TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION


Plot

During the depths of the Great Depression in the early 1930s, in the rigidly- and violently-segregated South, widower Atticus Finch is raising his two young children in the mythical town of Maycomb, Alabama. As one of the few attorneys in his small, rural hometown, Finch is called upon by the county court to defend Tom Robinson, a Black laborer. Robinson is falsely accused of having raped a White man’s daughter, Mayella Ewell. In reality, Mayella Ewell had committed the unpardonable sin of crossing the color line in order to seduce Tom Robinson. The Ewells are quintessential “poor White trash,” living on the outskirts of town and far removed from its civilizing effects. A conventionally racist, all-White jury convicts the innocent Robinson, despite Finch’s heroic and impassioned defense. Bereft of hope, Tom Robinson tries to escape from prison, and is shot dead. Following his exposure and humiliation at the trial, town drunk Bob Ewell, the father of Mayella, attempts to take vengeance against Finch by attacking his two children. In turn, Ewell is fatally stabbed by Boo Radley, the Finch’s mysterious and reclusive neighbor.

Jean Louise, nicknamed Scout, is the younger daughter of Atticus Finch, and the play unfolds through her eyes. At the outset of the play in 1932, she is about to start the first grade; by its end, she is an adult looking backwards to her youth, having matured tremendously and learned perhaps too much about poverty, racism, injustice, class divisions, and intolerance.
**Main Characters**

*Atticus Finch:* Protagonist; approximately 50-year-old widower; father of Jem and Scout Finch; bookish; attorney appointed by Judge Taylor to defend Tom Robinson; in his youth, an expert marksman with a rifle. An iconic voice of reason.

*Jeremy Atticus “Jem” Finch:* elder son of Atticus; four years older than his sister, Scout; quite athletic; shares with his father the characteristics of honor and bravery; best friend of Dill’s.

*Jean Louise “Scout” Finch:* Protagonist; first person narrator, who as an adult is looking back on the events of the story; tomboy and younger sister to Jem; youngest character in the story. When the play begins, she is a precocious six-year-old who has learned to read at home before starting the first grade. Initially, she is terrified of Boo Radley, but overcomes her untoward fear. She personifies the innocence of childhood, especially because of her inability to understand racial prejudice. Scout unknowingly saves the lives of her father and Tom, as a lynching mob headed by Walter Cunningham threatens them.

*Calpurnia, “Cal”:* Black housekeeper/cook in the Finch household, who plays a large role in raising Jem and Scout. She is a somewhat stern but deeply loving maternal figure to both children, who lost their biological mother when they were very young. She helped Scout learn how to write.

*Charles Baker “Dill” Harris:* Seasonal playmate to Jem and Scout; he comes to Maycomb each summer to visit his Aunt Rachel Haverford; with Jem and Scout, he attempts to unravel the mysteries surrounding Boo Radley. His character is based on Truman Capote, who in real life was a childhood friend to Harper Lee.

*Arthur “Boo” Radley:* Subject of town gossip, based on his appearance as a defendant in a courtroom trial when he was a teenager; a lonely, reclusive, and unassuming figure who is simultaneously kind, generous, and chivalrous. He kills Bob Ewell when Ewell is attacking Jem and Scout. He might be seen as the “mockingbird” of the title. Robert Duvall made his film debut playing the role of Boo.

*Miss Maudie Atkinson:* 40-ish, unmarried, kindly neighbor of the Finch family; she explains why it is a sin “to kill a mockingbird”; not prejudiced against Blacks, which is unusual for the time and place of the novel.

*Thomas “Tom” Robinson:* 25-year-old Black man falsely accused of raping Mayella; married to Helen, with three children; a field hand whose kindness and helpfulness towards Mayella create the circumstances that undo him. His right-handedness becomes a critical component of the dedicated courtroom defense that Atticus offers on Tom’s behalf. When the convicted Tom tries to escape from jail, he is shot seventeen times by his guards, and dies.

*Robert E. Lee “Bob” Ewell:* Antagonist; father to Mayella and seven other children; a lazy town drunk who poaches game and lives off government relief. He falsely accuses Tom, a Black man, of raping Mayella, although there is clear evidence that he himself physically (and perhaps even sexually) abuses Mayella. Although he is thoroughly despicable and untrustworthy, as a White man his word carries infinitely more weight than Tom’s. He spits in the face of Atticus after the attorney has proven in court that Ewell has perjured himself. He threatens Tom’s widow, and attempts to kill Jem and Scout, but meets a well-deserved death at the hands of Boo Radley.

