

St. Mary's Catholic Academy



Year 9 – To Kill a Mockingbird – Harper Lee

Information for staff

Background information/overview

In *To Kill a Mockingbird* (TKAM) Harper Lee explores civil rights and racism in the segregated Southern United States of the 1930s. The story is told through the eyes of Jean Louise “Scout” Finch, a nine year old girl, whose father, Atticus Finch, strives to prove the innocence of a black man unjustly accused of rape. We also meet Boo Radley, a mysterious recluse neighbour of Scout’s, through the innocent perspective of a child. The book is set at the time when the effects of the Great Depression of 1929 were being felt by the community, although Scout’s family were more affluent than some of her neighbours due to her father’s work as a lawyer. Despite slavery being abolished in 1865, in the 1930s, the southern states had passed laws which created a segregated society where black people did not have the same rights as white people. The justice system was a racist one and men were still dying as slaves in a prison work scheme.

Harper Lee was born in 1926 in Monroe, Alabama, a town which shares many similarities to Maycomb, the town in which TKAM is set. Her father was a lawyer, like Atticus Finch, the father of Scout. It is believed that Lee drew inspiration from her childhood friendship with the later novelist Truman Capote to create the character of Scout’s friend Dill. Furthermore, in 1931, when Lee was five, nine young black men were accused of raping two white women in Alabama and five of the nine men were sentenced to long prison terms. Many saw the sentences as being racially motivated and it was suspected that the women were lying, especially as their claims became more suspect during an appeal. Whilst it is clear that these events influenced Lee’s writing, she was firm that despite these similarities to her real life, TKAM was not about her childhood home, but in fact could be any town in the Southern USA of the time.

TKAM was written in the mid-1950s, and completed in 1957 before being published with revisions in 1960, just before the peak of the American civil rights movement. Critics found the narrative voice of Scout, a nine year old girl, unconvincing, but the book became an enormous popular success selling over 15 million copies. In 1962 a film starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch, Scout’s father, was produced, which went on to receive great accolades and won an Academy Award. Meanwhile Lee herself went retreated from the public eye, stopped giving interviews and produced very few other works.

The book is still loved today for its representation of childhood innocence, its moral condemnation of racism and its premise of goodness surviving the assault of evil. Before reading it with the class, it might be useful to familiarise yourself with some basic context about racism in the Deep South of the 1930s, perhaps using the resources in Google drive.

Chapter number	Chapter overview	Opportunities to pause	Suggested discussion questions
1	Scout begins with a potted history of her family, and an introduction to Maycomb, and Dill's fascination with the Radley Place.	Pg12 – The sheriff wouldn't put him in jail "alongside Negroes"	How do you feel about the narrator being a nine year old girl? Why do you think Dill is so fascinated with the Radley Place? Do you think the story about Arthur "Boo" Radley is true?
2-3	Scout starts school and we see the injustice of her teacher's treatment of her, as she tries to explain Walter Cunningham's behaviour.	Pg23 – representation of poverty Pg 34 – the Ewells	What do we learn about Scout through her attempted explanation of Walter's behaviour? What does this teach us about Maycomb? What sort of upbringing do Scout and Jem appear to have received?
4-6	Scout finds "gifts" hidden in the tree. Miss Maudie tells Scout the rumours about Boo probably aren't true. The children are told to leave Boo alone.	Pg42 / 45 – "act like a girl"	What makes the children suspect the Radley game is wrong? Why don't they just leave the Radley place alone? Why do you think it's so important to Jem to get his pants back?
7-8	More gifts appear in the tree. Miss Maudie's house sets on fire and whilst Scout watches, Boo, unnoticed, wraps a blanket round her.	Pg70 – Jem cries Pg73 – "nigger snowman" - context	Why do you think Nathan Radley cements over the knot hole in the tree? What had Jem been upset about? Why had Scout not heard him cry? What impression are you getting about Boo Radley?
9-11	We learn that Atticus is to defend Tom Robinson, against the wishes of some in the town. Atticus shoots a mad dog. Jem goes to read to Mrs Dubose and learns a lesson.	Pg85 – Cecil Jacobs Pg98 – Atticus wanted her to hear – why? Pg99 - mockingbird	What do we learn from Cecil Jacobs' verbal attack on Scout? Why could Atticus not hold his head high if he didn't defend Robinson? Why does he still do it if he knows they can't win? What lesson does Jem learn from Mrs Dubose?
12-13	Calpurnia takes Scout and Jem to church – we are reminded of Tom Robinson's plight. Aunt Alexandra arrives.	Pg137 – the Ewells Pg138 – Cal's double life.	Why does Calpurnia lead a "double life"? Why does the town believe Bob Ewell's word over Tom Robinson's and why does Scout struggle with this? Why has Aunt Alexandra been asked to stay?
14-15	Dill arrives back in Maycomb. Atticus protects Tom Robinson from a lynch mob but it's Scout's innocent actions that disperses them.	Pg161 – Ku Klux Klan	Why was Atticus reading a newspaper outside the jail? What had the mob arrived at there for? How does Scout's chattiness end up clearing the mob?
16-17	Tom Robinson's trial begins, with most of Maycomb watching. Bob Ewell testifies about the rape of his daughter Mayella.	Pg172 – Braxton Pg196 – Jem "We've got him"	What do you think might happen in the trial? Is it likely that Scout is right about Atticus trying to show that Mr Ewell had beaten Mayella himself? At this point, who do you want to win the trial and why?
18-19	Atticus shows Tom to be disabled and so unlikely to have raped Mayella. Tom tells his side of the story, which the reader is lead to believe is the truth.	Pg211 – loneliness Pg220 – Dill's reaction	How did you feel when Atticus revealed Tom Robinson to be disabled? Why did Mayella save up to send the children for ice cream? Does anyone feel sorry for Mayella Ewell and if so why?
20-22	The verdict comes in that Robinson is guilty. The black community show their gratitude to Atticus. Bob Ewell spits at Atticus and threatens to "get him"	Pg223 – Jem convinced they'll win. Pg233 – the verdict	How did you react to the verdict? Were you shocked? Why is Scout made to stand as her father passes? Why is Bob Ewell not satisfied with the verdict and still threatens Atticus?
23-25	Life continues in Maycomb. We hear that Tom Robinson is dead after attempting to escape jail.	Pg241 – Atticus' attitude Pg244 – women	How did you react to the news of Tom's death? Why was Tom "a dead man the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth"?
26-27	Bob Ewell's behaviour becomes more threatening.	Pg272 – Miss Gates Pg276 – Atticus explains	Why is Scout confused about Miss Gates' attitude? Why does Jem become angry?
28-29	Bob Ewell attacks Scout and Jem, and a mystery figure saves them. Bob Ewell is found dead.	Pg296- Atticus still can't understand Ewell	Why does Atticus still not believe that any man can be as evil as Bob Ewell is? Were you surprised to finally meet Boo Radley?
30-31	The sheriff, Heck Tate insists it was an accident. Atticus thinks Jem killed him, but it becomes clear it was the mystery figure, who is Boo Radley. Tate saves Boo Radley from the unwanted attention.	Pg304 – mockingbird Pg308 – "you never really know a man..."	Why does Heck Tate insist that Bob Ewell fell on his knife? What does Scout mean when she says "it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird"? What have you learnt from reading this book?