

To Kill a Mockingbird – elements and parallels

The Birds

As you read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you will find direct and indirect references to the **mockingbird**. The writer develops the idea that people can be 'mockingbirds' and harming them would be a sin. So the mockingbird becomes a symbol.



The mockingbird is a smallish grey speckled bird found in the southern parts of the US. It has a fine song of its own, and, in addition, has a remarkable power of mimicry.

In this novel we are given a description of this song in a clear auditory image:

High above us in the darkness a solitary mocker poured out his repertoire in blissful unawareness of whose tree he sat in, plunging from the shrill kee-kee of the sunflower bird to the irascible qua-ack of a blue jay, to the sad lament of Poor Will, Poor Will, Poor Will).

Atticus' warning to his children shows the local attitude towards mockingbirds. "...remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird", he tells them. Miss Maudie explains why:

Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird).



The writer has used another bird in her novel with her choice of the family's surname. A **finch** is a small brown bird that is similar in size and colour to a mockingbird. Thus one of the symbols in the novel is closely connected to the main characters.

CHARACTER PROFILES

Scout: Six-year-old Jean Louise "Scout" Finch narrates *Mockingbird*. A tomboy at heart, Scout works hard not to "act like a girl" by wearing overalls instead of dresses and beating up other children who antagonize her. Scout spends her days playing outside with her older brother, Jem, and her best friend, Dill. Extremely smart and bright for her age, Scout loves to read and spends time reading with her father, Atticus, every night. Spunky and head strong, Scout often finds herself in trouble with her father, her housekeeper, Calpurnia, her neighbours, her aunt Alexandra, and her teachers. Despite the rules of etiquette governing life in her small town, Scout voices her opinions and recognizes hypocrisy and injustice in her elders.

Atticus: Father of Jem and Scout, Atticus Finch sits on the Alabama State Legislature and acts as Maycomb's leading attorney. The epitome of moral character, Atticus teaches his children and his community how to stand up for one's beliefs in the face of prejudice and ignorance by defending a black man, Tom Robinson, wrongfully accused of raping a white woman. Having lost his wife when Scout was two years old, Atticus devotes himself to his children despite criticism from family and neighbours who think his children lack discipline and proper guidance. Atticus stands as one of literature's strongest and most positive father figures.

Jem: Ten years old when the book begins, Jeremy "Jem" Finch acts as Scout's playmate and protector. Entering adolescence during the course of *Mockingbird*, Jem matures as he struggles with issues of racism and intolerance. On the brink of manhood, Jem goes through phases as he comes to grips with his family's past and his future role in society. Sometimes moody and sullen, sometimes kind and gentle, Jem emerges as a leader as he helps Scout understand how to get along in school and reminds her to respect Atticus and their other elders.

Dill: Harper Lee based her character, Charles Baker "Dill" Harris, on her girlhood friend and famous writer, Truman Capote. Spending his summers with his relative, Miss Rachel, in Maycomb, Dill, who is Scout's age, comes from a broken family. Dill spins grand tales about his father but runs away from home late in the book because he feels his mother and step-father don't care about him. During his summers however, he, Jem, and Scout entertain themselves by pretending they are characters in plays and attempting to coax Boo Radley out of his house.

Boo Radley: Arthur "Boo" Radley is Maycomb's town recluse. Myths and rumours about Boo and his family abound. According to town gossip, Boo stabbed his father in the leg when he was a boy and has since been confined to his house. The children imagine Boo as a ghoulish figure who eats cats and stalks about the neighbourhood under the cover of night. In fact, Boo stands as a figure of innocence who befriends and protects the children in his own way.

Calpurnia: The Finch's black housekeeper, Calpurnia acts as a mother figure and disciplinarian in the Finch household. Atticus trusts Calpurnia, relies on her for support raising his children, and considers her part of the family. Calpurnia also gives the children insight into her world when she takes them to her church.

