

**Text 1: Excerpt from “To Kill a Mockingbird” by Harper Lee**

Read from this paragraph in Chapter 15:

*The Maycomb jail was the most venerable and hideous of the county’s buildings. Atticus said it was like something Cousin Joshua St. Clair might have designed. It was certainly someone’s dream. Starkly out of place in a town of square-faced stores and steep-roofed houses, the Maycomb jail was a miniature Gothic joke one cell wide and two cells high, complete with tiny battlements and flying buttresses.*

to the final paragraph of the chapter, which ends:

*Walking toward the office, Dill and I fell into step behind Atticus and Jem. Dill was encumbered by the chair, and his pace was slower. Atticus and Jem were well ahead of us, and I assumed that Atticus was giving him hell for not going home, but I was wrong. As they passed under a streetlight, Atticus reached out and massaged Jem’s hair, his one gesture of affection.*



*Downtown Dallas in 1910, when Allen Brooks, a black man, was hanged from a telephone pole. Credit via Dallas Public Library/Dallas History Archives Division*

**Text 2: Excerpt from “History of Lynchings in the South Documents Nearly 4,000 Names” by Campbell Robertson**

DALLAS — A block from the tourist-swarmed headquarters of the former Texas School Book Depository sits the old county courthouse, now a museum. In 1910, a group of men rushed into the courthouse, threw a rope around the neck of a black man accused of sexually assaulting a 3-year-old white girl, and threw the other end of the rope out a window. A mob outside yanked the man, Allen Brooks, to the ground and strung him up at a ceremonial arch a few blocks down Main Street.

South of the city, past the Trinity River bottoms, a black man named W. R. Taylor was hanged by a mob in 1889. Farther south still is the community of Streetman, where 25-year-old George Gay was hanged from a tree and shot hundreds of times in 1922.

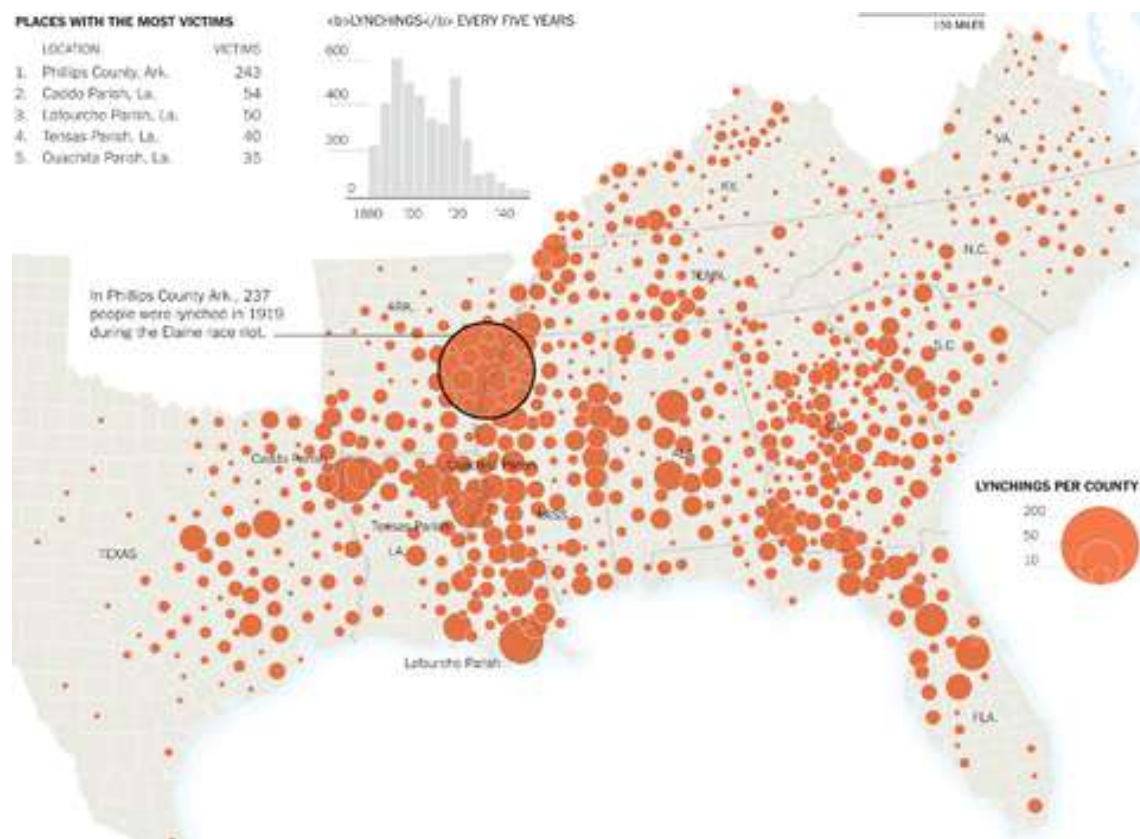
And just beyond that is Kirvin, where three black men, two of them almost certainly innocent, were accused of killing a white woman and, under the gaze of hundreds of soda-drinking spectators, were castrated, stabbed, beaten, tied to a plow and set afire in the spring of 1922.

