

Studying To Kill a Mockingbird

Introduction

This guide is written for teachers and students who are studying Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The guide is written specifically for students in the UK, but I hope it may be helpful to users from other parts of the world. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a set text for GCSE exams in English literature. It may also be studied for teacher-assessed coursework in English in Key Stages 3 and 4 (GCSE reading).

About the novel

To Kill a Mockingbird was first published in 1960. It won the prestigious *Pulitzer Prize* and was adapted for the cinema, winning Oscars (Academy Awards) for the script and for Gregory Peck (best actor in a leading role), who played Atticus.

Harper Lee was born in Monroeville, Alabama, which may be the model for the fictional Maycomb. She has not written any more novels but her neighbour Truman Capote, has become one of the most distinguished of modern prose writers in the USA. Some people believe that he is the original for Dill in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Studying the text

There are many ways in which one can write about a literary text, but among those most commonly encountered at Key Stages 3 and 4 would be to study *character*, *theme* and *technique*. These terms are explained below, and some pointers given as to how to study them in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Chapter-by-chapter questions

The questions below should help students and teachers find what is important in the novel, and could prove useful for revision. You can answer them on your own, but they are suitable for discussion work. Your answers to these questions (if you write them) could form a useful summary of the novel. A class of students could share this task, and paste the results together. If you do this, then try to be consistent in pronoun choices and verb tenses. Some teachers and examiners will use the past tense to refer to events in a work of fiction, but the convention for scholars and critics is to use the present tense.

Chapter 1

- What do you learn in this chapter about Maycomb, Atticus Finch and his family?
- What do you learn about Dill's character?
- What, briefly, has happened to Arthur "Boo" Radley.
- Why does the Radley place fascinate Scout, Jem and Dill?
- What do you notice about the narrative voice and viewpoint in the novel?

Chapter 2

- Why is Scout so looking forward to starting school?

- Why does Jem not want anything to do with Scout at school? Is his behaviour typical of an older child?
- What do you think of Miss Caroline Fisher as a teacher? Can you find qualities which would make her good or not so good at her job?

Chapter 3

- Who is Calpurnia? What is her place in the Finch household?
- What is Walter Cunningham like? What does his behaviour during lunch suggest about his home life?
- What do you think of the way Atticus treats Walter?
- Does Scout learn anything from Walter's visit? What do you think this is?
- Atticus says that you never really understand a person "until you climb into his skin and walk around in it". What does this mean? Is it an easy thing for Scout to learn? (In the last chapter of the novel, Scout repeats this, but she changes "skin" to "shoes" - this is probably not a mistake: Harper Lee suggests that Scout cannot clearly recall exactly what Atticus said and when, but the reader can check this!)
- What do you learn in this chapter about the Ewells?

Chapter 4

- What does Scout think of current fashions in education?
- What superstitions do the children have in connection with the Radley house?
- Why do the children make Boo's story into a game?
- What do they do in this game? Do you think the game is an accurate version of what happens in the Radleys' home?
- What might be the cause of the laughter from inside the house?

Chapter 5

- Describe Miss Maudie Atkinson? How typical is she of Maycomb's women? What do the children think of her?
- What does Miss Maudie tell Scout about Boo? How does this compare with what Scout already believes?
- Scout claims that "Dill could tell the biggest ones" (lies) she ever heard. Why might Dill have told such lies?
- What reasons does Atticus give for the children not to play the Boo Radley game? Do you think he is right? Why?

Chapter 6

- Why does Scout disapprove of Jem's and Dill's plan of looking in at one of the Radleys' windows?
- What does Mr. Nathan Radley know about the intruders in his garden? Why does Miss Stephanie refer to a "negro" over whose head Mr. Nathan has fired?
- Why does Dill's explanation of Jem's state of dress almost land him in trouble?

Chapter 7

- When Jem tells Scout about getting his trousers back, he tells her of something strange. What is this?

- Can you find any evidence that Jem is beginning to understand more than Scout about Boo Radley? What do you think this is?
- Does Jem still fear the gifts in the tree? Give reasons for your answer.
- When the children plan to send a letter to the person who leaves the gifts, they are prevented. How does this happen? Who does it, and why might he do so?

Chapter 8

- Why does Scout quiz Atticus about his visit to the Radley house? How much does Atticus tell her?
- What is the “near libel” which Jem puts in the front yard? How do Miss Maudie and Atticus react to it?
- Why does Atticus save Miss Maudie's oak rocking chair?
- When Atticus asks Scout about the blanket around her shoulders, what does Jem realize?
- Explain what Atticus means by telling Jem not to let his discovery “inspire ” him to “further glory”? Is there any reason why Jem might now do as his father says?

Chapter 9

- How well does Atticus feel he should defend Tom Robinson? Is it usual for (white) lawyers to do their best for black clients in Alabama at this time?
- Scout and Jem have “mixed feelings” about Christmas? What are these feelings and why?
- Uncle Jack Finch tells Scout that she is growing out of her pants. What does this mean and why might he say it?
- When Francis talks to Scout he reveals an unpleasant feature of Aunt Alexandra. What is this?
- Does Scout learn anything from overhearing Atticus's conversation with Uncle Jack? What might this be?
- Read the final sentence of this chapter. Explain in your own words what it means and why it might be important in the story.

Chapter 10

- Scout says that “Atticus was feeble”. Do you think that this is her view as she tells the story or her view when she was younger? Does she still think this after the events recorded in this chapter?
- In this chapter Atticus tells his children that “it's a sin to kill a mockingbird”. What reason does he give for saying this?
- Why does Heck Tate not want to shoot Tim Johnson?
- Near the end of this chapter Atticus cuts off Heck Tate as he is speaking to Jem. What might Heck have been about to say, and why would Atticus want to stop him from saying it?
- Jem and Scout have different views about telling people at school how well Atticus can shoot. Explain this difference. Which view is closer to your own?

Chapter 11

- How does Atticus advise Jem to react to Mrs. Dubose's taunts?
- What does Mrs. Dubose say about the children's mother? How does Jem feel about this?
- What request does Mrs. Dubose make of Jem? Is this a fair punishment for his “crime”?

