

## Themes and Genres in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work – they are the important meanings contained in a book, poem or play. The themes of Mockingbird contrast with its subject – the depiction of small-town life in Alabama in the 1930s. Note that to get a good mark in Literature you must mention the background of the novel – the Great Depression which brought with it poverty, and the racism and narrow-mindedness that characterized the former Confederate states.*

*Study Guide overview. Barron's lists three themes only: Prejudice, End of Innocence and Justice as a Simple Concept. York Notes suggest four major - Growing Up, Courage, Prejudice and Symbolism (!) - and five minor - Family, Superstition, Loneliness, Injustice and Hypocrisy. Letts lists four: Courage, Family, Justice and Prejudice/Hatred.*

### **a. Society**

*Mockingbird* is a detailed examination of a closed community in an American Southern town during the Great Depression in the early 1930s. The novel tells us a great deal about its social hierarchy during a time of poverty, from its respectable citizens holding responsible posts, such as Atticus, down to the "entailed" farmers (the Cunninghams), the "white trash" (the Ewells) and finally, at the bottom, the black community ("niggers"), who have their own hierarchy based chiefly on education, with the Reverend Sykes, Calpurnia and Zeebo at the top. Although Zeebo is a mere refuse (and dead dog!) collector in the eyes of the whites, to the blacks he holds the important position of Superintendent of Music.

### **b. Family**

Because of Maycomb's history, many of its families are extended ones, and inbreeding, combined with prejudice, ensures that family traits (or what are believed to be family traits) are passed down from generation to generation. Heredity is deemed important by snobs like Aunt Alexandra. There are also internecine disputes between families, such as the one between the Cunninghams and the Coninghams.

How issues are decided within a family is also important, as in the intervention of Alexandra in the upbringing of the children. This can be mentioned when dealing with the theme of the role of women.

Another important side to the theme of family is the role of the father, especially the father-daughter relationship, which is stressed at the end. Other considerations are the ties between siblings, and the parallels between family and community.

### **c. Childhood**

The narrator's technique of detailing an Alabama childhood is often remarked upon: sometimes we have an adult point of view, sometimes a child's, but usually a mixture of both, with an adult's complex language analysing in retrospect what the young Scout sees. Mayella, for instance, is described as a "young girl", although she would have appeared as an adult to Scout. Even so, the events unfold at the pace of the child's understanding: the reader is ahead of not only Scout but also Jem in guessing that the tree presents come from Boo.

It must be remembered that Jean Louise, as a tomboy in a liberal environment, is not typical of most children of the time - nor is Dill. But the description of Jem's adolescence is in many ways universally true, and the insight we gain in the school scenes into the upbringings of other children is probably very accurate. Moreover, the effect of the events during the three years covered by the book on the Finch children is one of an increase of learning about the world at the expense of innocence (an innocence which undoubtedly saves lives in the ugly incident outside the gaol), though saved from cynicism by Atticus's role model.

### **d. Role of Women**

The novel is sprinkled with wry remarks from Lee's narrator about the way women were regarded in the Maycomb community (as in the description of Finch's Landing, Chapter 9), and Scout is at every turn is seen to avoid being stereotyped as a girl, especially the one Aunt Alexandra wants her to be - a "Southern Belle". Nevertheless, the educated women are generally portrayed as strong characters with corresponding influence in both family and community (Cal, Alexandra, Mrs Dubose, etc), although they do not tend to have the direct high-profile effect on events that Tate, Atticus and Underwood do, and cannot even sit on juries.

### **e. Race**

Since the end of the American Civil War in 1865 blacks were supposed to have been liberated, but prejudice against them was still strong when Lee was writing in the late 1950s, and must have been even worse during the Depression. There is evidence of apartheid in the book: for example, the blacks live in the "Quarters" beyond the rubbish dump – what Bob Ewell calls the “nigger nest” - and during the court case the children sit in the "coloured" gallery. Black people are despicably treated throughout, with even Underwood contemptuous of them, partly because of an ingrained heritage of bigotry in Alabama, which was on the pro-slavery losing side during the Civil War. The continued separation of black and white communities led to calumnies against blacks such as a supposedly irresistible desire for white women, and the fact that blacks were cheap competitors for jobs increased hatred towards them when jobs were in short supply.

