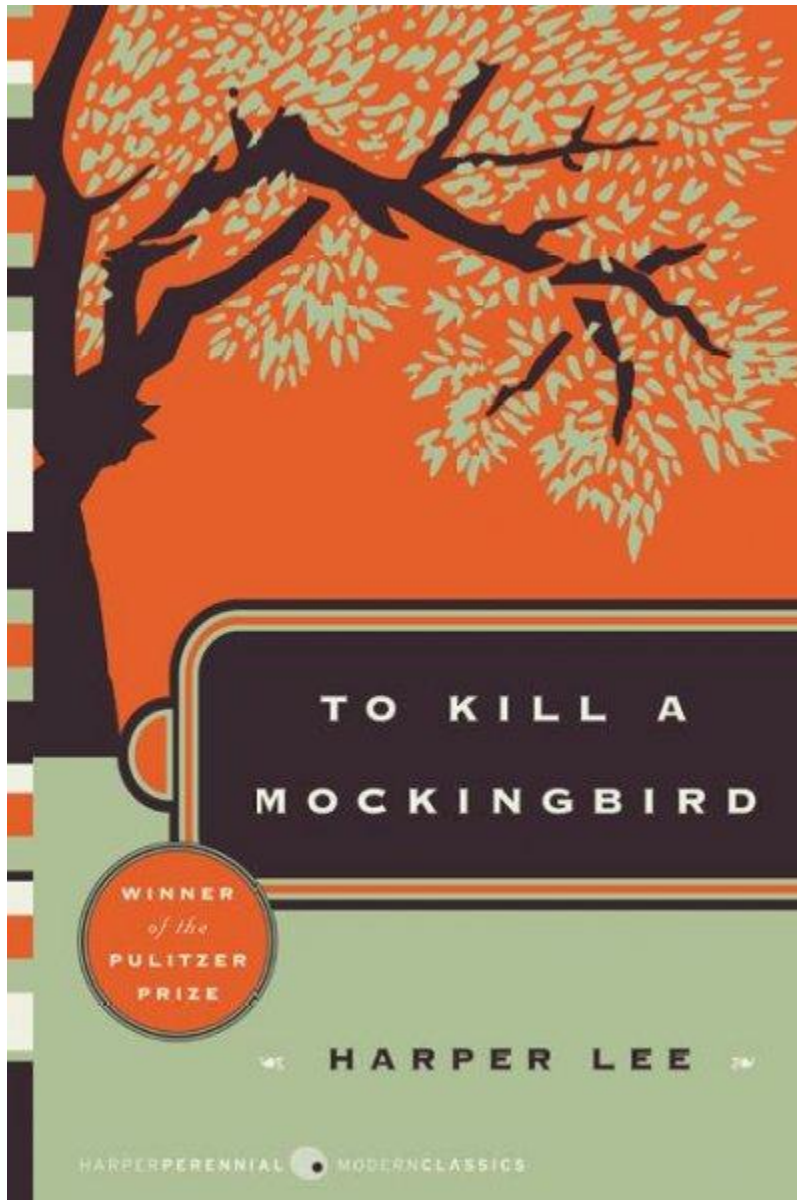


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1308896>

### About the Book



The story of a white lawyer who defends an African American man, falsely accused of assaulting a young white girl in a community that will not even consider the possibility of a black man's innocence.

## About the Author *Source: NoveList*

Born Nelle Harper Lee, the author grew up in Monroeville, Alabama. Her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, was a prominent lawyer, legislator, and newspaperman. Her mother, Frances Finch Lee, was a member of an old southern family. Harper had two sisters and a brother. One of their playmates was Truman Streckfus Persons, who would later become famous as author Truman Capote. Harper, too, was an imaginative child; she read widely and by the time she was seven was beginning to write.

