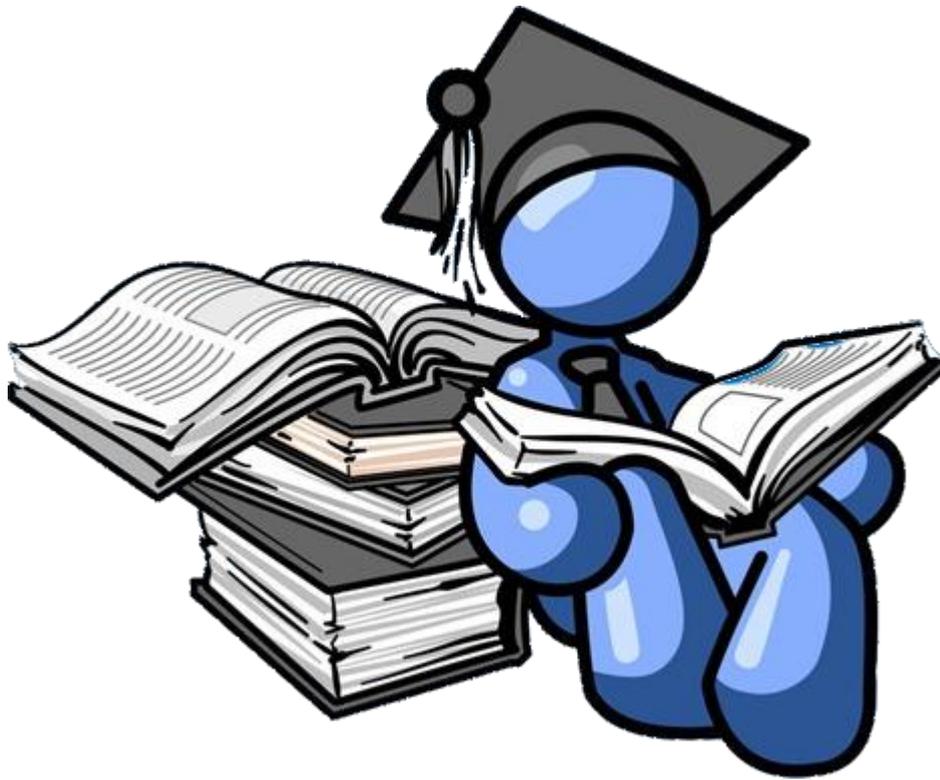


To Kill A Mockingbird

REVISION NOTES- English Literature



To Kill A Mockingbird

Revision Notes

Context

- Nelle Harper Lee was born in Monroeville, Alabama, in 1926. Like Jem and Scout, her father was a lawyer. She studied at the University of Alabama and worked in New York.
- There she began work on To Kill a Mockingbird, in the mid 1950s. It was completed in 1957 and published in 1960 - just before the black civil rights movement in America really took.
- The novel won the Pulitzer Prize, America's top literary award, in 1961. It was adapted for the stage and was also made into a successful film. Yet Harper Lee did not write any more novels. She returned to Monroeville. Now in her 70s, she still lives there today.

American slavery

- Black people were originally brought from Africa to America during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. They were forcibly transported across the Atlantic in slave ships (in which many died) and sold as slaves. They had no rights and were seen by their white owners as little more than animals or machines.
- Even after the abolition of slavery in 1865, the blacks were still almost powerless. The whites had too much to lose to allow blacks any rights. Nothing was equal: blacks had the worst of everything while whites had the best.
- Such was the hatred of blacks by the whites - especially during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when money was tight for everyone - that it was common for blacks to be lynched or hung by a mob well into the 20th century - so there was good reason for Atticus to sit outside the jail to protect Tom Robinson before his trial.

Segregation and injustice

- In the 1930s, although 50% of the population of Southern towns were black, they had no vote and could not marry whites. The policy of segregation meant that blacks had to have their own schools, their own churches, their own football teams, even their own cemeteries.
- In the novel, Scout and Jem get into trouble with Aunt Alexandra for attending the blacks' church. The blacks file into the courthouse after the whites and have to sit up in the balcony, away from the whites.

Characters

Scout

- Scout is 6 years old at the start of the story and 9 at the end. She tells us the story, so it is a first person narrative.
- She has a very close relationship with her father, Atticus and her brother, Jem - they spend most of their time together.
- She is very intelligent - she could read and write before she started school. She hates school because she is bored and feels stifled, and tries to persuade Atticus not to make her go.
- She is a tomboy - she is insulted when Jem says to her "I declare to the Lord you're getting' more like a girl every day!" She tries to resist her aunt's attempts to make her a lady and wear dresses.
- She is not afraid to fight people who insult Atticus. Later, she feels "extremely noble" when she walks away from a fight as Atticus asked.
- She is inquisitive: for example, she wants to know about Boo Radley and go to Calpurnia's house.
- She is well-meaning and thinks the best of people. For example, she does not realise the danger that Atticus is in when he spends the night outside Tom Robinson's cell. Her innocent attempt at polite conversation with Mr Cunningham saves the situation.
- She thinks of others: at the start she tries to explain to her teacher why Walter Cunningham can't be loaned any lunch money; right at the end, she knows Boo will be happier in the dark of the back porch, and she arranges his arm so that it looks like he is escorting her when she leads him back to his house.