*Mayella Violet Ewell:* 20-ish daughter of Bob Ewell; her major role in life is to care for her seven siblings; raised in squalor. Her attempt to seduce Tom is stumbled upon by her father, setting into motion the fateful events of Tom’s trial and death. In the courtroom, she lies under oath about the seduction/rape, because it is untenable for a White woman to have feelings for a Black man.

*Alexandra “Aunt Alexandra” Hancock:* sister to Atticus; clashes with Calpurnia about Scout’s upbringing; wants to turn tomboy Scout into a proper, Southern young lady.

*John Hale “Uncle Jack” Finch:* younger brother to Atticus and Alexandra; 40-ish; a childless uncle who dotes on Jem and Scout.

*Judge John Taylor:* assigns Atticus Finch to defend Tom Robinson on a charge of rape; both he and Atticus already know that this task is hopeless in the setting of virulently racist Maycomb.
Impact of “To Kill a Mockingbird”

Lee’s only published novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1961. *Mockingbird* spent 88 weeks on the bestseller lists, has been translated into more than forty languages, and is ranked by the Guinness Book of Records as the top selling novel of all time. In 1999, librarians across the country recognized *Mockingbird* as the best novel of the twentieth century (Library Journal). Lee was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest national award for civilians, by George W. Bush in 2007. At the White House ceremony, President Bush remarked, “To Kill a Mockingbird has influenced the character of our country for the better. It’s been a gift to the entire world. As a model of good writing and humane sensibility, this book will be read and studied forever. And so all of us are filled with admiration for a great American and a lovely lady named Harper Lee.” The American Library Association and the National Education Association report that local school boards have frequently challenged *Mockingbird* as “immoral” because it examines themes of abuse, rape, and racism, and because the “n-word” is used nearly 50 times in its text.

*Mockingbird* was made into a highly acclaimed and enormously popular black and white film, winning three 1963 Academy Awards for Best Actor (Gregory Peck), Best Screenplay (Horton Foote), and Best Art Direction (Alexander Golitzen). The film earned further Academy Award nominations for Best Picture (Alan Pakula) and Best Director (Robert Mulligan). Robert Duvall made his screen debut in the role of Boo Radley. In 2003, the character of Atticus Finch was named the greatest movie hero of the twentieth century by the American Film Institute.

The fictional Atticus Finch, as portrayed by Gregory Peck in the 1962 film and Martin Kildare in USF’s current production of the play, has become such a professional icon that the American Bar Association honored him with such statements as, “Atticus Finch has represented both an image lawyers crave and a standard that intimidates them” and “an instrument of truth, an advocate of justice, the epitome of reason.” The ABA Journal has proclaimed *Mockingbird* as the greatest legal movie of all time. In 1997, a monument to Atticus Finch was erected by the State Bar of Alabama in Monroeville. A decade later, the State Bar awarded an honorary special membership to Harper Lee.

Nelle Harper Lee

Born 1926, in Monroeville, the county seat of Monroe County, in southern Alabama. Her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, was an attorney concerned with social justice who defended two Black men on murder charges; they were convicted and hanged. He was also editor and part-owner of the town newspaper, and served in the state legislature from 1926 to 1938. He died shortly after *Mockingbird* was published. Lee’s mother’s maiden name was Frances Cunningham Finch; both “Cunningham” and “Finch” are names used in the novel. Lee’s brother was four years older than she, which parallels the age difference between Jem and Scout in *Mockingbird*.

When Harper Lee was age six, the infamous Scottsboro Boys trials began with allegations that nine Black teenagers had raped two White girls in March, 1931. Convicted in Alabama courts, their cases were eventually appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court concluded that Alabama’s method of jury selection violated the equal protection clause (Fourteenth Amendment) of the U.S. Constitution.

Lee graduated from Monroe County High School in 1944 and began her undergraduate studies at Huntingdon College in Montgomery. She transferred to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa and became editor of its school newspaper. Lee attended (but did not graduate from) that University’s law school 1945. She spent a summer as an exchange student at Oxford University, England, and shortly thereafter gave up her legal studies.