If asked on issues of race or prejudice, discuss Dolphus Raymond's position, and also mention Alexandra on Cal, and the Missionary Ladies. Race can also be tied in to society: what goes down badly for Tom Robinson in court is his pity for Mayella, which is seen as disrespect for someone higher in the pecking order of Maycomb society. Also you may mention that Lee makes her black characters unsterotyped,

rounded, three-dimensional figures, more noble than the whites partly because of their humility, but also capable of prejudice (Lula).

#### **f. Prejudice**

Although this theme can be closely tied in to that of race and the fate of the Robinsons, there is a lot more to Maycomb's prejudice, some of which can be also linked to religion. Boo Radley is another obvious victim, but also the "nigger lover" Atticus and his children, and, more subtly, Miss Maudie (though she gives as good as she gets).

Prejudice also links to the themes of Justice and Courage. Failure to put yourself in someone else's place leads to a lack of understanding, which in turn leads to fear, superstition, stereotyping and intolerance, which leads to prejudice and bigotry, which leads to injustice. On the other hand, putting yourself in someone else's shoes leads to understanding, leads to sympathy, tolerance and the courage to stand up to prejudice, and finally leads to justice.

#### **g. Religion**

While Atticus comes across as a free thinker on religion, most of Maycomb has fixed views on the subject. It is shown as a non-conformist community (that is, protestant but not of the established Church), divided into shades of Baptism, Methodism and Presbyterianism. It is often handy when we criticize literature to divide characters up according to their philosophies: whether they are pleasure-lovers (hedonists), or whether they think pleasure is wrong (puritans). This distinction between people goes back through history - in the Roman Empire it was Epicureans (hedonists) versus Stoics (puritans), in the English Civil War Cavaliers (hedonists) versus Roundheads (puritans) - and is especially useful in analysing Shakespeare. In *Mockingbird* the puritans are the Primitive Baptist sect "the foot-washers" - example, Nathan Radley - who set themselves up against those who enjoy life, such as Miss Maudie. Before the trial Miss Maudie is engaged in a scriptural battle with the foot-washers over her pleasure-giving flowers: "He that cometh in vanity departeth in darkness", riposted with, "A merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance". Mr Radley, for all his religious fervour, tries to prevent any further acts of altruistic kindness by Arthur by cementing up the knot-hole. This does not, however, mean that Lee's message is one of out-and-out hedonism - Boo's fate after the joyriding incident is enough confirmation of that, as are the consequences of Bob Ewell's drinking - rather it is one of getting the balance between pleasure and abstinence right, as Miss Maudie does.

It is as well to mention here that Atticus's maxim of getting into someone else's skin or shoes in order to understand them is close to the Christian precept of treating others as you would like them to treat you - a rule ignored by many of the Maycomb Christians.

#### **h. Justice**

In theory, all American Negroes have had equal rights in law since the end of the Civil War in 1865. Yet that does not mean that they receive justice. The court's verdict against Tom Robinson, shown through Jem's trusting, inexperienced eyes,

emphasises this. Atticus upholds his belief in the law for, apart from minor improvements which he agrees could be made, he thinks it is satisfactory. What do need to change are people's attitudes. The law can function, but justice cannot be carried out until attitudes change. It is people who must apply the law justly.

Judge Taylor is an honourable man who does his best to see that Tom Robinson has a fair trial by appointing Atticus to defend him. He is a responsible judge who keeps his court well disciplined, despite his casual air and unusual habits, such as eating cigars and cleaning his nails whilst the court is in session. let's explore p15

### **i. Imprisonment**

Beside the physical confinements of Tom Robinson and Boo Radley, there are also mental prisons which a number of the citizens of Maycomb are in. Tom's real prison is his race, while Boo is imprisoned by prejudice as much as by his father, and both are imprisoned by their stereotypes. Mayella is trapped by loneliness, ignorance and poverty - compare Curley's wife in *Of Mice and Men*, substituting Curley for the third factor. Scout feels that "a pink cotton penitentiary" is about to descend on her. Mrs Dubose is imprisoned in her morphine hell, the farmers by entailment, the entire black community by prejudice, lack of education, poverty, and the small-town mentality with its traditions, which in turn holds back members of the white community like Atticus who want to make progress. Think of more examples of imprisonment.

