

To Kill a Mockingbird Themes

• Good and Evil

- [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) is an exploration of human morality, and presents a constant conversation regarding the inherent goodness or evilness of people. Atticus, father of Scout and Jem, also plays the role of teacher, for his children and his town. Atticus believes that people usually contain aspects of both good and evil, but that good will usually prevail. Atticus teaches this to his children, but also to the town, as he works to defend [Tom Robinson](#), an innocent black man accused of raping a white woman. In the racist town of Maycomb in the heart of America's South during the Depression era, this is a Herculean task. Despite the challenge of overcoming the town's deeply ingrained racism and forcing people to change their social perspectives, Atticus struggles on, because he believes that one day, goodness will prevail over the evils of racism and racial equality will exist.
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- Throughout the book, Scout and Jem make the classic transition from innocence to maturity. Jem leads this change, as he is older than Scout, but both children experience it. At the beginning of the novel, they approach life innocently believing in the goodness of all people, thinking everyone understands and adheres to the same values they and their father do. During Tom Robinson's trial, the children are sorely disappointed when the jury, made up of their fellow townspeople, convicts the obviously innocent Tom Robinson simply because he is a black man and his accuser is white. The realization that there is true evil within their society shakes Jem to the core. He held a strong belief in the goodness of all people, but after the trial must reevaluate his understanding of human nature. The challenge of this struggle causes him great emotional pain as he tries to come to terms with disappointing realities of inequality, racism, and general unfairness. Scout also struggles to understand these things, but even following the trial is able to maintain her belief in the goodness of human nature. At the end of the novel, both children are faced with true evil, as [Bob Ewell](#) tries to kill them. True goodness, embodied in [Boo Radley](#), saves them. In this final conflict between these opposing forces, goodness prevails.
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• Education

- Shortly after the novel begins, Scout starts her first year at school. The educational system in Maycomb leaves much to be desired. Scout is ahead of her classmates because Atticus has taught her to read and write, and [Calpurnia](#) has even taught her script. However, once her teacher discovers this, she punishes Scout and tells her not to learn anything else at home, because her father does not know how to teach her properly. This is the first clear conflict between institutionalized education and education in the home.
- Atticus clearly takes great pride in instilling a powerful sense of morality in his children. He truthfully answers whatever questions they ask, and encourages their inquisitive minds by treating them as adults and encouraging them to grow intellectually and morally as much as possible. On the other hand, Scout's teacher has a very specific understanding of what children should learn when, even if this schedule requires holding a child back. For example, when she asks Scout to write during class and Scout writes in script, she chides her and tells her that she should not be

doing that for many years, because it isn't taught in school until much later. Scout feels frustrated that her teacher does not understand her and only wants to hold her back.

- Scout comes to Atticus with concerns about her education and he helps her understand that she must get an education, even though she might find the process frustrating, and that he will continue to read with her and teach her at home. Clearly, Atticus understands the faults of the educational system, but also knows it is necessary for his children to pass through this system to be a part of society. However, his teaching at home, both morally and otherwise, is far more valuable to his children than anything they learn in the classroom. Scout notices this most obviously when learning about the Holocaust. Her teacher explains that such oppression of one group of people could never happen in the United States and Scout is astonished. She heard Miss Gates outside the court house during Tom Robinson's trial saying that, referring to black people, she thought it was, "time somebody taught them a lesson, they thought they was getting' way above themselves, an' the next thing they think they can do is marry us." Scout sees Miss Gates's statement about blacks in clear conflict with her statement about the equality in America.
- Scout receives the majority of her education in the home, and doesn't believe school will do much for her. At the end of the novel, she notes that she has learned probably all there is to learn, except maybe algebra. Clearly, Scout understands that life experiences are the true teachers, and that Atticus has taught her more than school ever will. Clearly, Lee is expressing a lack of belief in the institutionalized educational system, and in fact suggests it might do more harm than good. Perhaps a more valuable education can be found in the home.