Tom Robinson: The most important client of Atticus' career, Tom Robinson, a young, black man, is a church-going father of four accused of rape by Mayella Ewell.

Bob Ewell: The father of eight, Bob Ewell, a white man, and his family live behind Maycomb's dump. Desperately poor, Ewell uses his welfare money to buy alcohol while his children go hungry. His nineteen-year-old daughter, Mayella, accuses Tom Robinson of rape and battery.

Aunt Alexandra: Atticus' sister, Aunt Alexandra is a proper Southern woman who maintains a strict code about with whom she and her family should associate. She criticizes Atticus for letting Scout run wild and when she moves into their home during Tom Robinson's trial, Alexandra urges Scout to wear dresses and become a proper lady.

Miss Maudie: Miss Maudie is the counterpoint to Aunt Alexandra. A neighbour to the Finch family, Maudie offers Scout a female role model opposite from Alexandra. Maudie respects the children and admires Atticus. Unlike the other women in the town, Maudie minds her own business and behaves without pretension or hypocrisy.

Walter Cunningham: Walter Cunningham plays a small but important role in *Mockingbird*. A farming family, the Cunninghams occupy a middle position in Maycomb's class hierarchy above African American citizens and the Ewells but below Atticus and the Finch family. Honest and hard working, Walter Cunningham and his son are respectable community members who represent the potential in everyone to understand right from wrong despite ignorance and prejudice.

SETTING

1933 - 1935 in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama

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.

Scottsboro Trials - The Novel's Setting in the 1930s

There are many parallels between the trial of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and one of the most notorious series of trials in the history of the United States. On March 25, 1931, a freight train was stopped in Paint Rock, a tiny community in Northern Alabama, and nine young African American men who had been riding the rails were arrested. As two white women - one underage - descended from the freight cars, they accused the men of raping them on the train. Within a month the first man was found guilty and sentenced to death. There followed a series of sensational trials condemning the other men solely on the testimony of the older woman, a known prostitute, who was attempting to avoid prosecution under the Mann Act, prohibiting taking a minor across state lines for immoral purposes, like prostitution. Although none of the accused was executed, a number remained on death row for many years. The case was not settled until 1976 with the pardon of the last of the Scottsboro defendants.

Some of the parallels between the Scottsboro trials and the trial of Tom Robinson are shown in the chart below: <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/FTrials/scottsboro/scottsb.htm>

The Scottsboro Trials	Tom Robinson's Trial
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> took place in the 1930s took place in northern Alabama began with a charge of rape made by white women against African American men the poor white status of the accusers was a critical issue a central figure was a heroic judge, a member of the Alabama Bar who overturned a guilty jury verdict against African American men this judge went against public sentiment in trying to protect the rights of the African American defendants the first juries failed to include any African Americans, a situation which caused the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn the guilty verdict the jury ignored evidence, for example, that the women suffered no injuries attitudes about Southern women and poor whites complicated the trial. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> occurs in the 1930s takes place in southern Alabama begins with a charge of rape made by a white woman against an African American man the poor white status of Mayella is a critical issue a central figure is Atticus, lawyer, legislator and member of the Alabama Bar, who defends an African American man Atticus arouses anger in the community in trying to defend Tom Robinson the verdict is rendered by a jury of poor white residents of Old Sarum the jury ignores evidence, for example, that Tom has a useless left arm attitudes about Southern women and poor whites complicate the trial of Tom Robinson.

The Author and the Novel

Nelle Harper Lee, the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, had many childhood experiences which are similar to those of her narrator, Scout Finch.