Supporting this theme is the motif of boundaries and fences. Boundaries can protect but also imprison. As soon as the novel's characters try to break through their boundaries, violence ensues, eg, when Tom crosses the boundary of the Ewell place, or when the Old Salem group crosses the boundary of Maycomb decorum. The children try to break the barrier between Boo and them, by crossing the boundary into his territory, and Scout tries to break through the boundary of race by asking to visit Cal at home. There are lots of examples.

### **j. Courage**

"I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand," says Atticus to Jem after Mrs Dubose's death, and this is a good starting-point for discussing the types of courage which are on show in the novel. Here are York Notes on the subject:

There are many examples of courage shown throughout the novel. For instance:

Chuck Little stands up to Burris Ewell in class (Chapter 3);

Jem rescues his trousers at night from the Radley Place (Chapter 6);

Miss Maudie is optimistic after her house has burned down (Chapter 8);

Mr Link Deas speaks out for the Robinsons (Chapter 19 and 27).

Two major types of courage are emphasised in the novel.

"Real courage" (p124, Chapter 11) when you continue with what you are doing even though you are fighting a losing battle. An example is Mrs Dubose's battle with her morphine addiction.

Fighting against evil and prejudice. Understanding of others is sometimes not enough; an act of bravery is demanded to try to prevent evil taking place and to override prejudice. Examples of this type of courage are:

Mr Underwood's article about Tom Robinson's death (Chapter 25);

Boo Radley's heroic act when he rescues Jem from Robert Ewell (Chapter 28).

Both these main types of courage are evident in the major plot of the novel:

Atticus represents Tom Robinson even though success is unlikely;

He takes a stand against racial prejudice in the Maycomb community.

*York Notes* also ask three questions about courage:

*Consider whether Aunt Alexandra coming to live with the Finches at a difficult time is a good example of a courageous act;*

*Consider whether To Kill a Mockingbird is a courageous novel;*

*Does it matter that you might be fighting for something which is unlikely to succeed?*

#### **k. Coexistence of Good and Evil**

The most important theme of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the book's exploration of the moral nature of human beings—that is, whether people are essentially good or essentially evil. The novel approaches this question by dramatizing Scout and Jem's transition from a perspective of childhood innocence, in which they assume that people are good because they have never seen evil, to a more adult perspective, in which they have confronted evil and must incorporate it into their understanding of the world. As a result of this portrayal of the transition from innocence to experience, one of the book's important subthemes involves the threat that hatred, prejudice, and ignorance pose to the innocent: people such as Tom Robinson and Boo Radley are not prepared for the evil that they encounter, and, as a result, they are destroyed. Even Jem is victimized to an extent by his discovery of the evil of racism during and after the trial. Whereas Scout is able to maintain her basic faith in human nature despite Tom's conviction, Jem's faith in justice and in humanity is badly damaged, and he retreats into a state of disillusionment.

The moral voice of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is embodied by Atticus Finch, who is virtually unique in the novel in that he has experienced and understood evil without losing his faith in the human capacity for goodness. Atticus understands that, rather than being simply creatures of good or creatures of evil, most people have both good and bad qualities. The important thing is to appreciate the good qualities and understand the bad qualities by treating others with sympathy and trying to see life

from their perspective. He tries to teach this ultimate moral lesson to Jem and Scout to show them that it is possible to live with conscience without losing hope or becoming cynical. In this way, Atticus is able to admire Mrs. Dubose's courage even while deploring her racism. Scout's progress as a character in the novel is defined by her gradual development toward understanding Atticus's lessons, culminating when, in the final chapters, Scout at last sees Boo Radley as a human being. Her newfound ability to view the world from his perspective ensures that she will not become jaded as she loses her innocence.