The killing of Mr. Brooks is noted in the museum. The sites of the other killings, like those of nearly every lynching in the United States, are not marked. Bryan Stevenson believes this should change.

On Tuesday, the organization he founded and runs, the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Ala., released a report on the history of lynchings in the United States, the result of five years of research and 160 visits to sites around the South. The authors of the report compiled an inventory of 3,959 victims of “racial terror lynchings” in 12 Southern states from 1877 to 1950.

Next comes the process of selecting lynching sites where the organization plans to erect markers and memorials, which will involve significant fund-raising, negotiations with distrustful landowners and, almost undoubtedly, intense controversy.

The process is intended, Mr. Stevenson said, to force people to reckon with the narrative through-line of the country’s vicious racial history, rather than thinking of that history in a short-range, piecemeal way.



## **For Writing and Discussion**

1. How well does Scout understand the events she's relating in this excerpt from the novel? What clues in the text reveal her point of view? How does Scout's perspective shape or limit the reader's understanding of the unfolding action? What demands are placed on the reader when we have a narrator with a limited point of view?
2. The Equal Justice Initiative report documents 326 lynchings in Alabama between 1877 and 1950. How does the broader history of lynching help you to better understand the events in Chapter 15 of "To Kill a Mockingbird"? How does the history provide a new perspective on the choices faced by Atticus, Scout, Mr. Cunningham or other characters?
3. How does Harper Lee's fictional portrayal of the attempted lynching compare with the historical examples described in the Equal Justice Initiative report? Does the report help you to assess whether Ms. Lee's description is realistic? How do the report and the novel reflect the nature of "mob mentality"? What social and moral commentary is Ms. Lee offering through her portrayal of the Maycomb lynch mob?
4. The Equal Justice Initiative founder, Bryan Stevenson, is quoted saying that "lynching and the terror era shaped the geography, politics, economics and social characteristics of being black in America during the 20th century." What was the function of lynching in Jim Crow society? Does this historical context help you to more fully imagine life in Maycomb?
5. A New York Times editorial on the Equal Justice Initiative report, "Lynching as Racial Terrorism," argues that "this history needs to be properly commemorated and more widely discussed before the United States can fully understand the causes and origins of the racial injustice that hobbles the country to this day." What legacies of the lynching era do you see today? How might a fictional text like "Mockingbird" foster the kind of honest conversation about race and justice that the report demands? What other texts shaped your thinking about race and justice?

## **Who was Tom Robinson?**

The Equal Justice Initiative report documents the fates of nearly 4,000 African-American lynching victims, restoring names and stories to individuals whose humanity has often been obscured. Like some individuals documented in the report, the fictional Tom Robinson survives a lynching attempt after being accused of raping a white woman. Yet readers know relatively little about Tom, and in the excerpt we've selected here, he speaks only four words. One of the criticisms that has been leveled against "To Kill a Mockingbird" is that Harper Lee does not give his character sufficient depth. Readers are left with little sense of Tom's life and experience, or of the devastating consequences the injustices he suffers must have for his family.

Historical sources about the lives of black men in the segregated South of the 1930s can help students imagine some of the circumstances of a character such as Tom Robinson; they can also give texture to students' study of the history of lynching. Duke University's Behind the Veil website features dozens of

oral history interviews with African-Americans who lived from the 1890s to the 1950s. In Facing History's "Teaching Mockingbird" guide (PDF), we feature two interviews, with H.J. Williams and Roosevelt Williams. (The two are unrelated.) As students learn about the men's experience with school, work, church and Jim Crow, they can consider questions like:

Based on what you have pieced together about Tom, do you notice any similarities between his life and the lives of the men you have learned about?

**Using what you have just learned, what can you imagine or infer about Tom's life that the novel does not tell us?**