The first person narrative is effective because:

- It provides humour. For example, Scout screams "the world's ending" when she first sees snow and she can't understand why Atticus isn't pleased to see her when she bounds up to him when surrounded by the lynch mob.
- It provides us with a less biased viewpoint. Although Scout sees Tom Robinson as "just a Negro", she is not prejudiced against the blacks in a way that most of Maycomb's white adult inhabitants are. She is genuinely interested in going to Calpurnia's house and considers running away when Aunt Alexandra forbids it. She cannot understand her teacher's racist attitude to the blacks, when she (the teacher) is so critical of Hitler's treatment of Jews.
- We have to work out things for ourselves. Scout is too young and too innocent to realise exactly what is going on, but when we interpret what she tells us, we understand the situation. For instance, she did not initially realise that Boo had left the presents in the tree and couldn't work out why Jem was crying when the knothole was cemented up. We realise he was crying out of sympathy for Boo.

Atticus

- Atticus Finch is the father of Jem and Scout. His wife died when Scout was 2 and he is bringing the children up on his own, with the help of Calpurnia. Scout "says he played with us, read to us, and treated us with courteous detachment". It is clear he loves his children.
- His family has been associated with Maycomb for many generations and he is related in some way to most families in the town.
- He is a lawyer. He takes on Tom Robinson's case, knowing he'll lose, explaining to Scout that "every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally".

- He is kind and caring. He paid for his brother's medical training; when Miss Maudie's house burnt down, he saved her favourite rocking chair; he is polite and civil to Mrs Dubose despite her rudeness to him; he is committed to racial equality.
- He tries to get Jem and Scout to see things from other people's point of view. He explains to Scout why Mr Ewell poaches to feed his family and he makes the children think about Boo Radley's life.
- He is scrupulously honest. He tells Jem and Scout the truth about their relatives - rather than the gilded version Aunt Alexandra prefers. When he mistakenly believes that it was Jem who killed Mr Ewell, he is keen not to prevent Jem being punished.
- He has a dry sense of humour. For instance, when Jem is anxious about going to Mrs Dubose's to read because it is dark and spooky, Atticus tells him: "That should appeal to your imagination. Just imagine you're inside the Radley house".
- He always sees the best in people. Far from disliking Mrs Dubose, with her strongly racist views, he admires her for battling against her morphine addiction.
- The only person who has some influence over him is his sister, Aunt Alexandra, who tries to control how he brings up Jem and Scout. However, he does not give in to her request to drop Tom Robinson's case.

Jem

- Jem is Scout's older brother, nearly 10 years old at the start of the novel and nearly 13 at the end, just entering puberty.
- He is close to Scout: he is her constant companion at home. Although as he gets older he becomes positively allergic to Scout in public and spends more time with a football team than Scout, he always looks out for her and protects her.
- He loves and admires his father, which is one of the reasons why he was so furious with Mrs Dubose and beheaded all her camellias.
- He sees himself as brave and casts himself in the hero role in their games. Although, like other children, he is scared of passing the Radleys' house, he proves genuine bravery when he goes back to the Radley's place for his trousers after having been shot at, and when he and Scout are attacked by Mr Ewell on Halloween.
- He is intelligent and quick-thinking: he is the first to spot the mad dog and tell Calpurnia, who raised the alarm; he creates a snowman out of earth covered in snow; he knows that the ground is cooler under a tree as he leads Scout to and from the school pageant.
- Scout describes him as having "a naturally tranquil disposition and a slow fuse".
- He is more mature than Scout and so has a better grasp of the trial. He is convinced of victory and so his faith in the justice system and in human nature is shaken when Tom is pronounced guilty. Scout says "his shoulders jerked as if each 'guilty' was a separate stab between them".
- Jem's broken arm is the first thing that we hear about in the novel. This creates suspense - we want to find out how it happened, but we are not told until almost the end.

Dill

- His real name is Charles Baker Harris. He has no proper home and spends his time between various relatives. In Maycomb, he stays with his Aunt Rachel during the summer vacations. Later on, when his mother remarries, he runs away from his new stepfather. He is a victim of others' selfishness and can be compared to Boo Radley and Tom Robinson.
- Scout first sees him as a "curiosity".