- Explain in your own words what Atticus thinks of insults like “nigger-lover”. How far do you agree with him?
- Why, in Atticus's view, was Mrs. Dubose “a great lady”?
- Atticus says that Mrs. Dubose is a model of real courage rather than “a man with a gun in his hand”. What does he mean? Do you think he is right?
- Chapters ten and eleven are the last two chapters in the first part of the book. Explain why Harper Lee chooses to end the first part here.

Chapter 12

- Comment on Jem's and Scout's visit to First Purchase church.
- What new things does Scout learn here about how the black people live?
- What does Scout learn from Calpurnia's account of Zeebo's education?
- Explain why Calpurnia speaks differently in the Finch household, and among her neighbours at church.

Chapter 13

- Why does Aunt Alexandra come to stay with Atticus and his family? What is she like?
- Read the Alexandra says when she comes to the Finch house. Are these typical of her or not?
- Alexandra thinks Scout is “dull” (not clever). Why does she think this, and is she right? Are all adults good at knowing how clever young people are?
- How does Aunt Alexandra involve herself in Maycomb's social life?
- Comment on Aunt Alexandra's ideas about breeding and family. Why does Atticus tell them to forget it? Who is right, do you think?

Chapter 14

- Comment on Atticus's [explanation of rape](#). How suitable is this as an answer to Scout.
- Why does Alexandra think Atticus should dismiss Calpurnia? How does Atticus respond to the suggestion?
- Why is Scout pleased when Jem fights her back? Why is she less pleased when he tells Atticus about Dill?
- What do we learn from Dill's account of his running away?

Chapter 15

- What is the “nightmare” that now descends upon the children?
- What was (and is) the Ku Klux Klan? What do you think of [Atticus's comment](#) about it?
- How does Jem react when Atticus tells him to go home, and why?
- What persuades the lynching-party to give up their attempt on Tom's life?
- Comment on the way Scout affects events without realizing it at the time.

Chapter 16

- What “subtle change” does Scout notice in her father?
- What sort of person is Dolphus Raymond?
- How does Reverend Sykes help the children see and hear the trial? Is he right to do?
- Comment on Judge Taylor's attitude to his job. Does he take the trial seriously or not?

Chapter 17

- What are the main points in Heck Tate's evidence? What does Atticus show in his **cross-examination** of Sheriff Tate?
- What do we learn indirectly of the home life of the Ewell family in this chapter?
- What do you learn from Bob Ewell's evidence?
- Why does Atticus ask Bob Ewell to write out his name? What does the jury see when he does this?

Chapter 18

- Is Mayella like her father or different from him? In what ways?
- What might be the reason for Mayella's crying in the court?
- How does Mayella react to Atticus's politeness? Is she used to people being polite?
- How well does Mr. Gilmer prove Tom's guilt in the eyes of the reader (you) and in the eyes of the jury? Can you suggest why these might be different?

Chapter 19

- What made Tom visit the Ewell's house in the first place?
- Why does Scout think that Mayella Ewell was "the loneliest person in the world"?
- In your own words explain Mayella's relationship with her father.
- How does Dill react to this part of the trial? Why is this, in your opinion?

Chapter 20

- Scout says that "Mr. Dolphus Raymond was an evil man". Is she right?
- In most states of the USA people who drink alcohol in public places are required to hide their bottle in a paper bag. Why does Dolphus Raymond hide **Coca-Cola** in a bag?
- What, according to Atticus, is the thing that Mayella has done wrong?
- Explain, in your own words, Atticus's views on people's being equal.

Chapter 21

- What does Jem expect the verdict to be? Does Atticus think the same?
- What is unusual about how long it takes the jury to reach a verdict? Is the verdict predictable or not?
- As Scout waits for the verdict, she thinks of earlier events. What are these and how do they remind us of the novel's central themes?

Chapter 22

- Although Atticus did not want his children in court, he defends Jem's right to know what has happened. Explain, in your own words, Atticus's reasons for this. (Look at the speech beginning, "This is their home, sister".)
- Miss Maudie tells Jem that "things are never as bad as they seem". What reasons does she give for this view?
- Why does Dill say that he will be a clown when he grows up? Do you think he would keep this ambition for long?
- This story is set in the 1930s but was published in 1960. Have attitudes to racism remained the same (in the USA and the UK) or have there been any changes (for the better or worse) since then, in your view?
- Why does Bob Ewell feel so angry with Atticus? Do you think his threat is a real one, and how might he try to "get" Atticus?

Chapter 23

- What do you think of Atticus's reaction to Bob Ewell's challenge? Should he have ignored Bob, retaliated or done something else?
- What is "circumstantial evidence"? What has it got to do with Tom's conviction?
- What does Atticus tell Scout about why the jury took so long to convict Tom?
- Why does Aunt Alexandra accept that the Cunninghams may be good but are not "our kind of folks"? Do you think that people should mix only with others of the same social class? Are class-divisions good or bad for societies?
- At the end of this chapter, Jem forms a new theory about why Boo Radley has never left his house in years. What is this? How likely is it to be true, in your opinion?

Chapter 24

- Do you think the missionary ladies are sincere in worrying about the "Mrunas" (a tribe in Africa)? Give reasons for your answer.
- Compare the reactions of Miss Maudie and the other ladies when Scout says she is wearing her "britches" under her dress.
- What is your opinion of the Maycomb ladies, as depicted in this chapter?
- Explain briefly how Tom was killed. What is Atticus's explanation for Tom's attempted escape. Do you think agree with Atticus?
- How, in this chapter, do we see Aunt Alexandra in a new light? How does Miss Maudie support her?

Chapter 25

- How does Maycomb react to the news of Tom's death?
- Comment on the idea that Tom's death was "typical"?
- Explain the contrast Scout draws between the court where Tom was tried and "the secret courts of men's hearts". In what way are hearts like courts?
- Why did Jem not want Scout to tell Atticus about Bob Ewell's [comment](#)? Was this a wise thing to ask her to do?

Chapter 26

- In her lesson on Hitler, Miss Gates says that "we (American people) don't believe in persecuting anyone". What seems odd to the reader about this claim?
- Why is Scout puzzled by Miss Gates' disapproval of Hitler?
- Why does Scout's question upset Jem? Is there a simple answer, or any answer, to the question ("How can you hate Hitler an' then turn around an be ugly about folks right at home?")