● Social Inequality

- Along with struggling with concepts of good and evil, Scout and Jem spend a great deal of time trying to understand what defines and creates social strata. Scout tends to believe that "folks are just folks", while Jem is convinced that social standing is related to how long people's relatives and ancestors have been able to write.
- Scout elucidates the town's social strata quite clearly on her first day at school when [Walter Cunningham](#) does not have lunch or lunch money. Her classmates ask her to explain to the teacher why Walter won't take a loaned quarter to buy lunch, and she lectures the teacher on the Cunningham's financial situation and how they trade goods for services. Scout and the other children have a very clear understanding of the social inequalities in their town, but see these inequalities as natural and permanent. The Finch family falls rather high up in the social hierarchy, while the Ewell family falls at the bottom. However, this hierarchy only includes white people. Maycomb's black population fall beneath all white families in Maycomb, including the Ewells, whom Atticus labels as "trash".
- Scout understands this social structure, but doesn't understand why it is so. She believes that everyone should be treated the same, no matter what family they are from. For instance, when she wants to spend more time with Walter Cunningham, [Aunt Alexandra](#) objects saying no Finch girl should ever consort with a Cunningham. Scout is frustrated by this, as she wants to be able to choose her own friends based on her definition of what makes a good person: morality.

● The Mockingbird

- When Scout and Jem receive airguns for Christmas, Atticus tells them that although he would prefer that they practice their shooting with tin cans, if they must shoot at living things, they must never shoot at mockingbirds. Atticus explains that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird. Clearly, this is the title scene, but the theme continues throughout the book. Miss Maudie explains why Atticus is

correct - mockingbirds never do anyone any harm, and are not pests in any way. All they do is sing beautifully and live peacefully. Therefore, it is a sin to kill them. The mockingbird comes to represent true goodness and purity. Tom Robinson is one example of a human "mockingbird". He stands accused of raping and beating [Mayella Ewell](#), but is innocent of the charges. The town commits the ultimate sin by finding him guilty and sentencing him to death. In effect, they have killed a mockingbird. Boo Radley is another example of a human "mockingbird". He has spent his entire life as a prisoner of his own home because his father was overzealous in punishing him for a childhood mistake. Boo Radley observes the world around him, causing no harm to anyone, and then saves Jem and Scout's lives when Bob Ewell attacks. The sheriff determines that Ewell's death will be ruled an accident to avoid forcing Boo to go to trial, even though Boo killed him to protect the children. Atticus agrees, and wants to make sure Scout understands why this little white lie must be told. She replies saying of course she understands, putting Boo on trial and in the public sphere would be like killing a mockingbird. The mockingbird represents true goodness and innocence that should always be protected.

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• Perspective

- Throughout the novel, Atticus urges his children to try to step into other people's shoes to understand how they see the world. Whenever Scout doesn't understand Jem, Atticus encourages her to try to understand how he might be feeling. Usually, Scout finds this advice helpful, and her attempts to gain insight into other people's perspectives on life and the world broaden her moral education and social understanding.
- When [Mrs. Dubose](#), the mean old woman who lives down the street from the Finch family yells insults at Jem and Scout on her way to town, Jem reacts by returning and cutting up all the flowers in her front yard. His punishment is to read to Mrs. Dubose for a specified time period every day. He complains to Atticus that she is an awful woman, but Atticus tells Jem and Scout to try to understand Mrs. Dubose's point of view. She is an old woman, very set in her ways, and she is entirely alone in the world. Jem and Scout agree to visit her. After Mrs. Dubose dies, Atticus reveals that by reading to her each day, the children were helping her break her morphine addiction. Atticus explains that Mrs. Dubose was fighting to regain sobriety, even as she stood on the brink of death. Because of this, to Atticus, she is the bravest person he has ever known. He explains this to the children to try to make them understand the terrible pain she was experiencing, and how their presence helped her through the process. Although she might have said some horrible things, Atticus encourages the children to try to see the world from her perspective and to understand how brave and strong she was.
- At the end of the book, Scout escorts Boo Radley back to his home. After Boo closes the door, she turns around and surveys the neighborhood from his perspective. She imagines how he has witnessed all the happenings of the recent years, including her and Jem running by the house on their way to and from school, her childhood Boo Radley games, Miss Maudie's fire, the incident of the rabid dog, and finally, Bob Ewell's attack. As she steps into Boo's shoes, Scout gains a new respect for his life, and understands that his experience is just as valid as hers. With this understanding, she is humbled.