Lee attended public schools in Monroeville then spent a year at Huntington College in Montgomery, Alabama, before transferring in 1945 to the University of Alabama. There she spent four years, including one as an exchange student at Oxford University in England. During her college years, Lee often contributed to campus publications. Six months before she was to obtain her law degree, as her father had expected, she left the university and moved to New York. There she supported herself by working as an airline-reservations clerk until a literary agent urged her to expand one of her short stories into a novel. Lee promptly quit her job and spent all her time writing what became *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The novel is based on places and people Lee knew well. Not only does the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, closely resemble Monroeville, but Lee has also pointed out that her town's school playground, the old, "haunted" house, and the courtroom all appear in her novel. The young boy called Charles Baker Harris, or "Dill," was modeled on their friend, the future Truman Capote, and Harper Lee's father was the inspiration for the similarly courageous lawyer Atticus Finch.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is best known as the story of a white lawyer who defends an African American man, falsely accused of assaulting a young white girl in a community that will not even consider the possibility of a black man's innocence. However, there are several other incidents in the novel, unrelated to race, that demonstrate how wrong it is to make judgments about people based on external appearances. The novel also questions society's imposition of gender roles, as the tomboy narrator, Jean Louise ("Scout") Finch, resists her aunt's attempts to transform her into a southern lady.

Harper Lee's first novel was a best-seller and a critical success; in 1961, it won the Pulitzer Prize. The film *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) is now itself considered a classic. Because of its artistry and its timeless theme, the book has remained popular with readers of all ages. It is frequently assigned in high school and college classes.

Although Harper Lee spoke of writing another novel, one has not appeared. She lives quietly in New York and Monroeville, seldom granting interviews or making public appearances.

## **Awards**

*To Kill a Mockingbird* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1961 (<http://www.pulitzer.org/>).

## **Reviews**

### *Booklist*

In a Southern novel of unusual narrative charm eight-year-old Jean Louise, nicknamed Scout, tells about growing up as the daughter of a widowed lawyer, Atticus Finch, in the small town of Maycomb, Alabama during the 1930's. She and her older brother Jem happily occupy themselves with resisting "progressive education," bedeviling the neighbors, and stalking the local bogeyman--until their father's courageous defense of a black man falsely accused of rape introduces them to the problems of race prejudice and brings adult injustice and violence into their childhood world. Despite a melodramatic climax and traces of sermonizing, the characters and locale are depicted with insight and a rare blend of wit and compassion.

### *Magill Book Review*

Between the ages of 6 and 9, Scout Finch has doubts about whether she wishes to grow up to be a lady. She much prefers the free, boyish life she enjoys with her older brother, Jem, and his friends. She also enjoys an open relationship with her widowed father, Atticus, a local attorney and perennial legislator. Though many of the family's adventures are told, Scout's life during these years centers on two events, her developing relationship with Boo Radley and her father's defense of Tom, a black wrongly accused of raping a white woman.

Scout discovers that while the mentally deficient Boo Radley has been a curiosity to her, he has been lovingly caring for her. She and her friends watch the house where his family keeps him hidden and speculate about him, sometimes cruelly. Various signs show Scout that Boo's interest in them is friendly and protective. Scout becomes sure of his goodness when Boo saves her and Jem from a murder attempt.

This lesson in tolerance is often repeated in the novel. Tom's trial reveals the degree to which the whole town needs to understand what Scout learns. Because he proves the likelihood of Tom's innocence, Atticus must endure scorn, anger, and the attempted murder of his children. Despite Atticus' successful defense, the jury recommends the death penalty.

Scout's innocent perceptions reveal how family, class, race, region, and religion can be barriers to tolerance and sympathy. The openness to experience that Atticus cultivates in her helps her to look closely at people and to withhold judgment until she understands them.

## **Literary Criticism**

### *The Female Voice in To Kill a Mockingbird: Narrative Strategies in Film and Novel*

Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of my attire. I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches; when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn't supposed to be doing anything that required pants. Aunt Alexandra's vision of my deportment involved playing with small stoves, tea sets, and wearing the Add-A-Pearl necklace she gave me when I was born; furthermore, I should be a ray of sunshine in my father's lonely life. I suggested that one could be a ray of sunshine in pants just as well, but Aunt said that one had to behave like a sunbeam, that I was born good but had grown progressively worse every year. She hurt my feelings and set my teeth permanently on edge, but when I asked Atticus about it, he said there were already enough sunbeams in the family and to go about my business, he didn't mind me much the way I was.