Chapter 27

- What three things does Bob Ewell do that alarm Aunt Alexandra?
- Why, according to Atticus, does Bob Ewell bear a grudge? Which people does Ewell see as his enemies, and why?

- What was the purpose of the Halloween pageant? What practical joke had persuaded the grown ups to have an organized event?

Chapter 28

- Comment on the way this chapter reminds the reader of earlier events in the novel.
- Why does Jem say that Boo Radley must not be at home? What is ironic about this? (Is it true? Does he really mean it? Why might it be important for him and Scout that Boo should not be at home?)
- Scout decides to keep her costume on while walking home. How does this affect her understanding of what happens on the way?
- Why had Atticus not brought a chair for the man in the corner? Who might this stranger be?

Chapter 29

- What causes the “shiny clean line” on the otherwise “dull wire” of Scout's costume?
- What explanation does Atticus give for Bob Ewell's attack?
- What does Heck Tate give as the reason for the attack?
- Do you think the sheriff's explanation or Atticus's is the more likely to be true?

Chapter 30

- Who does Atticus think caused Bob Ewell's death?
- Why does Heck Tate insist that Bob Ewell's death was self-inflicted? In what way is this partly true?
- Is Heck Tate right to spare Boo then publicity of an inquest? Give reasons for your answer.
- How does the writer handle the appearance, at the end of the story, of Boo Radley?

Chapter 31

- How do the events of the final chapters explain the first sentence in the whole novel?
- Comment on the way the writer summarizes earlier events to show their significance.
- How does Scout make sense of an earlier remark of Atticus's as she stands on the Radley porch?
- How much of a surprise is it to find what Boo Radley is really like? Has the story before this point prepared the reader for this discovery?
- At the end of the novel, Atticus reads to Scout. Comment on his choice of story. Does it have any connection with themes earlier in the novel and in its ending?

Activities for responding to the text

The activities listed below are intended to help you develop a good understanding of the novel. They are related to one or more chapters, as shown. Click on the link for activities on the chapters you have chosen:

Chapters 1 and 2

In small groups or pairs, talk about your first day at primary or infant school. You could record this talk or use it as a starting point for a written account.

Chapters 3 and 4

Make a list of all the superstitions you remember from when you were young. Ask your friends and relatives to tell you the superstitions they used to believe. You could also explore superstitions in other books you have read (such as *Tom Sawyer*). You could talk or write about these.

Chapter 5

Speak or write about a dare that went wrong. You should base this on a true account, though you may wish to change some details to make it more interesting.

Chapter 6

Write out, as a script for a play, the conversation in which Mr. Nathan Radley tells his neighbours about his shooting at the intruder in his garden. Decide who says what, and try to give them speeches which are in character. Miss Stephanie Crawford, Miss Maudie Atkinson and Atticus should speak some lines. You may wish to include lines for Miss Rachel and Mr. Avery, also.

Chapters 7 and 8

Make a story (written or scripted for speaking) out of your recollection of any minor disaster (like a fire, or a flood, or some other domestic accident). Try to tell the story from a child's viewpoint. You may wish to alter things or exaggerate for dramatic or comic effects.

Chapter 9

Defending Tom Robinson. Atticus says, "We were licked a hundred years before we started" Imagine that you are a young lawyer helping Atticus prepare his case. Make notes (a series of bullet points) of things that will help you defend Tom, and of things that the prosecution will use to try and convict him.

Chapters 10 and 11

Models of bravery. Atticus tries to explain what he thinks real bravery is. Think of real world examples - perhaps famous people or maybe someone less well-known - and explain why you think they are brave. This is best done as a spoken presentation to a group. You can follow it up with discussion.

Chapter 12

Mixing with strangers. Speak or write about your experiences of meeting people whose way of life was different from your own - perhaps people from another country, or ethnic group, or people whose first language is not the same as yours.

Chapters 13 to 16

Here we see how Atticus tries to protect his children from the ugly realities of adult life. Atticus did not want his children to be in court, but they manage to see most of the trial. Do you think that it was good or bad for them to be there? Discuss whether you think it right for young people to be able to witness criminal trials. (You can choose the age range for the discussion.) You could do this as a formal debate - whether young people at a given age should be allowed to attend

criminal trials. You will need some speakers to propose and oppose the motion, and someone to chair the debate.

Chapters 16 to 21

Using the account of the trial in these chapters, make one or more new texts by adapting the original. Here are some suggestions:

- Write an account of the events of a chosen day, or a summary of the trial after the verdict for a local or regional newspaper, such as the **Maycomb Tribune**, the **Montgomery Advertiser** or the **Mobile Register**. (All these newspapers are named in the text. While Maycomb is a small [fictitious] town, Montgomery is the state capital of Alabama and Mobile is another large city in the same state.)
- Script and present a short item on any part of the trial for a news broadcast on an Alabama radio station.
- Write a scene for a play (stage or TV) or cinema screenplay of some part of the trial. You may wish to edit the original text to make your version shorter.
- Prepare a list of bullet points for Atticus to use in presenting his appeal against Tom's conviction.
- Write one or more monologues, showing how various people experienced or witnessed the trial. These could be participants or observers. You may wish to choose some of the following: Judge Taylor, Mayella Ewell, Calpurnia, Helen Robinson, Mr. Gilmer, Heck Tate, Dill. Decide how open and truthful you want to be.

Chapters 22 to 25

Mr. Underwood's editorial. We are given quite a lot of information about Mr. Underwood's editorial in the **Maycomb Tribune**, following Tom's death. For example, that he "likened it to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children". An **editorial** is a section in a newspaper which does not give news, but **comments** on it and **interprets** it. Using all the clues you can find, try to write the editorial as you think Mr. Underwood might have done.

Chapters 26 to 31

The secret diary of Arthur Radley. At the end of the novel we realize that Arthur (Boo) Radley has never stopped watching the children, and that he has foreseen the danger from Bob Ewell, which Atticus has not taken seriously. Imagine that Arthur keeps a diary, in which he writes about what he has seen and how he makes sure that the children are safe. We do not know what style Arthur would use, so you must choose one you think appropriate to what we know of him. Write a series of entries for such a diary, to cover the main events of the final chapters of the novel.

