

**PG SEM II**  
**CC-5**  
**FILM & LITERATURE**  
**TO KILL A MOCKING BIRD**

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*To Kill a Mockingbird* is primarily a novel about growing up under extraordinary circumstances in the 1930s in the Southern United States. The story covers a span of three years, during which the main characters undergo significant changes. Scout Finch lives with her brother Jem and their father Atticus in the fictitious town of Maycomb, Alabama. Maycomb is a small, close-knit town, and every family has its social station depending on where they live, who their parents are, and how long their ancestors have lived in Maycomb.

**Epigraph**

Summary and Analysis

Lee begins *To Kill a Mockingbird* with an epigraph (a brief quotation placed at the beginning of a book or chapter) by Charles Lamb: "*Lawyers, I suppose, were children once.*" **That she chose this epigraph is interesting on several levels.**

A good part of this story's brilliance lies in the fact that it's told from a child's point-of-view. Through Scout's eyes, Lee is able to present the story objectively. By having an innocent little girl make racial remarks and regard people of colour in a way consistent with the community, Lee provides an objective view of the situation. As a child, Scout can make observations that an adult would avoid or sugar-coat. Readers, too, are likely to be forgiving of a child's perception, whereas they would find an adult who makes these remarks offensive.

Much of Harper Lee is in the character of Scout. Lee's father was an attorney, as is Scout's. Importantly, Lee herself studied law. Because Scout's personality is loosely autobiographical, the epigraph makes sense. Lee proves through the telling of the story that she was also once a child.

Atticus' answer to Jem's question of how a jury could convict Tom Robinson when he's obviously innocent: "'They've done it before and they did it tonight and they'll do it again and when they do it — it seems that only children weep'" is significant in understanding the epigraph. At various points in the story, Jem expresses his desire to become a lawyer, following in his father's footsteps. The lessons he learns during the course of the story will ultimately shape not only the kind of lawyer he will be, but also the kind of man he will become. Readers see this future lawyer as a child first.

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**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 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.

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**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.

**Prejudice**

Discussions about prejudice in general, and racism in particular, are at the heart of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Conflicts over racism drive some of the most compelling and memorable scenes in the novel. **Racial conflict** causes the two dramatic deaths that occur in the story. On one level, *To Kill a Mockingbird* represents a simplistic and moralistic view of racial prejudice. White people who are racist are bad, and white people who are not racist are good. Atticus risks his reputation, his position in the community, and ultimately the safety of his children because he is not racist, and therefore good. Bob Ewell falsely accuses a black man of rape, spits on Atticus publicly, and attempts to murder a child because he is racist, and therefore bad. *To Kill a Mockingbird* does attempt to look at some of the complexities of living in a racist society. Both Scout and Jem confront everything from unpleasantness to murderous hostility as they learn how their family's resistance to racial prejudice has positioned them against the community at large.

The treatment of prejudice in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not only simplistic in terms of morality, but also in terms of perspective.

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**Law**

Though the trial of Tom Robinson takes up only about one tenth of the book, it represents the narrative centre around which the rest of the novel revolves. This trial seems intended as an indictment of the legal system, at the least as it exists of within the town of Maycomb. But the all-white jury does not interpret the evidence according to the law, but rather applies their own prejudices to determine the outcome of the case. Tom Robinson's guilty verdict exemplifies the limitations of the law, and asks the reader to reconsider the meaning of the word "fair" in the phrase "a fair trial." While Atticus understands that the legal system is flawed, he firmly believes in the legal process.

**Lying**

There are **two lies at the heart of *To Kill a Mockingbird***. Mayella Ewell says that Tom Robinson raped her, and Heck Tate says that Bob Ewell accidentally stabbed himself. **The first lie** destroys an innocent man who occupies a precarious social position in Maycomb because of his race. **The second lie** prevents the destruction of an innocent man who occupies a precarious social position in Maycomb because of his extreme reclusiveness. Taken together, the two lies reflect how deception can be used to harm or to protect. The two lies also reveal how the most vulnerable members of society can be the most deeply affected by the stories people tell about them.

**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.

**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,

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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.

**Style**

The style of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is generally humorous and conversational, but also deceptively sophisticated, which reflects the mix of straightforward story-telling and complicated ideas. Because the book is framed as the recollection of the narrator, the opening pages use complex, elevated language: "brethren," "dictum," "impotent fury." Once the narrator has set the scene, she reverts to a more childlike narration, mixing elegant metaphors ("it drew him as the moon draws water") with frank statements ("Mrs. Dubose was plain hell.") Language and speech play significant roles throughout the book. Scout and Jem misuse words, guess at the definition of words they don't understand, and remark on their father's "last-will-and-testament" diction and the elegant sentences of Miss Maudie. Language both reveals and conceals, as when Calpurnia's grammar becomes "erratic" when she's furious, or Dill tells lies to get the kids out of trouble. Atticus, a lawyer, trips his children up in their own narratives. The contrast between what people say and what they mean is echoed by the style of the story itself, which conceals adult subjects in the apparently simple story of children.