This passage reveals the importance of female voice and gender issues in Harper Lee's popular Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, first published in 1960. The novel portrays a young girl's love for her father and brother and the experience of childhood during the Great Depression

in a racist, segregated society which uses superficial and materialistic values to judge outsiders, including the powerful character Boo Radley. In 1962, a successful screen version of the novel (starring Gregory Peck) appeared. However, the screenplay, written by Horton Foote, an accomplished Southern writer, abandons, for the most part, the novel's first-person narration by Scout (in the motion picture, a first-person angle of vision functions primarily to provide transitions and shifts in time and place). As a result, the film is centered more on the children's father, Atticus Finch, and the adult world in which Scout and Jem feel alien. As several commentators have noted, the film seems centered on the racial issue much more than on other, equally successful dimensions of the novel. Clearly, part of the novel's success has to do with the adult-as-child perspective. Lee, recalling her own childhood, projects the image of an adult reflecting on her past and attempting to recreate the experience through a female child's point of view.

That the film shifts perspectives from the book's primary concern with the female protagonist and her perceptions to the male father figure and the adult male world is noteworthy. While trying to remain faithful to the importance of childhood and children in the novel, Foote's objective narration is interrupted only occasionally with the first-person narration of a woman, who is presumably the older, now adult Scout. However, the novel is very much about the experience of growing up as a female in a South with very narrow definitions of gender roles and acceptable behavior. Because this dimension of the novel is largely missing from the film's narrative, the film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* may be seen as a betrayal of the novel's full feminist implications--a compromise of the novel's full power.

Granted, when a film adaptation is made, the screenwriter need not be faithful to the original text. As Robert Giddings, Keith Selby, and Chris Wensley note in their important book *Screening the Novel*, a filmmaker's approaches to adapting a literary work may range from one of almost complete faithfulness to the story to one which uses the original as an outline for a totally different work on film. Foote's adaptation seems to fall somewhere in between these extremes, with the film decidedly faithful to certain aspects of the novel. His story clearly conveys the novel's general mood; it is obvious he wishes to remain close to the general subject matter of life in the South during the Great Depression and its atmosphere of racial prejudice and Jim Crow. Reflecting on the film, Harper Lee herself states,

"For me, Maycomb is there, its people are there: in two short hours one lives a childhood and lives it with Atticus Finch, whose view of life was the heart of the novel."

Though admittedly Atticus Finch is at the heart of the film and novel, there are some clear and notable discrepancies between the two versions that alter the unique perspective of the novel considerably--despite what Lee herself has commented. Only about 15% of the novel is devoted to Tom Robinson's rape trial, whereas in the film, the running time is more than 30% of a two-hour film. Unlike the book, the film is primarily centered on the rape trial and the racism of Maycomb which has made it possible--not surprising considering it was made during what was to become the turbulent period of the 1960s when racial issues were of interest to Hollywood and the country as a whole. Significant, though, are the reviewers and critics who believe this issue, rather than the female child's perspectives on an adult male world, is the novel's main concern and as a result admire the film for its faithfulness to the original.

Many teachers of the novel and film also emphasize this issue to the neglect of other equally important issues. In 1963 and again in the year of the film's twenty-fifth anniversary, the Education Department of Warner Books issued Joseph Mersand's study guide on the novel, one section of which is an essay subtitled "A Sociological Study in Black and White." Turning the novel into sociology, many readers miss other aspects of Lee's vision. In an early critical article, Edgar Schuster notes that the racial dimensions of the novel have been overemphasized, especially by high school students who read it, and he offers possible strategies for teaching students the novel's other central issues, which he lists as "Jem's physiological and psychological growth" (mentioning Scout's growth in this regard only briefly as if it is a side issue), the caste system of Maycomb, the title motif, education, and superstition. What is so striking about Schuster's interpretation is his failure to acknowledge that the issue of Scout's gender is crucial to an understanding not only of the novel but also of Scout's identification with her father. As feminists often note, male readers sometimes take female perspectives and turn them into commentaries from a male point of view. Because the novel and film center so much on Atticus, he, rather than Scout, becomes the focus.