- He joins in Jem and Scout's games and soon shows an active imagination. Scout sees him as "a pocket Merlin, whose head teemed with eccentric plans, strange longings, and quaint fancies".
- It was his idea first to make Boo come out.
- He is a quick thinker - he explained away the loss of Jem's trousers (which he'd lost in the Radley place) by saying they'd been playing strip poker.
- He becomes 'engaged' to Scout.
- He sobs during the trial while Tom Robinson is being cross-examined. Like the other children, he wants justice and is anti-racist.

Calpurnia

- She is the Finches' black cook.
- She lives in the black community on the edge of the town and her own children are now grown up. She does not know how old she is.
- She has been with the family since Jem's birth and Atticus sees her as part of the family. Scout says "I had felt her tyrannical presence as long as I could remember."
- Although she is firm, she is kind: she made Scout's favourite crackling bread on her first day at school.
- She is well educated, one of only four people in her church who can read. She taught Scout how to write.
- Atticus depends upon her. He refuses to let Calpurnia go when Aunt Alexandra comes to stay; he takes her to help him break the news of Tom's death to his wife Helen.

Tom Robinson

- A black man, he lives on the outskirts of Maycomb among the black community with his wife and young children.
- He worked for Mr Link Deas for eight years "without a speck o' trouble outa him".
- He befriended Mayella Ewell and helped her with her chores because he felt sorry for her. When she tries to seduce him and is discovered by her father, she accuses him of raping her.
- His left arm is crippled as the result of an accident at work, so he could not possibly have inflicted the injuries on Mayella she claims he did.
- He speaks well at his trial and earns our respect.
- He is killed when trying to escape from prison. Atticus says, "I guess Tom was tired of taking white men's chances and preferred to take his own".

Boo Radley

- Boo's name is mentioned right at the start of the story in an intriguing way: "It began the summer when Dill came to us, when Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out".
- Scout describes him as a malevolent phantom. Many rumours circulated about him and children were afraid to go near his house.
- In reality, he is a recluse who was emotionally damaged by his cruel father. Mr Radley preferred to shut up his son than send him to an industrial school as a punishment for schoolboy pranks. His older brother, Nathan, took over when his father died.
- He is intelligent - one of the items he leaves in the knothole from the children is a school spelling medal. He skilfully carves soap figures.
- From his house, he can see the whole of life in Maycomb.

- He grows to love the children next door whom he watches - Jem and Scout. He leaves presents for them in the knothole, mends Jem's trousers, covers Scout with a blanket during the fire - and finally saves their lives.
- Scout only realises what life is like for him when she guides him home later that night. She realises that she and Jem are his children.

The Ewell Family

- We know they are important in the novel because on the first page, Scout says "I maintain that the Ewells started it all. 'Atticus said the Ewells had been the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations.'"
- Burris Ewell appears at school on Scout's first day. Filthy and rude, he announces that he won't come to school again that year. Chuck Little describes him as "a mean one, a hard-down mean one".
- Mayella Ewell is the oldest of Mr Ewell's eight children and attempts to look after her siblings.
- She is 19 at the time of the trial.
- We sympathise with her to some extent as she did try to be clean and tidy, and grew red geraniums to brighten up her home. She has no friends: Scout realises "Mayella Ewell must have been the loneliest person in the world".
- She was so attracted to Tom that she saved up over a whole year to get enough money to send the younger children to buy ice creams and give her an opportunity to be alone with him.
- However, our sympathy dies because she lies about Tom Robinson raping her. She sticks to her story, even when it is obvious she is lying.
- Mr Bob Ewell is a rough man, described "as a little bantam cock".
- He has no job and lives off social security money. He uses the money for drink: his children scavenge for food on the tip near the family's shack.
- He is rude and ill-mannered at the trial - he calls the judge "Cap'n".
- He is racist, ignorant and hate-filled.
- He is proved to be a liar at the trial when Atticus shows him to be left-handed: the injuries Mayella suffered were inflicted by a left-handed person.
- He is bitter at having been shown up by Atticus during the trial and plots revenge, finally attempting to kill

Themes

Prejudice

Prejudice permeates Maycomb society. Almost every character is either prejudiced against others, or the victim of prejudice. There is racial prejudice, class prejudice and prejudice against individuals who don't fit in.

Racism

The majority of the white population of Maycomb are racist. They see Blacks as second-class citizens (they do menial jobs for little money) and second-class humans.

The table below shows some examples of the racist views shared by most of the characters in the novel.

