

# To Kill a Mockingbird Study Guide

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For the novel by Harper Lee



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## Synopsis

In the sleepy southern town of Maycomb, Alabama, Scout Finch and her brother Jem revel in the glory days of childhood, trading stories and superstitions with Dill Harris, the imaginative nephew of their neighbor. Dill is especially fascinated with the legends surrounding the mysterious Boo Radley, who stays in his house all day, but, it is rumored, comes out at night to dine on squirrels and cats and peek in windows. Their summer days are spent adding to the Boo Radley legends or devising ways to make Boo come out.

Scout becomes increasingly uneasy about playing games that revolve around Boo Radley. Guided by the wisdom of her father, Atticus, and Calpurnia, their cook, Scout is learning the ways and unwritten rules of southern society and how to get along in it.

Atticus is a lawyer with an extremely difficult case on his hands. Tom Robinson, a black man, has been accused of raping a white girl. With deep-seated prejudice working against him, Atticus must prove his client innocent. Scout and Jem watch while their otherwise civilized neighbors show subtle disapproval or outright distaste for Atticus's defense of a black man.

While Atticus struggles to do the right thing, Scout struggles with her Aunt Alexandra, Atticus's sister, who comes to live with them. Aunt Alexandra is set on making Scout into a refined southern lady by instilling in her the rules of social decorum. Atticus is more concerned that his children simply do what is right.

And meanwhile, the trial of Tom Robinson reaches its conclusion, but not before Atticus challenges the very structure of southern society.

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2. A *foil* is someone or something that, by a striking contrast, reveals the characteristics of someone or something else. In Chapter 17 Scout provides a description of the Ewell's house and yard. What objects act as a foil to the junk strewn around the Ewell's yard? What might the presence of these objects reveal about the character of Mayella Ewell?
  
3. When Bob Ewell refers to Mayella he uses language like "screamin' like a stuck hog," "ruttin' on my Mayella," and "lyin' on the floor squallin'." What does the use of language like this reveal about Bob Ewell's character? About his feelings toward Mayella?
  
4. There is a terrible *irony* in the fact that Bob Ewell considers himself better than his black neighbors. List two ways the author shows this irony.
  
5. Mayella Ewell takes offense to Atticus's politeness toward her. What might this indicate about Mayella?

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6. Tom Robinson tells Mr. Gilmer that he helped Mayella Ewell because he felt sorry for her. Mr. Gilmer repeats this with apparent incredulity: “*You* felt sorry for *her*, you felt *sorry* for her?” Scout says,

The witness realized his mistake and shifted uncomfortably in the chair. But the damage was done. Below us, nobody liked Tom Robinson’s answer.

What was the “mistake” that Tom Robinson made?

7. Dill becomes increasingly upset at the way the prosecutor treats Tom Robinson until Jem makes Scout take Dill outside. When Dill tells Scout how he feels, Scout says, “Well, Dill, after all he’s just a Negro.” In spite of all the wisdom given her by Atticus, what has Scout failed to understand regarding racial differences?

8. Mr. Dolphus Raymond says,

Things haven’t caught up with [Dill’s] instinct yet. Let him get a little older and he won’t get sick and cry. Maybe things’ll strike him as being—not quite right, say, but he won’t cry, not when he gets a few years on him.

What does he mean by making this statement?

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9. The children discover that Mr. Dolphus Raymond only *pretends* to be half-drunk all the time. Mr. Raymond admits his deception isn't honest, but it is "mighty helpful to folks." How is it helpful? What is your opinion of Mr. Raymond's deception?
  
10. In Atticus's final appeal to the court he suggests that Mayella Ewell has "broken a rigid and time-honored code of our society." What was that code? What was Mayella's reaction to breaking that code?
  
11. In his own way, Mr. Raymond also broke the code. What was his reaction?
  
12. What "generally accepted truths" does Atticus challenge in his final appeal?
  
13. When the jury returns with the verdict, Scout says, "it was like watching Atticus walk into the street, raise a rifle to his shoulder and pull the trigger, but watching all the time knowing that the gun was empty." Why does Scout refer to this event once again? What is the significance of the empty gun? By bringing this image to mind, what is the author saying about Atticus and his actions in general?

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14. Is the verdict surprising? Why or why not? What clues were given earlier in the story that the case would probably turn out as it did?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
15. Why do all the black people in the balconies stand as Atticus leaves the courtroom?

**Dig Deeper:**

16. What evidence did Atticus show that proved Tom Robinson's innocence? The jury's verdict was obviously not based on hard evidence. On what was the jury's verdict based?

Read Leviticus 19:34, Romans 13:8–10, Galatians 3:26–29, Colossians 3:11, and James 2:8, 9. Why is any kind of class or racial discrimination wrong?

## *To Kill a Mockingbird Study Guide Answer Key*

says this is a “witness for the Lord,” but Mrs. Merriweather continues to complain about black people to the other women. Without actually mentioning his name, she complains about Atticus’s role in the trial and calls him misguided. She says all Atticus did was “stir ’em up.” She says all this while a guest in his house. Miss Maudie calls her on it by saying “His food doesn’t stick going down, does it?” Mrs. Merriweather, speaking of black people, says “People up there (the North) set ’em free, but you don’t see ’em settin’ at the table with ’em. At least we don’t have the deceit to say to ’em yes you’re as good as we are but stay away from us. Down here we just say you live your way and we’ll live ours.” What Mrs. Merriweather fails to realize is that saying “you’re as good as we are but stay away from us,” is, in practice, the same thing as saying “you live your way and we’ll live ours.” This section is hypocritical as a whole in that this is meant to be a Christian meeting and social gathering, but the women’s actions are far from proper Christian behavior.

9. These images of senseless killing are used repeatedly to reinforce the senselessness of Tom Robinson’s death.

10. Alexandra expresses her condolences to Atticus after the trial. It is the first time Scout hears her call Atticus “brother.” Alexandra is not shown as a contributor to the hypocrisy of the meeting although the reader would perhaps expect her to join in. She shows concern for Atticus and general weariness after she learns about Tom’s death. She is also shown to be in less control of her surroundings in this scene (Maudie Atkinson must rouse her), and to not have all the answers for a change. Scout is impressed that her aunt is able to maintain social decorum after the news and this inspires Scout to do the same.

11. Scout finds it confusing that Miss Gates rails against Hitler’s treatment of the Jews and supports “equal rights for all, special privileges for none,” and yet puts down black people outside the courthouse.

*Dig Deeper:*

12. Answers will vary.

13. Answers will vary. Things such as personal biases, historical prejudices, bad experiences, etc., would interfere with the reasoning process.

14. Alexandra sees a difference between being friendly, polite, and gracious to someone and having that person in your home. It seems contradictory that one can be “friendly and polite” to a person but not allow that person in one’s home. If you can’t let that person in your home, are you really being “gracious”? These verses indicate that love is shown in action, not simply word. Jesus says that it’s better to invite to your home those who cannot repay you, or in terms of modern society, those of a lower class.

15. The public had already decided that Tom was guilty, regardless of the evidence. The prejudice against black people is something that is deep-seated in the hearts of these men. Regardless of what they outwardly profess to be right and just, people are ruled by what they believe inside.

### *Chapters 27–31*

*Questions:*

1. Bob Ewell acquired and lost a job in a matter of days, and he openly accused Atticus of “getting his job.” Someone tried to break into Judge Taylor’s house while he was home. Bob Ewell began harassing Helen Robinson when she walked to work.

2. He gave Helen Robinson a job even though he didn’t really need her. He threatened to have Bob