

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

To Kill a Mockingbird

by
Harper Lee

Book Information

Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird
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Two children witness the effects of racial prejudice, as their father courageously defends an innocent black man who has been accused of raping a white woman.

Award: Pulitzer Prize

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Ethics/Morality; Community Life, Prejudice; Community Life, Violence; Mysteries, Murder; People, Children; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

Main Characters

Arthur (Boo) Radley the Finches' reclusive neighbor, who extends friendship to Scout and Jem

Atticus Finch Scout and Jem's father, who is a widower; a small-town lawyer who follows his conscience in the face of opposition

Aunt Alexandra Atticus's sister, who is concerned with social status and proper appearances

Bob Ewell a shiftless troublemaker, who lives off the county and often becomes abusive when he drinks

Calpurnia the Finches' devoted black housekeeper

Charles Baker (Dill) Harris Scout and Jem's summer friend, who tells tall tales

Jean Louise (Scout) Finch Jem's younger sister, who must struggle to control her temper

Jeremy (Jem) Finch Scout's older brother, who has his idealistic views challenged

Mayella Ewell Bob Ewell's daughter, who longs for affection and accuses Tom Robinson of raping her

Miss Maudie Atkinson the Finches' neighbor, who is compassionate and open-minded

Tom Robinson an honest, hardworking black man, who is accused of a crime he did not commit

Vocabulary

caricature a representation in which the subject's distinctive features are exaggerated for comic effect

haints and Hot Steams ghosts or other supernatural apparitions

linin' the procedure whereby a song is sung line-by-line, a leader singing each line and a group repeating it

mixed children children born of parents who are of different races, one black and one white

scuppernongs a variety of grapes

WPA Work Projects Administration; one of President Roosevelt's New Deal programs in place during the Great Depression, which provided employment to underprivileged people

Synopsis

In this novel, the adult Scout looks back on her childhood and two very important episodes that shaped her life. The first concerns her neighbor, Arthur (Boo) Radley. As the story opens, Scout, her brother, Jem, and their friend, Dill, become obsessed with the idea of making Boo Radley "come out", as he has not been seen outside his house in many years. The children imagine Boo to be some sort of monster, despite the opinions of their father and their friend, Miss Maudie, that Arthur merely wants to be left alone.

The children's attitude toward Boo starts to change when gifts are left for them in the knot-hole of a tree, and they suspect that Boo is the mysterious benefactor. They come to realize that Boo is extending friendship to them, despite his brother's attempts to keep him a "prisoner" inside his house.

The second important storyline begins when Jem and Scout's father, Atticus, is appointed to defend a black man who has been accused of raping a young

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white woman. Because the story takes place in a small town in Alabama during the 1930s, it is understandable that Atticus meets with much resistance when he tries to honestly defend the man who has been wrongly accused. Racial prejudice is strong in Maycomb, and Atticus knows his case is lost before he begins. Despite opposition, Atticus makes a strong case in his defense of Tom Robinson and clearly proves the man's innocence. He shows that Mayella Ewell herself made advances toward Tom and was severely beaten by her father, Bob Ewell, as a result. As Atticus had predicted, however, prejudice overpowers the truth, and Tom is found guilty.

Jem is profoundly affected by the outcome of the trial; he becomes moody and withdrawn. The entire family is saddened when Tom Robinson, believing that Atticus's promised appeal will prove futile as well, tries to escape from prison and is shot and killed by a guard. In addition, the Finch family's security is threatened because Bob Ewell, realizing that he was made to look like a fool at the trial, swears vengeance on anyone who was connected with the case.

At the end of the story, the two parts of the plot are drawn together in a dramatic climax when Bob Ewell attacks Jem and Scout, and Boo Radley comes to their rescue. Boo carries the injured Jem home, and Scout identifies him as their rescuer. Meanwhile, Bob Ewell is found dead from a stab wound. The sheriff makes the decision to call Ewell's death a self-inflicted accident in order to protect Boo's needed privacy. After walking Boo home, Scout sees things from his perspective and is content to leave him alone.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Describe the sequence of events that brings Jem to view Boo Radley as a friendly person and not a mysterious monster.

As the story opens, both the children seem to believe the superstitious rumors that surround Boo Radley. They both become part of Dill's obsession to make Boo come out. As they discover the various gifts in the knot-hole of the tree, however, Jem begins to change his mind. At first he is apprehensive; he seems to suspect Boo, but is unsure of his intentions. When he discovers that someone has intentionally sewn and folded the pants he lost at the Radley place, he has a change of heart. He realizes the person knows him and has done him a favor. After the children find the soap dolls, he is certain the gifts in the tree were for them alone and that the giver is trying to be friendly. He is upset when Mr. Nathan closes the knot-hole, because he knows Mr. Nathan is deliberately trying to prevent Boo from communicating with them. He starts to feel sorry for Boo. When Boo covers Scout with a blanket on the night of the fire, Jem's mind is finally made up. When Atticus suggests that the blanket be returned, Jem becomes frightened for Boo. He worries that Boo will get in trouble for his act of kindness. By this time, Jem not only sees Boo as a person, but has empathy for him and does not want to cause him any further trouble. After this, he no longer wants to pester Boo. Although both the children witness the events, it is Jem who more fully comprehends Boo's actions and intentions. He seems to realize long before Scout does that Boo is their benefactor and is reaching out to be their friend.

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Literary Analysis

Describe how Jem's character changed throughout the course of the novel.