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• Racism

- Obviously, racism is a major theme of the novel. During the Depression era, blacks were still highly subjugated members of society. Blacks were not permitted to commingle with whites in public settings, as exemplified in the courthouse physical separation of races and in the clearly

distinct black and white areas of town. Moreover, things like intermarriage were almost unheard of, and sorely looked down upon.

- Throughout the novel, Scout explores the differences between black people and white people. She and Jem attend church with Calpurnia and Scout truly enjoys the experience. Afterwards, she asks Calpurnia if she might be able to visit her house sometime because she has never seen it. Calpurnia agrees, but the visit is never made, largely because Aunt Alexandra puts a stop to it. Jem, Scout and Dill also sit with the black citizens of the town in the balcony of the court house to observe the trial. In addition, Scout and Dill have a lengthy conversation with Mr. Raymond, a white man who married a black woman and has mixed children. Mr. Raymond reveals that he pretends to be an alcoholic by carrying around a paper bag with a bottle of Coca-Cola inside in order to let the town excuse his choice to marry a black woman.
- Tom Robinson is convicted purely because he is a black man and his accuser is white. The evidence is so powerfully in his favor, that race is clearly the single defining factor in the jury's decision. Atticus fights against racism, and a few other townspeople are on his side, including Miss Maudie and [Judge Taylor](#). Jem and Scout also believe in racial equality, but are obviously in the minority. When Atticus loses the trial, he tries to make his children understand that although he lost, he did help move along the cause of ending racism as evidenced by the jury's lengthy deliberation period. Usually, such a trial would be decided immediately.

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● Bravery

- Bravery takes many forms in *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Atticus is brave to defend a black man in the face of criticism and threats of violence. He also is brave in the face of danger, both when he kills the rabid dog with a single shot and when facing the mob of men outside the jailhouse. Atticus urges Scout to be brave and prevent herself from fighting those who criticize her or her family. To Atticus, withholding violence is one of the highest forms of bravery. The children believe themselves to be brave when approaching the Radley house early in the book, but learn later on that this was false bravery, and in fact, silly. Atticus holds up Mrs. Dubose as the ultimate definition of bravery, as she fights against her morphine addiction in order to be free from it before she dies, even when she knows she will die in the process. Atticus, who also fights against a power greater than himself, tells his children they should have great respect for Mrs. Dubose. Finally, Bob Ewell represents the greatest cowardice, as he both lies in the courtroom to protect himself and resorts to attacking children in the darkness in order to make himself feel more of a man.

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● The Law

- Atticus is a lawyer, and the book is centered around his representation of Tom Robinson. Although Atticus loses the trial, he believes strongly that despite social inequalities, all men are equal in the courtroom. He includes this information in his closing statements to the jury, and during his later discussions with Jem and Scout regarding jury selection and the trial process, makes this statement again. Atticus believes that progress towards racial equality can and will be made in the courtroom.
- In addition, although he believes powerfully in upholding the law, Atticus understands that it must be bent in certain situations. For example, Bob Ewell is permitted to hunt even in the off season because the town authorities know that if he is prevented from hunting, his children might starve. In addition, at the end of the novel, the law would require Boo Radley to be placed on trial to determine whether he killed Bob Ewell in self defense or not. However, Atticus understands, as

does [Heck Tate](#) and Scout, that Boo should not be forced to experience powerful public attention or criticism. Therefore, it is necessary to bend the law in this case to protect Boo.

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