

To Kill a Mockingbird Discussion Guide

- Where does Jean Louise's nickname "Scout" come from? Why do you think that Ms. Lee doesn't offer an explanation?
- Why are there so many nicknames in the story? (Scout, Dill, Boo) What is their significance in each case?
- Do you agree with Atticus's parenting style? How do you think that he did as a parent? How do you think he did as a lawyer? How do you think he did as a Citizen of Maycomb? How do you think that he did as a person?
- If Jem and Scout had a mother, how would the story be different?
- If the story is about the trial, why does Ms. Lee spend so much of the book on the years before it happened? Is the book really about the trial then?
- What was Ms. Lee trying to communicate to her readers with the chapter about Mrs. Douglas?
- Why was Arthur "Boo" Radley such a large character in the story?
- Why did Aunt Alexandra come to live with the Finches?
- What line or quote seems to embody the lesson of the story?
- The jury at the trial declares Tom Robinson guilty, but the townsfolk all seem to think otherwise. Is this the point of the story?
- What was your opinion of Aunt Alexandra? Did she deserve the respect that Atticus demanded that Scout give her? Did your opinion of her change after the scene when Atticus tells her of Tom Robinson's death?
- What was your opinion of Sheriff Tate? He refused to serve justice to Tom Robinson, but yet he believed he was innocent. He then refused to arrest Arthur Radley for possible murder of Bob Ewell.
- What was your opinion of Mrs. Douglas? Did it change when she died?
- How are Tom Robinson and Arthur "Boo" Radley treated similarly by the townsfolk? How are they treated differently? Why?
- How do Jem and Scout's views of Boo Radley change during the book? Why does Jem cry when the hole in the tree is filled with cement?

-Atticus tells the children several times that they must walk in someone else's shoes before judging that person. Describe times when Atticus, Scout, or Jem walked in someone else's shoes. Does this change how they viewed the situations? What role does this advice play in sympathy and compassion?

-Do you think the missionary society was walking in the Mrunas' shoes? What do these ladies show you about life in the town? Can you walk in their shoes and understand where they are coming from?

- One of the chief criticisms of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that the two central storylines—Scout, Jem, and Dill's fascination with Boo Radley and the trial between Mayella Ewell and Tom Robinson—are not sufficiently connected in the novel. Do you think that Lee is successful in incorporating these different stories? Were you surprised at the way in which these story lines were resolved? Why or why not?

- What elements of this book did you find especially memorable, humorous, or inspiring? Are there individual characters whose beliefs, acts, or motives especially impressed or surprised you? Did any events in this book cause you to reconsider your childhood memories or experiences in a new light?

-In the last few lines of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout says, "He was real nice..." and Atticus replies, "Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them." Do you agree that most people in the novel are nice after they are "seen?" How is Atticus able to see the good side of people despite all he has experienced? Can you?

Symbols in To Kill a Mockingbird

The mockingbird

The mockingbird is a symbol of innocence or vulnerability. Several characters lose their innocence in the novel—most notably Tom Robinson. When he is killed, the newspaper editorial compares his death to the "senseless slaughter of songbirds," a direct reference to Atticus's earlier warning to his children that it's a sin to shoot a mockingbird because a mockingbird does nothing but bring joy to people. Similarly, the sheriff refuses to arrest Boo Radley because doing so would be "sort of like shootin' a mockingbird," meaning that Boo is such a vulnerable character that it doesn't make sense to bring him extra hardship. In the same vein, Scout's last name Finch, another songbird, suggests that her innocence (or loss of) will be integral to the story's plot.

-Was the mockingbird a good symbol? Was it easy for modern readers to understand?

The Knothole

Boo has been living as a recluse for many years but obviously wants to connect with the outside world. Boo leaves gifts for Jem and Scout in the knothole of the tree as a way of connecting with them, without making himself vulnerable. When Nathan Radley learns what Boo had been doing, he fills the knothole with cement, breaking Boo's ties with the outside world, in an attempt to keep him secluded.

-Was this right of Mr. Nathan? He seemed nice, but was he really? Why did he want to keep his brother secluded?

The Mad Dog

Tim Johnson, a well-known dog in Maycomb, becomes rabid—and a danger to the community. The dog's disease is symbolic of racism in the town. Just as Sheriff Tate refuses to serve justice in the Tom Robinson case, so does he refuse to shoot the rabid dog—he urges Atticus to fight it, just as Atticus fights for justice in the courtroom. Miss Maudie aptly tells Scout she believes that Atticus "decided he wouldn't shoot till he had to, and he had to today."