At age 23, Lee moved against her parents’ wishes to New York City to pursue a career as a writer. There, Lee reunited with her childhood friend, Truman Capote, and began writing *Mockingbird* while working as a clerk. As her novel was being produced into a film, Lee was a frequent visitor to the set, became friends with Gregory Peck, and remains close with his widow, Veronique, and extended family. At age 86, Lee has remained consistently reticent about her work and personal life, and since 1964 she has very rarely granted interviews, given speeches, or made public appearances.
Harper Lee in the courthouse in Monroeville, Alabama, May 1961. The building is now a museum.

Film producer Alan Pakula with Harper Lee; the author spent three weeks watching the filming

President George W. Bush presents Harper Lee with the Presidential Medal of Freedom; White House, November 5, 2007
Truman Capote

Neighbor and childhood friend of Harper Lee, in Monroeville, Alabama. During the summer months when his mother was visiting New York City, Capote lived with his aunt, next door to the Lee family. He moved to New York City when he was eight years old. He and Lee reunited in New York City when she moved there in the mid-1950s. Capote and Lee maintained their friendship until his death in 1984, at age 59. Capote was the basis for the character Dill, playmate to Jem and Scout, in *Mockingbird*.

In the summer of 1959, Lee submitted the *Mockingbird* manuscript to her editor, Tay Hohoff. In December of that year, before *Mockingbird*’s publication, Lee traveled with Capote to Holcomb, Kansas. There, she began extensive research during the next several years for Capote’s classic “nonfiction novel” *In Cold Blood*. Although Capote wrote a shared dedication of this work to Lee, he never acknowledged the extent of her research assistance and collaboration. Neither Lee nor Capote published another novel after their respective masterpieces were completed.

Some rumors suggest that Capote was the ghostwriter for *Mockingbird*, though a great deal of evidence exists to the contrary. Capote himself indicated in a July 9, 1959, letter to his aunt in Monroeville that Lee was the sole author.

Christopher Sergel

Born 1918 in Iowa City, Iowa. Graduated from the University of Chicago, and served in the Merchant Marines during World War II. His adaptation of *Mockingbird* was published by Dramatic Publishing Company, which had been founded in 1885 by his great uncle, Charles Sergel. His play was one of more than a dozen dramas and stage adaptations (including *The Mouse That Roared*, *Cheaper by the Dozen*, and *Up the Down Staircase*) published by his family’s firm. He served as president of Dramatic Publishing Company between 1970 and 1993.

Sergel’s dramatic adaptation premiered onstage in Greenwich, London in 1988, and had its American debut in Monroeville in 1990. In the Spring of each year, his play has a three-week run on the grounds of the Monroe County courthouse, where Lee’s father practiced law. Local residents appear in the cast. This annual production also travels regionally. Consistent with her refusal to seek publicity, Harper Lee herself has never attended any of the Monroeville performances.

Sergel died in 1993 at age 75 at his home in Connecticut.
## Differences between the Novel and the Film

**Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch with Brock Peters as Tom Robinson**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>POINT OF DIFFERENCE</strong></th>
<th><strong>1960 NOVEL</strong></th>
<th><strong>1962 FILM</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nathan Radley, Boo’s father, cements the hole in the tree</td>
<td>Jem/Scout do not witness his action</td>
<td>Jem/Scout see Mr. Radley patching up the tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subplot of Jem reading to Mrs. Dubose</td>
<td>portrayed as Jem’s punishment</td>
<td>omitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Maudie’s house</td>
<td>burns down</td>
<td>unmentioned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atticus shooting the rabid dog</td>
<td>quite intense</td>
<td>less so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooting of Tom Robinson</td>
<td>by prison guards, shooting to kill as Tom runs toward the fence</td>
<td>deputies taking Tom to prison shoot to stop him from escaping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jem/Scout accompany Calpurnia to her Black church</td>
<td>occurs when Atticus Finch is out of town</td>
<td>deleted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dill runs away from his home to the Finch residence</td>
<td>because he hates his new stepfather</td>
<td>omitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boo Radley’s only line, as spoken to Scout</td>
<td>“Will you take me home?”</td>
<td>deleted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fights between Jem and Scout</td>
<td>occur frequently</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Mayella’s alleged rape</td>
<td>November 21</td>
<td>August 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early childhood “romance” between Dill and Scout</td>
<td>proceeds to the point of an “engagement”</td>
<td>does not occur</td>
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