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An outline of the novel

Use the table below to learn the structure of the novel - this shows you the main events in each chapter. Examiners will expect you to be able to write clearly where and when things happen - this table should help.

Year	Time of year	Chapter	What happens
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Part 1

1933	Early summer	1	Introduction. Arrival of Dill. Children try to get Boo to come out.
	September	2	Scout starts school: Miss Caroline Fisher. Description of Cunningham family.
	September	3	Burriss Ewell upsets Miss Caroline. Ewells described.
1934		4	Boo leaves gifts in tree. Dill comes back to Maycomb.
	Late spring/ early summer		
	Late spring/ early summer	5	Children attempt to send Boo a letter.
	Late summer	6	Children try to spy on Boo.
	October/November	7	Boo leaves more gifts. Hole is filled with cement. Tom arrested for alleged rape (November 21st).
	Winter	8	Cold winter. Snow in Maycomb. Miss Maudie's house burnt.
	Christmas	9	Atticus agrees to defend Tom Robinson. Scout fights Cousin Francis.
1935	February	10	Atticus shoots Tim Johnson (a rabid dog).
	Spring	11	Jem beheads Mrs. Dubose's camellias and has to read to her. She overcomes her morphine addiction and dies.

Part 2

	Summer	12	Children go to First Purchase church with Calpurnia. Aunt Alexandra arrives.
	Summer	13	Aunt Alexandra entertains Maycomb's ladies.
	Summer	14	Dill returns to Maycomb.
	Summer	15	The Old Sarum mob tries to lynch Tom. Scout intervenes and unwittingly saves him.
	Summer	16	The trial begins. The children sit in the black people's balcony.
	Summer	17	Heck Tate (sheriff) testifies, followed by Bob Ewell.
	Summer	18	Mayella Ewell testifies.
	Summer	19	Tom Robinson testifies. Dill cries at the cross-examination of Tom.
	Summer	20	Scout and Dill meet Dolphus Raymond outside. Atticus sums up for the defence. The children are found to be in the court.
	Summer	21	The jury returns a verdict of guilty on Tom..
	Summer	22	Jem cries at the verdict. Atticus receives presents from black community. Bob Ewell spits at Atticus and vows revenge.
	Summer	23	Atticus is not frightened by Bob's threat.
	August	24	The missionary circle meets for tea. News comes of Tom's death.
	September	25	School starts again. Miss Gates teaches about Hitler and the Jews.

September	26	B.B. Underwood writes an editorial on Tom's death.	
October	27	Bob Ewell attempts revenge on Judge Taylor and Helen Robinson. Atticus is not worried. A pageant is planned.	
October	28	Jem and Scout go to the pageant. Bob attacks them, but they are rescued. Bob is found dead at the scene.	
October	29	Scout describes the attack - Boo is revealed as the children's saviour.	
October	30	Atticus thinks Jem has killed Bob Ewell. Heck Tate proves that it was Boo.	
October	31	Boo and Scout go to see Jem. Scout takes Boo home.	
Year	Time of year	Chapter	What happens

Character

We can study what characters (note the spelling!) are like in themselves, but we see them best in their **relations** with other people and the wider society of which they are (or fail to be) a part.

Any statement about what characters are like should be backed up by **evidence**: quote what they **say**, or explain what they **do** (or both). Do not, however, merely retell narrative (the story) without comment. Statements of opinion should be followed by reference to events or use of quotation; quotation should be followed by explanation (if needed) and comment. This is rather mechanical, but if you do it, you will not go far wrong.

In this guide, general comments will often be made without supporting evidence (to save time). As you study or revise you should find and list this evidence. If you cannot find any, ask a teacher who knows this text. You should certainly, in any case, be making your own revision guides, and marking your copy of the book. If you are preparing this text for an examination, you may be allowed to underline key passages or to use bookmarks.

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Atticus Finch

What people say about him

One way to begin looking at Atticus's character is to read what other people say about him or to him. Look at the things that Bob Ewell says, or Stephanie Crawford or consider the criticisms some people make of him. These may be mild and partly well-meant (like the things his sister, Alexandra, says) or harsher, like the things Mrs. Dubose says.

One character in the novel earns Scout's trust (and the reader's) by her clear sightedness and honesty. This is Miss Maudie Atkinson. Study these things she says about Atticus, and try to decide how far you agree with them, and, if you do, what they tell you:

"He's the same in the courtroom as he is on the public streets" **Chapter 19**

"There are some men in the world who were born to do our unpleasant jobs for us. Your father's one of them" **Chapter 22**

"Did it ever strike you that Judge Taylor naming Atticus to defend that boy was no accident?" **Chapter 22**

You may have to write about Atticus in assessed work. Below are some headings with suggested comments - you can use these to organize your writing. The order is not necessarily the best one for you, so feel free to rearrange them.

Atticus as a father

- Atticus treats his children as intelligent young adults - he speaks in a clear matter-of-fact way, and answers questions directly (including technical points of law and definitions of rape).
- He is very fair - he tries to hear both sides of an argument.
- He does not beat his children, but is firm in some matters - as when he insists that Jem read to Mrs. Dubose, or makes them obey Calpurnia and Aunt Alexandra.
- He does not stereotype people - he is quite happy for Scout to be a tomboy.
- He sees that the children need a mother figure, and recognizes that Calpurnia is far better able than he is to be a homemaker.

Atticus's diplomacy

- Atticus is frequently criticized by others people. He does not take advantage of his social standing to retaliate or rebuke them.
- Atticus remains calm when provoked directly - look, for example, at how he handles Bob Ewell's challenge: "Too proud to fight?" "No," says Atticus, "too old" (Think about the ambiguity - on the surface it seems to mean that Atticus is no longer strong and fit enough to fight; but also it might mean that fighting is not something that adults should do - which could imply that Bob has not grown up).
- Atticus understands the importance of allowing people to pay for his services, even though he has no need of their gifts - as when he accepts payment in kind from the Cunninghams, or gifts from the black people of Maycomb after Tom's trial.