Character	Example of racist attitudes
The Sheriff	When he arrested Boo Radley (suspected of stabbing his father in the leg with a pair of scissors) he "hadn't the heart to put him in the jail alongside Negroes" .
Mrs Dubose	She tells the children: "Your father's no better than the niggers and trash he works for!"
Aunt Alexandra	She doesn't like to talk about important matters "in front of Calpurnia and them" .
Scout's cousin Francis	He claims that Atticus is "ruining the family" by taking on the Robinson case.
Mr Cunningham	He's part of a mob of men who would have lynched Tom Robinson, had Atticus not been on guard outside the jail.

Only a few people in the book are open-minded enough to recognise racism for the evil it is. Here are some examples:

Character	Example of anti-racist attitudes
Atticus	He hates the town's racist attitude and refers to it as "Maycomb's usual disease" .
Miss Maudie	She is proud of "those people in this town who say that fair play is not marked White Only."
Jem	He can't believe that the jury can convict an innocent man just because he is black. "It ain't right!" he says.
Scout	She sees the hypocrisy of her teacher who opposes Hitler but supports the Tom's conviction. "It's not right to persecute anybody, is it?"

Class prejudice

As well as prejudice about people's colour, there is prejudice about people's social standing. There are strict divisions along class lines in Maycomb society. For example ...

Aunt Alexandra is obsessed with the superiority of the Finch family, part of the local **white aristocracy**. She doesn't allow Scout to play with Walter Cunningham because ...

The Cunninghams are **lower class whites** - poor farmers, badly hit by the Depression. However they are a better class of people than....

The Ewells. They are '**White Trash**' - the lowest class of whites - uneducated and poor. But even they look down upon ...

The **Blacks**. The black community is automatically seen as at the bottom of the class system, yet since the abolition of slavery, the boundaries between them and the Ewells is less clear. This is one reason why Mr Ewell is so racist.

Prejudice against individuals

Finally, there is prejudice against anyone who doesn't fit in to Maycomb's fixed expectations of how people should behave. The most important victim of this type of prejudice is **Boo Radley**.

- Most of the town are prejudiced against Boo. Local gossip portrays him as a malevolent phantom. Children run past the Radley house out of fear and won't eat anything that came from Radley trees, believing them poisoned.
- Yet a very few people accept him for what he is. Miss Maudie remembers him when he was a boy who always spoke nicely; and Atticus tries to make the children understand him and not torment him. By the end of the novel, the children respect him too.

Understanding

Understanding is shown to be the way to counter prejudice. Look at these examples of people gaining understanding in the novel ...

Character	Example of gaining understanding
Scout	She grows up a lot during the novel. She learns nothing from her teacher, Miss Caroline, but she learns much from Atticus, Calpurnia, Miss Maudie and the experiences of the three years. By the end of the novel, she has learned to accept people for what they are and not to be judgemental.
Jem	He matures fast and arguably learns even more than Scout. As he matures physically - he is proud of the hair on his chest - he grows away from Scout and gains adult values. He is the most affected by the result of the trial and realises that Maycomb is in a cocoon of prejudice.
Mr Cunningham	He learns from Scout's innocent conversation outside the jail and disperses the mob. One of his family on the jury goes on to argue that Tom should be acquitted.
The whole town of Maycomb	It begins to learn as a result of the trial. Miss Maudie describes this change as " a baby-step towards fair-mindedness ".

Atticus is the example to everyone. He knows that the only way to break down prejudice and misunderstanding is to see things from another's viewpoint - "**to climb into his skin and walk around in it**". This is the main message of the novel.

Loneliness

Throughout the novel we meet a number of **characters** who are isolated from the close-knit white community of Maycomb and are lonely. We sympathise with them, and each of them find something to help them cope with their loneliness.

Character	How they cope with loneliness
Boo Radley	Turned into a recluse by his cruel father, he has become the subject of local legend. He watches Maycomb life from his window, especially the Finch children.
Dill	Rejected by his parents, he is passed around from relation to relation. Playing with Jem and Scout gives him a sense of being part of a family.
Mayella Ewell	Left to bring up her siblings virtually unaided, Mayella has no friends of her own age and no one to love her. She grows pretty flowers to add colour to her life, helped by Tom. Perhaps after her father's death she will grow stronger.
Tom Robinson	He is imprisoned when Mayella accused him of rape. The black community supports Tom and his family, and he is helped too by Atticus and his children.

All these people are lonely either because of prejudice against them; or because they are not loved enough, which is perhaps another way of saying the same thing!

Courage

There are many examples in the **novel** of people who show courage.

- Jem goes back to the Radley property to collect his trousers.
- Atticus shoots a mad dog in one shot.
- Mrs Dubose battles against morphine addiction.
- Dill escapes from his new stepfather to return to Maycomb.
- Atticus represents Tom Robinson, knowing the prejudice in the town.
- Tom tries to escape from prison.
- Boo saves the children from Mr Ewell.