Often in the novel, Scout has a tendency to summarize—sometimes inaccurately—adult perspectives that she does not fully understand, providing insight into the other characters. Frequently, Scout's inaccuracies draw out a hidden truth.

The novel also includes a great deal of Southern vernacular such as "ain't," "I reckon," and "yonder" to show the ways the characters all belong to the same community, yet occupy different positions due to class and education. The Finches tend to use long words (such as "provocation"), signifying their education, while Calpurnia speaks like the Finches in their home, but adopts a more vernacular style at her church. When Scout questions her about "having command of two languages," Calpurnia says "folks don't like to have somebody around knowin' more than they do." The least educated characters are unable to shift

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speaking styles in this way. When Mayella Ewell testifies, Lee uses abbreviations and incorrect grammar to represent that Mayella is uneducated: “So he come in the yard an’ I went in the house to get him the nickel and I turned around an ’fore I knew it he was on me... I fought’n’hollered, but he had me round the neck.” Overall, the vernacular speech works with the content of the novel to give us a sense of each character’s identity and place within the community. However, a possible criticism is that these abbreviations encourage us to judge characters based on their education, race, and class before we get to know them as individuals.

### **Motifs**

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.*

### **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

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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.

### **Genre**

#### **Southern Gothic**

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is primarily an example of Southern Gothic fiction in that it takes place in the South, contains both dark and comedic elements, uses Southern vernacular, features exaggerated characters, and references the supernatural. Southern Gothic is a genre that became popular in the first half of the twentieth century, as a sub-genre of the American Gothic.

#### **Courtroom Drama**

This book is also one of the most famous courtroom dramas in American literature, as much of the action takes place during a criminal trial, and the ethical issues raised by the case heighten the story's drama. "Courtroom drama" is a term usually applied to film, but it can also be used to describe books. Books in this genre take place mainly in a courtroom.

#### **Bildungsroman**

Finally, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a bildungsroman, in that it traces Scout's development from innocent child to aware member of her community through the experience of witnessing Tom's trial and being rescued by Boo Radley. A bildungsroman, which means "novel of education" in German, describes one character's (often the narrator) passage from youth into adulthood. In a bildungsroman, this character begins the book with little understanding of the adult world. She faces a major challenge that tests her understanding of the world and teaches her something important about the society she lives in. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout learns about racism in her community and in the legal system.

#### **Comparing *To Kill a Mockingbird* to Its Movie Version**

##### **Introduction**

The film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), which stars Gregory Peck as Atticus and Mary Badham as Scout, is as much a classic as the novel itself. (The film received eight

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Academy Awards nominations and netted awards for Best Actor, Best Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium, and Best Art Direction — Set Decoration, Black and White.) Ideally, a novel and its film version complement each other, which, on many levels, is the case with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. However, film can accomplish things that novels can't, and vice versa. Likewise, film has limitations that a novel doesn't. This essay explores some of the differences between *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the film and the novel.

### **Narration**

By its nature, film is a visual medium, which makes a first-person story difficult to tell. To have Scout narrating throughout the film as she does in the book would prove distracting, so Scout as narrator is only presented to set the mood of a scene in the film. As a result, viewers don't get a strong sense of Scout's first-person narration as they do in the book; instead, they simply notice the childlike perspective portrayed in the story.

### **Characters**

A film has less time to tell its story and therefore often concentrates the events of a story into fewer characters; when a book makes the transition to film, characters and their actions are often combined. For instance, Miss Stephanie Crawford is Dill's aunt and Cecil Jacobs, not Francis Hancock, drives Scout to break her promise to Atticus about fighting. Aunt Alexandra isn't present in the movie at all, so the issue of Scout "acting like a lady" never plays a major role in the film.

The implied incest between Bob and Mayella Ewell is never discussed during the course of the trial. Unlike today's films, movies in 1962 weren't allowed to cover such controversial subject matter. Instead, films had to find ways to work around taboo subjects. In this case, the film works around the incest issue by showing Bob Ewell's unscrupulous behavior in other ways.

The courtroom scenes are condensed in the film. Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch delivers a shortened version of Atticus' closing arguments to the jury.

The film addresses the plight of African Americans only through the trial. Calpurnia is treated respectfully by everyone, the children never attend Calpurnia's church, and on the day of the trial, blacks and whites enter the courtroom together (although the blacks, and Scout, Jem, and Dill, sit separately in a balcony, just as they do in the book). Remember, though,



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that at the time this film was in theaters, audiences wouldn't have needed an explanation for these sorts of things. They knew first-hand the challenges African Americans faced. The idea that blacks would sit separate from whites would have been expected — or understood, at the very least — by anyone viewing the film.

Film is very much reflective of the original audience's culture. As a film ages, audiences need more information to fully grasp the story. The fact that the film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is still so powerful is a testament to a fine adaptation of a classic story.

**Critical Responses**

The film received widespread critical acclaim. As of July 2018, it maintains a 91% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, based on 57 reviews.