In the first part of the novel, Jem is a happy, carefree child. He engages in childish games with Dill and Scout, although he is always aware of his responsibility to Scout as her big brother. Because he is older than Scout, he has a more thorough understanding of the events they witness, both in relation to Boo Radley, and in relation to the trial of Tom Robinson. He shows he is growing up when he stands beside his father in the confrontation with the men from Old Sarum and refuses to obey his father's orders that he take Scout and go home. He is aware of the danger, while Scout is not. Jem becomes moody and withdrawn even in the time leading up to the trial. His episode with Mrs. Dubose further helps him to grow up and see things from a more adult point of view. He learns the true meaning of courage. He still displays childlike idealism, however, in his belief that Tom Robinson will be acquitted after the truth has been told. He is devastated by the outcome of the trial, as he hovers between the idealism of youth and the harsh realities of adulthood. His broken arm becomes a symbol of his broken youth and all the hurt he has experienced.

Inferential Comprehension

Explain what you think motivated Mayella Ewell's actions both before and during the trial. Consider details of her home life, as well as her relationships with both her father and Tom Robinson.

Despite the fact that Mayella was part of a large family, she was obviously very lonely; she was starved for any affection she could get. Tom Robinson was polite and kind and demonstrated a willingness to help her. Apparently hoping that he could give her love as well, she made advances toward him. After her actions with Tom were witnessed by her father, she acted out of fear. Her father severely beat her and probably threatened her with further punishments if she would not go along with the story that Tom Robinson had raped her. In court, she lied under oath in response to fear of her father and her own unspoken guilt over breaking one of the time-honored codes of Southern society--"tempting" a black man. Her ignorance and poverty made her unaware of how to act in the courtroom. She became angry with Atticus, claiming he was making fun of her, when he was, in fact, merely being polite and professional. Although she had originally been friendly with Tom, her own upbringing of prejudice probably made her see him as less than human. She was willing to sacrifice him, rather than admit her own "guilt" or risk further punishment from her father.

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Constructing Meaning

Which two characters would you consider to be the mockingbirds in this story? Why? Consider what various characters say about mockingbirds (Atticus, Miss Maudie, Scout), and give reasons to support your opinion. Compare and contrast the two characters.

Tom Robinson and Boo Radley are considered by most people to be the mockingbirds in the story. Both of them are harmless creatures, who go out of their way to help others (Tom helps Mayella Ewell and extends kindness to her; Boo leaves gifts for Jem and Scout and, thereby, extends friendship to them.). Both of them are persecuted by Maycomb society for circumstances that are not their fault. Boo was treated cruelly by both his father and brother, and others shun and somewhat fear him because of the lifestyle forced upon him by his family. Tom is accused of a crime he did not commit and is convicted because of his skin color. Tom's plight is especially tragic because he is destroyed by the same person to whom he has shown unusual kindness. The outcomes of their stories are different, however. Tom, in his desperation, tries to escape from prison and is killed as a result. Boo, on the other hand, emerges as a hero when he saves the lives of Jem and Scout. Atticus and Miss Maudie both share the view that killing a mockingbird is a "sin." Maycomb society commits such a sin when Tom Robinson is unjustly convicted. At the end of the story, Sheriff Tate tries to avoid another such sin when he decides to keep Boo's part in Bob Ewell's death a secret. He knows that exposing Boo to the scrutiny of Maycomb society would be more than Boo could handle and would be akin to killing a mockingbird.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features The theme that permeates *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that of racism. Tom Robinson is accused and convicted of rape because he is black. The jury is so entrenched in the societal atmosphere of racism that they refuse to accept the truth and take the word of the Ewells only because they are white.

Meanwhile, Atticus is scorned by the citizens of Maycomb for honestly defending Tom and "going against his upbringing." Have students research some aspect of racism, such as its historical beginnings in slavery, the effects of Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, segregation, the Civil Rights Movement, the Ku Klux Klan, etc. Have students give reports, and then hold a classroom discussion on this topic and why racism historically seemed to affect the South more than other parts of the country.

Understanding Characterization Different characters responded to the outcome of the trial in different ways. Jem seemed to be the most profoundly affected of the Finches, although we must assume that Atticus had strong emotions privately as well. Outside the Finch family, Bob Ewell and Tom Robinson also based their actions on the trial's outcome--Tom in his attempted escape and Bob in his quest for revenge. Have students create a journal for one of the characters, discussing in depth his or her feelings from the time of the trial to Tom Robinson's death, and perhaps beyond, to the time of Bob's attack on Jem and Scout.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors

Throughout the novel there are references to the national crisis that was taking place during this time period--the Great Depression. Residents of Maycomb had recently been assured that they "had nothing to fear but fear itself," a reference to the famous speech by Franklin D. Roosevelt. The "Crash" (meaning the Wall Street crash that precipitated the depression) is mentioned, as are some of Roosevelt's New Deal programs. It is mentioned that Bob Ewell lost his job with the WPA and blamed Atticus. Have students research the Great Depression of the 1930s or some aspect of it, such as the Wall Street crash, the New Deal, the WPA, F.D.R., etc.

Identifying Persuasive Language The events of Tom Robinson's trial are shown in great detail. It is easy to follow Atticus's strategy in Tom's defense and to see how Tom was clearly proven innocent (i.e. Mayella had not been examined by a doctor, so there was no evidence of rape;

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Mayella had been beaten by a left-handed person; Bob Ewell was proven to be left-handed; Tom was proven to be right-handed and was shown to be crippled on his left side; Mayella's testimony contradicted that of her father, etc.). Atticus's closing arguments are very powerful and persuasive. Only those blinded by the handicap of racial prejudice could be immune to them. Have students pretend that Tom's case did go to the Court of Appeals, or have them pretend that Bob Ewell went to trial for the assault of his daughter, or that Boo Radley went to trial for the murder of Bob Ewell. Have students prepare a legal brief for one of these scenarios, including all the facts, and using persuasive language to show either Tom's innocence, Bob's guilt, or Boo's innocence because of extenuating circumstances.