Harper Lee's Childhood	Scout Finch's Childhood
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> grew up in 1930s - rural southern Alabama town Father - Amasa Lee - attorney who served in state legislature in Alabama older brother and young neighbour (Truman Capote) are playmates Harper Lee - an avid reader six years old when Scottsboro trials were meticulously covered in state and local newspapers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> grew up in 1930s - rural southern Alabama town Father - Atticus Finch - attorney who served in state legislature in Alabama older brother and young neighbour (Dill) are playmates Scout reads before she enters school; reads <i>Mobile Register</i> newspaper in first grade six years old when the trial of Tom Robinson takes place

Lee wrote the novel during the beginning of the Civil Rights era (from about 1955 to 1958). Alabama was very much in the news at this time with the Montgomery bus boycott, Martin Luther King's rise to leadership, and Autherine Lucy's attempt to enter the University of Alabama graduate school.

Harper Lee, who was well known on campus as editor of the politically satirical student newspaper, graduated from the university and entered law school, leaving one semester short of receiving a law degree. Lee's book was published in 1960 - a time of tumultuous events and racial strife as the struggle in the Civil Rights movement grew violent and spread into cities across the nation, and into the American consciousness on TV screens and the nightly news.

The novel shot to the top of the *New York Times Best Seller List*, as it began to make its remarkable impact on a divided nation. A year after its publication Lee worked as a consultant on the film adaptation of the novel and the screenplay written by Horton Foote. The film was released in 1962 and went on to receive five Academy Award nominations, winning three.

	Publication/Release of <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> in the Civil Rights Era: A Chronology
1954	United States Supreme Court rules in <i>Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas</i> , that racial segregation in the public schools is inherently unequal and, therefore, illegal.
1955	Rosa Parks is arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus. Boycott of Montgomery County city buses begins officially. <u>Emmett Till</u> , a young African American man, is murdered while visiting the South.
1956	<p>Autherine Lucy receives a letter granting permission to enrol for classes at the U. of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.</p> <p>Home of Martin Luther King, Jr. is bombed in Montgomery. King is a leader in the boycott and designated spokesperson.</p> <p>Motions are filed in U.S. District Court calling for an end to bus segregation.</p> <p>Violence erupts on the campus of the U. of Alabama and in the streets of Tuscaloosa; continuing for three days. (TV evening news and Movietone newsreels showing "Week In Review" news clips in between feature films in movie theatres documented these events.)</p> <p>Autherine Lucy is forced to flee U. of Alabama campus; the university's Board of Trustees bars her from campus. (TV/ Movietone)</p> <p>Warrants are issued for arrest of 115 leaders of the Montgomery bus boycott.</p> <p>Autherine Lucy ordered by the courts to be re-admitted to U. of Alabama, only to be expelled by Board of Trustees. (TV / Movietone)</p> <p>U.S. Supreme Court decides in favour of Montgomery bus boycotters, by ruling bus segregation illegal.</p> <p>African Americans first board buses in Montgomery, according to a first-come, first-served basis. (TV/ Movietone)</p>
1957	Federal troops sent to Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce court- ordered desegregation of schools. (TV/ Movietone)
1960	Publication of <i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i> in the fall (Shoots to top of <i>NY Times Best Seller list</i>) ...In Greensboro, N.C., attempt to integrate lunch counters is thwarted (TV/Movietone).
1961	<p>Charlayne Hunter enters the U. of Georgia through lines of jeering white protesters (TV/Movietone)</p> <p>Freedom Riders begin arriving in the deep South to test desegregation. Violence necessitates the deployment of federal troops. (Major TV news event/Movietone)</p> <p>Violence erupts at U. of Mississippi over integration (featured on TV networks, in newspapers and magazines/Movietone).</p> <p><i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i>, is released; the screen adaptation by Horton Foote receives 5 Academy Award nominations.</p>
1963	<p>Dogs and power hoses are directed at peaceful demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama; America watched on TV news.</p> <p>Three Civil Rights workers are found murdered in Mississippi.</p> <p>Massive Civil Rights March is held in Washington, D.C.</p>
1964	The <i>Civil Rights Act</i> is passed.
1965	March for Voting Rights is held in Selma, Alabama.