Atticus's sympathy

- Atticus shows an interest in Walter Cunningham's home life, and asks him about farming - he allows Walter, who may not be very good at school work, to speak as an expert.
- Atticus always shows admiration for Mrs. Dubose - even though she abuses him and is a racist.
- At the end of the novel Atticus understands Boo's shyness - he does not try to make him sit down in the light, and addresses him courteously as "Arthur".
- When he learns of Bob Ewell's attack, he thinks it must be caused by a loss of sanity (like "diminished responsibility" in English law). He is very reluctant to see what Heck Tate (and the reader) knows is the real cause of the attack, that Bob Ewell is an evil man.

Atticus's integrity

- Atticus tries always to do what he sees is right: he does not WANT to take Tom's case, but sees this as his duty. Where some lawyers would go through the motions, seeing the case as a lost cause, Atticus believes that he should still try to save Tom.
- Atticus will not try to spare his own family from the consequences of their actions. When he thinks (wrongly) that Jem has killed Bob Ewell, he insists that the "best way to clear the air is to have it all out in the open".

Atticus's lack of prejudice

- Today we might not see this as remarkable, but Atticus lives in a racist and sexist society, yet shares neither prejudice.
- He respects people of colour - he gives Calpurnia complete discretion in running his house.
- Atticus respects women - he extends this respect to Mayella Ewell, whom Scout depicts as pathetic and friendless.

Atticus's ideal of courage

- Atticus shows some physical courage in facing a rabid dog, but he does not value this highly.
- Atticus shows courage in keeping guard outside the jail (Chapter 15), and stays calm outwardly when the lynch mob arrives.
- In defending Tom and being ready to accept the label of "nigger-lover" Atticus shows moral courage.
- Atticus's ideal is Mrs. Dubose: "...when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what". Is this a fair description of Atticus's own courage in trying to save Tom?

Atticus's two errors

Atticus makes two errors of judgement:

- trusting the Old Sarum mob not to try to lynch Tom (Chapter 15)
- trusting Bob Ewell not to carry out his threats of revenge (Chapter 23)

What do these errors tell us about Atticus?

Atticus in his own words

What do you learn from the things Atticus says in the novel? You can make use of almost anything he says. Below are a few selected quotations from Atticus. In each case, you can see more of the quotation by clicking on the short extract. Use this as a way to learn things, if you need to:

Boo Radley

Overview

Arthur Radley does not appear to Scout directly until the final chapters of the novel, but his presence is felt throughout the narrative. He is a silent witness of the children's actions. He is always vigilant and he sees the danger Atticus has overlooked when he saves the lives of Scout and Jem.

In the first chapter of the novel Scout considers the different starting points in a chain of events which form the plot of the novel. Jem maintains that "it began...when Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out". **What** began then we do not fully learn until the end of the novel, though we will soon learn more about Boo - much of it misleading or inaccurate. At the end of the novel Scout summarizes the events Arthur has witnessed (and in which he has sometimes taken part), leading up to his emerging from confinement when the children's lives are in danger.

At the start of the novel the brief reference to Boo arouses the reader's interest. Scout learns more from a variety of sources. Most of this information comes from Jem, who has heard it, in turn, from Miss Stephanie Crawford - and she is known to exaggerate or invent things.

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Boo's background

It seems that Arthur was not very successful at school (though he may have won a spelling medal). In his teens he joined with some of the Cunninghams in joyriding around Maycomb's square and locking an elderly official (Mr. Conner) in the court outhouse. While the other boys went to a state industrial school, Arthur was shut up at home by his parents. Fifteen years later Arthur, now aged thirty-three, attacked his father with a pair of scissors. His father ("the meanest man ever God blew breath into", according to Calpurnia) opposed sending him to a psychiatric hospital, and eventually took him home. When his father died, Arthur became the ward of his brother, Nathan Radley. Though less severe than his father, he still kept Arthur more or less imprisoned in the family home. By the time of the events in the novel it is no longer clear how far Arthur is forced to stay in, and how far this is his own wish.

What some people say about Arthur

To form your own idea of what Arthur is like you might consider what other people say about him, and decide how reliable their opinions are:

- **Jem** says he is "six and a half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch...There was a long...scar that ran across his face...his eyes popped and he drooled most of the time"
- **Miss Stephanie** claims that she once woke up to see Boo at her window
- **Miss Maudie** (Chapter 5) says that the legends about Boo are "three fourths coloured folk and one fourth Stephanie Crawford" and that she knew Arthur as a boy: "He always spoke nicely to me, no matter what folks said he did". She also explains that Arthur's family hold very severe religious beliefs, which have affected the way they treat Boo.

Boo in the first part of the novel

Scout tells the reader a lot about Boo in the early part of the novel, but he disappears from the narrative for most of the middle and later chapters, which are concerned with the story of the trial and its sequel.

Early in the story, the children try to persuade Boo to come out, but it seems that they miss the occasions when he does do this. Consider these clues:

- The children receive a series of mysterious presents which are left in the knot-hole of an oak tree by the Radley's house: two pieces of chewing gum, two Indian-head coins, two

- figures carved out of soap, a packet of gum, a spelling medal and a broken pocket watch. Are these random gifts, or do they tell you anything about the giver?
- When Jem snags his trousers on the fence wire, he leaves them. When he goes to retrieve them, he sees that they have been mended, inexpertly. What do you suppose is the explanation?
 - When Miss Maudie's house is burned, someone places a blanket over Scout's shoulders. Atticus sees this but does not tell Scout when it happens. Comment on what you think is the explanation.

Although Jem does not see Arthur on any of these occasions, he begins to understand what is happening. When Nathan Radley stops up the knot-hole, it is a fairly clear sign that he knows what Arthur has been doing and wants to stop it. And when Scout thinks she hears laughter from inside the Radley house, she finds this sinister - but the reader comes to see that this is the innocent laughter of Boo Radley, who is amused by the children at play.