## **l. Education of Children**

Because exploration of the novel's larger moral questions takes place within the perspective of children, the education of children is necessarily involved in the development of all of the novel's themes. In a sense, the plot of the story charts Scout's moral education, and the theme of how children are educated—how they are taught to move from innocence to adulthood—recurs throughout the novel (at the end of the book, Scout even says that she has learned practically everything except algebra). This theme is explored most powerfully through the relationship between Atticus and his children, as he devotes himself to instilling a social conscience in Jem and Scout. The scenes at school provide a direct counterpoint to Atticus's effective education of his children: Scout is frequently confronted with teachers who are either frustratingly unsympathetic to children's needs or morally hypocritical. As is true of *To Kill a Mockingbird's* other moral themes, the novel's conclusion about education is that the most important lessons are those of sympathy and understanding, and that a sympathetic, understanding approach is the best way to teach these lessons. In this way, Atticus's ability to put himself in his children's shoes makes him an excellent teacher, while Miss Caroline's rigid commitment to the educational techniques that she learned in college makes her ineffective and even dangerous.

## **m. Social Class**

Differences in social status are explored largely through the overcomplicated social hierarchy of Maycomb, the ins and outs of which constantly baffle the children. The relatively well-off Finches stand near the top of Maycomb's social hierarchy, with most of the townspeople beneath them. Ignorant country farmers like the Cunninghams lie below the townspeople, and the white trash Ewells rest below the Cunninghams. But the black community in Maycomb, despite its abundance of admirable qualities, squats below even the Ewells, enabling Bob Ewell to make up for his own lack of importance by persecuting Tom Robinson. These rigid social divisions that make up so much of the adult world are revealed in the book to be both irrational and destructive. For example, Scout cannot understand why Aunt Alexandra refuses to let her consort with young Walter Cunningham. Lee uses the children's perplexity at the unpleasant layering of Maycomb society to critique the role of class status and, ultimately, prejudice in human interaction.

## **Genres**

*The genre of a book is which type or category it fits into – horror story, adventure, romance, etc. Mockingbird has two main genres – bildungsroman and gothic novel.*

A bildungsroman is a “coming of age” or “rites of passage” novel, in which a child or children grow up through the experiences and events of the story.

A gothic novel is a genre which dates back to 1764, and was popular at the turn of and during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century – Frankenstein, Dracula and The Hound of the Baskervilles are all gothic novels. They feature spooky mansions or castles, imprisonment, monsters, the supernatural, imprisonment, people trespassing where they shouldn't go, murders, madness and incest. All these elements occur in *Mockingbird* – can you think where? The following passages are from Barron's Notes.

“Gothic Details - The powerful forces of good and evil in *To Kill a Mockingbird* seem larger than the small Southern town in which the story takes place. One of the ways in which Lee adds drama and atmosphere to her story is by including a number of Gothic details in the setting and the plot. In literature, the term Gothic refers to a style of fiction first popularized in eighteenth-century England, featuring supernatural occurrences, gloomy and haunted settings, full moons, and so on. Among the Gothic elements in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are the unnatural snowfall, the fire that destroys Miss Maudie's house, the children's superstitions about Boo Radley, the mad dog that Atticus shoots, and the ominous night of the Halloween party on which Bob Ewell attacks the children. These elements, out of place in the normally quiet, predictable Maycomb, create tension in the novel and serve to foreshadow the troublesome events of the trial and its aftermath.

“Small-Town Life - Counterbalancing the Gothic motif of the story is the motif of old-fashioned, small-town values, which manifest themselves throughout the novel. As if to contrast with all of the suspense and moral grandeur of the book, Lee emphasizes the slow-paced, good-natured feel of life in Maycomb. She often deliberately juxtaposes small-town values and Gothic images in order to examine more closely the forces of good and evil. The horror of the fire, for instance, is mitigated by the comforting scene of the people of Maycomb banding together to save Miss Maudie's possessions. In contrast, Bob Ewell's cowardly attack on the defenseless Scout, who is dressed like a giant ham for the school pageant, shows him to be unredeemably evil.”