate the good qualities and understand the bad qualities by treating others with sympathy and trying to see life from their perspective. He tries to teach this ultimate moral lesson to Jem and Scout to show them that it is possible to live with conscience without losing hope or becoming cynical. In this way, Atticus is able to admire Mrs. Dubose's courage even while deploring her racism. Scout's progress as a character in the novel is defined by her gradual development toward understanding Atticus's lessons, culminating when, in the final chapters, Scout at last sees Boo Radley as a human being. Her newfound ability to view the world from his perspective ensures that she will not become jaded as she loses her innocence.

The Importance of Moral Education

Because exploration of the novel's larger moral questions takes place within the perspective of children, the education of children is necessarily involved in the development of all of the novel's themes. In a sense, the plot of the story charts Scout's moral education, and the theme of how children are educated—how they are taught to move from innocence to adulthood—recurs throughout the novel (at the end of the book, Scout even says that she has learned practically everything except algebra). This theme is explored most powerfully through the relationship between Atticus and his children, as he devotes himself to instilling a social conscience in Jem and Scout. The scenes at school provide a direct counterpoint to Atticus's effective education of his children: Scout is frequently confronted with teachers who are either frustratingly unsympathetic to children's needs or morally hypocritical. As is true of *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s other moral themes, the novel's conclusion about education is that the most important lessons are those of sympathy and understanding, and that a sympathetic, understanding approach is the best way to teach these lessons. In this way, Atticus's ability to put himself in his children's shoes makes him an excellent teacher, while Miss Caroline's rigid commitment to the educational techniques that she learned in college makes her ineffective and even dangerous.

The Existence of Social Inequality

Differences in social status are explored largely through the overcomplicated social hierarchy of Maycomb, the ins and outs of which constantly baffle the children. The relatively well-off Finches stand near the top of Maycomb's social hierarchy, with most of the townspeople beneath them. Ignorant country farmers like the Cunninghams lie below the townspeople, and the white trash Ewells rest below the Cunninghams. But the black community in Maycomb, despite its abundance of admirable qualities, squats below even the Ewells, enabling Bob Ewell to make up for his own lack of importance by persecuting Tom Robinson. These rigid social divisions that make up so much of the adult world are revealed in the book to be both irrational and destructive. For example, Scout cannot understand why Aunt Alexandra refuses to let her consort with young Walter Cunningham. Lee uses the children's perplexity at the unpleasant layering of Maycomb society to critique the role of class status and, ultimately, prejudice in human interaction.

Motifs

Gothic Details

The forces of good and evil in *To Kill a Mockingbird* seem larger than the small Southern town in which the story takes place. Lee adds drama and atmosphere to her story by including a number of Gothic details in the setting and the plot. In literature, the term Gothic refers to a style of fiction first popularized in eighteenth-century England, featuring supernatural occurrences, gloomy and haunted settings, full moons, and so on. Among the Gothic elements in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are the unnatural snowfall, the fire that destroys Miss Maudie's house, the children's superstitions about Boo Radley, the mad dog that Atticus shoots, and the ominous night of the Halloween party on which Bob Ewell attacks the children. These elements, out of place in the normally quiet, predictable Maycomb, create tension in the novel and serve to foreshadow the troublesome events of the trial and its aftermath.

Small-Town Life

Counterbalancing the Gothic motif of the story is the motif of old-fashioned, small-town values, which manifest themselves throughout the novel. As if to contrast with all of the suspense and moral grandeur of the book, Lee emphasizes the slow-paced, good-natured feel of life in Maycomb. She often deliberately juxtaposes small-town values and Gothic images in order to examine more closely the forces of good and evil. The horror of the fire, for instance, is mitigated by the comforting scene of the people of Maycomb banding together to save Miss Maudie's possessions. In contrast, Bob Ewell's cowardly attack on the defenseless Scout, who is dressed like a giant ham for the school pageant, shows him to be unredeemably evil.

Symbols

Mockingbirds

The title of *To Kill a Mockingbird* has very little literal connection to the plot, but it carries a great deal of symbolic weight in the book. In this story of innocents destroyed by evil, the “mockingbird” comes to represent the idea of innocence. Thus, to kill a mockingbird is to destroy innocence. Throughout the book, a number of characters (Jem, Tom Robinson, Dill, Boo Radley, Mr. Raymond) can be identified as mockingbirds—innocents who have been injured or destroyed through contact with evil. This connection between the novel's title and its main theme is made explicit several times in the novel: after Tom Robinson is shot, Mr. Underwood compares his death to “the senseless slaughter of songbirds,” and at the end of the book Scout thinks that hurting Boo Radley would be like “shootin' a mockingbird.” Most important, Miss Maudie explains to Scout: “Mockingbirds don't do one thing but . . . sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.” That Jem and Scout's last name is Finch (another type of small bird) indicates that they are particularly vulnerable in the racist world of Maycomb, which often treats the fragile innocence of childhood harshly.

Boo Radley

As the novel progresses, the children's changing attitude toward Boo Radley is an important measurement of their development from innocence toward a grown-up moral perspective. At the beginning of the book, Boo is merely a source of childhood superstition. As he leaves Jem and Scout presents and mends Jem's pants, he gradually becomes increasingly and intriguingly real to them. At the end of the novel, he becomes fully human to Scout, illustrating that she has developed into a sympathetic and understanding individual. Boo, an intelligent child ruined by a cruel father, is one of the book's most important mockingbirds; he is also an important symbol of the good that exists within people. Despite the pain that Boo has suffered, the purity of his heart rules his interaction with the children. In saving Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell, Boo proves the ultimate symbol of good.