Boo in the final chapters of the novel

Arthur's saving of the children's lives is presented in an unusual way. Scout sees nothing and Jem remembers nothing. She also does not recognize the stranger in her house until Atticus makes this clear to her. Arthur has taken a kitchen knife - the only weapon he can find, evidently - and stabbed Bob Ewell, as he attacks the children. Heck Tate works out what has happened, and conceals Bob Ewell's flick-knife, in order to maintain that the kitchen knife was Ewell's weapon, on which he fell. This means that Arthur will not have to face an inquest, or any further public exposure.

Although Arthur is shy, he forgets about himself while he attends to Jem's injury and takes him home. He does nothing to conceal what he has done to Bob Ewell. We see this shyness as he stands out of the light, as he hesitates before stroking Jem's hair, and as he speaks, in a whisper, only to ask Scout to see him home.

Boo as an outsider

Harper Lee explores a familiar theme in her depiction of Boo Radley - that of the misfit or outsider who is misunderstood. We see this in *Beauty and the Beast* (with a happy ending) or the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (with a tragic ending). It is common in modern feature films, such as *The Elephant Man*, *Edward Scissorhands* or *Babe*. This portrayal is notable for the way in which the author presents Arthur Radley sensitively and with dignity.

And finally, it is only when she *literally* stands in a new position, on the Radley porch, that Scout understands Atticus's earlier remark (Chapter 3) about the need to put yourself in another person's place ("...climb into his skin and walk around in it") before you can really know him or her.

The mockingbird theme

The title of the novel alerts us to the importance of this theme. It comes from an old proverb that "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird". The children first hear this from Atticus, when he gives them air

rifles as Christmas presents (Chapter 10). He tells them they should shoot only at tin-cans but, seeing that they may well shoot birds, allows them to shoot the very common bluejay (regarded in the USA rather as pigeons are in the UK) but not mockingbirds. (Modern readers, especially in the UK, where many bird species are protected by law should note that hunting birds is considered acceptable sport in most parts of Europe and the USA even today. In the 1930s most children would have seen it as normal to hunt animals and birds.)

Scout is puzzled by this remark and asks Miss Maudie Atkinson about it. Miss Maudie says that:

“Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, they don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.”

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The mockingbird of the proverb is a harmless creature which does its best to please its hearers by singing, but which is defenceless against hunters. (Perhaps hunters with a sense of sport would avoid the bird, as being too easy a target.) The wrongness of killing the bird is evident, but it becomes a metaphor for the wrongness of harming innocent and vulnerable **people**.

In the novel, while we associate the mockingbird generally with weak and defenceless people, there are two characters who are more explicitly likened to the bird. These are **Tom Robinson** and **Arthur Radley**. Why are these two like the mockingbird?

- Tom is physically disabled, but his real weakness is his social position - he is a black man, to whom a white woman has made sexual advances, so he must be destroyed.
- Arthur is psychologically disadvantaged - he is very timid and almost incapable of being integrated into Maycomb's society.

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The author makes the comparison clearer in Chapter 25. Here, B.B. Underwood spells it out for his readers, writing in his editorial that it:

“...was a sin to kill cripples, be they standing, sitting or escaping. He likened Tom's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children...”

Scout notes that Mr. Underwood was writing so children could understand. She is a child and she understands. Many of the novel's readers will also be children. (You should be aware, though, that it was written for adult readers. Harper Lee could not have foreseen that the novel would become a set text for pupils in so many schools.)

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As the children set off for the pageant (Chapter 28), Jem hears a mockingbird and jokes that Boo must not be at home. There is an obvious irony in that he is very **wrong** in associating Boo with “haints” and “hot steams” but is **right** in his joking suggestion that Boo is not at home. Not only is Boo out of doors (or just about to leave) but his doing so is what delivers the children from real and very human danger, not the gothic fantasies of Halloween. But there are more odd pointers:

- when the bird starts to sing, the children are in front of the Radley house
- the bird is “solitary” and
- unaware “whose tree he sat in”

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When Heck Tate (Chapter 30) tells Atticus that he will not let Boo be exposed to publicity, he insists that "...draggin' him and his shy ways into the limelight..." is "...a sin. It's a sin and I'm not about to have it on my head..."

Scout shows that she understands Mr. Tate completely, when she says:

"Well, it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?"

Atticus embraces Scout, to acknowledge that she is right.

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Harper Lee's technique

Viewpoint

The story is told from Scout's viewpoint. It is written in the first person. This means that Scout uses the pronouns **I**, **me** and the possessives **my**, **mine** to refer to herself. She does not confine the narrative to things that she has directly experienced - for example she recounts stories from the history of Simon Finch, and repeats what other people tell her.

As the narrator she makes comments about how reliable other people's accounts are - so we allow for any distortion or exaggeration, as appropriate (Miss Stephanie, for example, is likely to exaggerate.) The events of the novel take place over several years, and Scout indicates the changes that she and Jem experience in this time. One example is that she begins as a tomboy but later in the novel accepts the need to behave in a more conventionally feminine role. She also learns, mostly from Miss Maudie, that this does not mean she has to give up her independence - that she can compromise in unimportant matters without betraying what she really values.

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We do, however, see other viewpoints as people speak, so it is possible for the reader to compare them. The novel gives a huge range of such opinions, too many to list here. Sometimes these are predictable and conventional (the spoiled and over delicate ladies of the Missionary circle) while at other times they are quite unconventional (think of Mr. Dolphus Raymond). Some questions to consider are these:

- As you read the story do you see things from one viewpoint or does the viewpoint change?
- Does the author manage to show convincingly the viewpoint of characters younger than herself (such as Scout, Jem, Dill and Walter)?
- How far does the author signal to you, as the reader, which views are "right", and how far does she allow you freedom to make your own judgments?

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Scout is four years younger than Jem, (who is nearly thirteen when he is attacked by Bob Ewell) so she is at most eight at the time when she attends Tom Robinson's trial. In her account of Mayella's testimony Scout refers to "a Mr. Jingle in a book" she "had been reading". This is Dickens' **The Pickwick Papers** - it may be hard for modern readers in the UK to believe that an

eight-year old would **not only** read a novel by Dickens, **but also** make such a comparison, yet **not** recall the title of the novel.

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Dialogue

The novel is highly dramatic. This does not mean that it is full of sensational or extreme situations, but that it has some of the qualities of a play - which also explains why it was successfully adapted for cinema.

Much of the text is in the form of dialogue - conversation recorded as direct speech. Even when Scout uses indirect (reported) speech, she makes sure she includes distinctive vocabulary that tells you about the character and attitude of the speaker.

One simple example to illustrate this, would be to look at modes of address. Jem typically addresses Atticus as "sir" (in Chapter 4, Atticus insists on this). Atticus addresses Mayella as "Miss Mayella". Bob Ewell addresses Mr. Gilmer, in court, as "cap'n", which shows how he misjudges the seriousness of the situation.

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There are long passages of dialogue in a variety of contexts. We have the formal proceedings in the trial of Tom Robinson, conspiratorial conversations among Scout, Jem and Dill, casual conversation with neighbours and the various occasions where Scout sits alone with Miss Maudie or Atticus. There are the set pieces at Scout's school - lessons with Miss Caroline and Miss Gates, and situations where Scout is a silent observer - for example, of the missionary ladies.

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Standard and non-standard language

To Kill a Mockingbird is a conventional literary novel. This means, among other things that it:

- is written in a form of standard English which has a wide-ranging lexicon (vocabulary),
- includes references to art and culture which the author expects the reader to know (or find out)
- relates principal events mostly in the past tense

The narrative contains some distinctively American lexis (vocabulary) so, to take one chapter (11) as a random example, we find **sassiest**, **mutts** and **playing hooky**. But the USA is a vast country, and Harper Lee makes use of many regional expressions, local to the southern (former Confederate) states or to Alabama more specifically, like **cootie**, **haint**, **scuppernongs** and **whistled bob-white**. In some cases you will find a form which is standard in both UK and US English, but with a different meaning. So when Jem leaves his **"pants"** (trousers) on the Radley fence, this is not as alarming as it might seem to English readers. On the other hand, when he stands "in his **shorts** (underpants or boxer shorts) before God and everybody", this is perhaps more alarming.

In the account of the visit to First Purchase, Scout records the distinctive speech of the coloured people - noting with particular interest the way Calpurnia switches into this non-standard variety.

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Structure

A long episodic novel can easily lose its way, but Harper Lee has a very organic sense of a single story with a unifying or central theme (the mockingbird theme) which is illustrated by the examples of Arthur Radley and Tom Robinson.

How many readers recall, by the end of the novel, the first sentence ("When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow")? This statement is soon forgotten, amidst a mass of narrative detail, but this incident, which Scout does not see and Jem cannot recall, is the defining moment or climax of the entire story.

The first part of the novel is an account of Scout's early years, taking her first days at school as a starting point. Most of this section is about the search for Arthur "Boo" Radley. The second part shows Scout becoming more able to understand the adult world, which is mirrored by the more serious events that occur at this point in her life.

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In the conclusion, however, Harper Lee brings the two narratives together - the stories are not separate. While Scout and Jem have been thinking more about the trial and less about Boo Radley, Arthur has not forgotten them. His appearance in the final chapters is almost miraculous - it is plausible (believable in its context) because it is so understated. There is no direct account of Arthur Radley's attack on Bob Ewell. It is inferred from the sounds Scout hears and what Heck Tate discovers at the scene.

For a more detailed account of what happens in each chapter, use the Outline of the Novel above.

- Make your own diagram to show and learn the structure of the story.

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Stereotyping

To Kill a Mockingbird sets out to challenge some stereotypes but it may also reinforce some alternative stereotypes. One common criticism of the novel is that the black characters are idealized. Lula is an exception, objecting to the appearance at First Purchase of the Finch children.

Harper Lee attacks the stereotype of the promiscuous and sexually voracious black man, but she endorses the stereotype of "White trash", in the Ewell family. In the USA there are many people who disapprove of dependency on the state, and on welfare payments - both the poor Cunninghams and the wealthy (but emotionally poor) Radleys are proud of their self-reliance.

The stereotype of aristocratic white women is held up to ridicule - their virtue is seen as excessive delicacy, and they appear as selfish and hypocritical. Scout wants to be like a boy, because she likes to be active. In general, the novel depicts men more favourably - or perhaps it shows that men may commit worse actions but women are more spiteful in what they say. Perhaps only a woman can be so tough in depicting her own sex (in this respect, Harper Lee writes rather in the manner of Jane Austen).

In a novel with a huge cast of characters, there is no reason to avoid using stereotypes in every case. There are plenty of characters, from Atticus to Dolphus Raymond, from Miss Maudie to Boo Radley, who do not conform to any stereotype.

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Attitudes in the text

In this story, we see a huge range of attitudes displayed by different characters. Can you find examples of some things that each of these thinks or believes. Select any of the following, and try to summarize his or her beliefs and outlook:

- Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose
- Aunt Alexandra
- Mr. Dolphus Raymond
- Jem
- Miss Maudie Atkinson
- Dill
- Mrs. Grace Merriweather

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Attitudes behind the text

If you study the text closely, you may have a sense of assumptions the author makes about the world, or of an outlook on life, which affects the way, she tells the story.

What are these attitudes or assumptions? If you find this question hard to answer, try this test. With which of the following statements do you agree or disagree? Harper Lee

- dislikes coloured people
- thinks you can learn more out of school than at school
- is critical of women
- prefers trousers to dresses
- thinks children should obey their elders
- supports traditional values
- approves of Hitler
- thinks Maycomb is a wonderful place in which to live
- is really the same person as Scout (apart from the name change)

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Arrange these statements in order of probability. The first one should be the one you think most likely to be true. Give reasons for your view. At the end will be the statements you think least likely to be true. And in the middle may be some about which you lack the information to make up your mind.

Attitudes in the reader

As you read this story, how far do you think the author has understood what you like to read? You may be surprised to find that the story was written for adult readers. Can you find anything in the text that suggests this?

Harper Lee writes both for children and grown-up readers. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not “grown-up” in the sense of being full of sex scenes, swearing and violence. But it may be hard for some readers, with sophisticated vocabulary and references. The teachers and examiners who chose the texts for the NEAB/AQA Anthology decided that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is suitable for younger readers. Do you think it **is** a good text for young people? Give reasons.

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The author

As you read this story, how conscious are you of the author? What are her purposes, in your view?

Is this story written to entertain, to earn money, to warn, to frighten, to teach, to amuse, none of these, all of these? What do you think is the author's reason for writing?

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Comparison

This story is full of comparisons and contrasts. Here are some examples:

- Past and present
- Old people and young people
- Men (boys) and women (girls)
- Justice and injustice
- Progress and tradition
- Innocence and experience
- Light and shade
- Danger and security

If you think this list is missing something, then add it. Choose the **five** most important areas of comparison or contrast and explain how they work.

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Implied meaning

This story is full of **implied meanings** - things that are suggested but never spelled out. It is always rather ambiguous, and it is possible to miss much of what is going on. You can find examples in almost any chapter you study. Here are a few suggestions, to get you started.

- Scout says that when she rolled into the Radleys' yard in a tyre, she heard how someone inside the house was laughing. At the time the reader may think this is the wild laughter of a dangerous madman. Only later do we understand that it is the innocent laughter of a child-like adult.
- Scout presents the Missionary Ladies' visit largely without comment, but allowing the reader to form an opinion about what the various ladies say. Scout does not directly criticize them. At one point, Miss Maudie asks a loaded (“rhetorical”) question to show the guests how much they depend on their coloured servants. But the implied meaning of much of this chapter is that these women are self-deluding. They have little real understanding of the way they exploit others, and are not yet ready to change. Scout's innocent questions help point out the implied meanings here.

- In the penultimate (last but one) chapter, Heck Tate says, of Bob Ewell's switch-blade (flick knife): "I said I took it off a drunk man downtown tonight. Ewell probably found that kitchen knife in the dump somewhere." What he really means is that he is going to keep Arthur Radley out of the investigation into Bob Ewell's death - which will now appear as an accident, in which Ewell fell on his own weapon, while attacking the Finch children. Sheriff Tate knows the real course of events, more or less, but sees a way to make Boo's weapon appear to be the one Bob Ewell had, while removing Bob Ewell's knife from the investigation altogether.

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Readers and readings

Reading the text

Say what you think the story means in a literal sense and in terms of theme, character and setting. Look at details of imagery, language and symbolism.

Reading the author

Try to explain what, in your view, the author wants us to think at various points. In doing this you should refer to her narrative methods.

Reading the reading

Be prepared briefly to explain your own understanding of the story, and how this changes while you are reading it for the first time, and also on subsequent readings, where you notice more.

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A note on the N-word

Depicting racism through dialogue | "Black nigger" and "white nigger"

Depicting racism through dialogue

The novel is set in the 1930s but was written in the late 1950s (published in 1960). The dialogue is marked by frequent use of the word "nigger". This is a convenient way to indicate to the reader the racist attitudes of various characters. When she wishes to refer to African-Americans, Harper Lee uses the term "coloured". It is not only racist whites who say this, however - at First Purchase church, Calpurnia addresses Lula as "nigger".

Since the novel was published, attitudes have changed in the USA and the UK about what is acceptable to speak and write. In the trial of O.J. Simpson, the word "nigger" was considered too offensive to repeat in court, and was described as the "N-word".

If you are a student writing about *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you may need at some points to quote others, for example those who call Atticus a "nigger-lover". Use quotation marks to show that it is someone else's words that you are writing.

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“Black nigger” and “white nigger”

Curiously the novel contains both of these phrases. Most speakers (racist or not) would assume that "nigger", as well as expressing racial hatred or prejudice, identified someone as black. Yet Bob Ewell manages to show the extremity of his hate as well (arguably) as his own lack of intelligence when he says, of Tom Robinson, "I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin' on my Mayella" (Chapter 17). This causes uproar in the court for five minutes, after which Judge Taylor instructs Bob Ewell to keep his testimony "within the confines of Christian English usage, if that is possible". The qualification ("if that is possible") is an implied criticism of Bob Ewell's impoverished vocabulary. It is not always true that people who swear or use racist language do so because they are not able to express themselves in other ways, but in Bob Ewell's case it may be true. For the reader, this phrase "black nigger" may be shocking, but necessary to show that in a town of racists, Bob Ewell goes even further than the worst of all the others.

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The "white nigger" is Jem. Mr. Nathan Radley (Chapter 6) is not, like Bob Ewell, giving vent to his hatred, but rather showing his prejudice in stereotyping all intruders as black people. He clearly knows that Jem has been in his garden, and he has fired over his head to scare him off. He relies on Miss Stephanie, the Maycomb gossip, to pass on his message that he "scared him pale" and if anyone "sees a white nigger around, that's the one".

Harper Lee leaves the question open as to which is worse - the cool institutional racism of Maycomb, which Nathan Radley typifies, or the extreme emotional racism of individuals like Bob Ewell. The novel challenges both of these attitudes, but it is really the ordinary people of Maycomb who seal Tom Robinson's fate. Bob Ewell does their dirty work for them, but is mistaken in thinking that he will gain any personal standing from it: "He thought he'd be a hero but all he got for his pain was...okay, we'll convict this Negro but get back to your dump" says Atticus.

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Specimen exam questions

[Foundation tier questions](#) | [Higher tier questions](#)

The questions below are taken from recent GCSE examination papers for English literature.

Foundation tier - example question 1

How does Harper Lee bring out different aspects of Atticus?

Write about:

- how Atticus's dealings with different characters bring out different aspects of his character
- how different events and situations bring out different aspects of Atticus
- what the writer wants you to think about Atticus

Foundation tier - example question 2

Jem changes in the course of the novel. How does Harper Lee show this?

Write about:

- what he is like at the start and at the end of the novel
- events that have an effect on him
- people who have an effect on him
- how the writer uses particular moments to show change

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Higher tier - example question 1

How does Harper Lee use minor characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird* to explore some of the main concerns of the novel?

Choose three of the following: Mrs. Dubose; Mayella Ewell; Heck Tate; Dolphus Raymond; Tim Johnson; Grace Merriweather; Miss Caroline; Lula

Write about:

- why you chose these characters
- the importance of what they say and do
- how the writer uses them to explore her main concerns

Higher tier - example question 2

Jem, Scout and Dill are all young people who learn from people and events around them.

How does Harper Lee show them learning and developing?