With regard to the film, I do not mean to suggest that Foote has not attempted to make some references to Scout's problems with gender

identity. When he does, however, the audience is very likely unable to make the connections as adequately as careful readers of the novel might. Of particular interest are two scenes from the film which also appear in the novel. During one of their summers with Dill, Jem insults Scout as the three of them approach the Radley home and Scout whines, fearful of what may happen. As in the novel, he tells her she is getting to be more like a girl every day, the implication being that boys are courageous and non-fearful and girls are weak and afraid (a point which is refuted when Jem's fears of Boo Radley and the dark are demonstrated). Nevertheless, what is most important in the scene is Scout's reaction. Knowing that being called a girl is an insult and that being female is valued less than being male in her small Southern town, she suddenly becomes brave in order to remain acceptable to her brother.

In another scene, as Scout passes by Mrs. Dubose's house and says "hey," she is reprimanded for poor manners unbecoming of a Southern lady. This scene occurs in both film and novel. However, in the novel Lee clarifies that the presumed insult to Mrs. Dubose originates with Mrs. Dubose's assumptions as a Southern lady, a role which Scout, in the novel especially, is reluctant to assume. The film's lack of a consistent female voice makes this scene as well as others seem unnecessary and extraneous. This is only one example of the way in which the superior narrative strategy of the novel points out the weakness of the objective, male-centered narration of the film.

One scene from the film concerning girlhood does not appear in the novel. Careful not to suggest that the Finches are churchgoers (for what reason?), as they are in the novel, Foote creates a scene which attempts to demonstrate Scout's ambivalence about being female. As Scout becomes old enough to enter school, she despises the thought of wearing a dress. When she appears from her room to eat breakfast before attending school for the first time, Jem ridicules her while Atticus, Miss Maudie, and Calpurnia admire her. Scout comments: "I still don't see why I have to wear a darn old dress." A weakness of the film in this regard is that until this scene, there has been little indication that Scout strongly dislikes wearing dresses, let alone has fears of growing up as a female. The novel makes it clear that Scout prefers her overalls to wearing dresses, which is perhaps why Foote found it necessary to create this particular scene. However, the previous two crucial scenes, while faithful to the novel's general concerns

with gender, create loose ends in the film which do not contribute to the success of the narration and which compromise the novel's feminist center.

The intermittent efforts to focus on the female narrator's perspective prove unsuccessful in revealing the work's feminist dimensions. As the film opens, the audience sees the hands of a small girl, presumably Scout, coloring. After the credits, a woman's voice, described by Amy Lawrence as a "disembodied voice exiled from the image," is heard reflecting on her perceptions of Maycomb." By introducing the audience to the social and spatial context, this first-person narrator provides a frame for the whole. The audience at this point, without having read the novel first, may not, however, recognize who the speaker is. As Scout appears playing in the yard, the viewer is left to assume that the voice-over opening the film is the female character speaking as a grown woman. The camera zooms down to reveal Scout and soon thereafter shifts to the standard objective narration of most films.

When the disembodied narrator is heard again, she reflects on Scout's views of Atticus after he insists she will have to return to school; yet, despite what her teacher says, father and daughter will continue reading each night the way they always have. Here the voice-over is designed to emphasize the heroic stature of Atticus and perhaps even to suggest that one reason for Scout's identification with him is his freedom of thought and action: "There just didn't seem to be anyone or thing Atticus couldn't explain. Though it wasn't a talent that would arouse the admiration of any of our friends. Jem and I had to admit he was very good at that but that was all he was good at, we thought" (Foote, P. 35). This intrusion becomes little more than a transition into the next scene, in which Atticus shoots the mad dog.

In the next intrusion the female voice interrupts the objective narration when, at school, Scout fights Cecil Jacobs for calling Atticus a "nigger lover." She states: "Atticus had promised me he would wear me out if he ever heard of me fightin' any more. I was far too old and too big for such childish things, and the sooner I learned to hold in, the better off everybody would be. I soon forgot ... Cecil Jacobs made me forget" (Foote, p. 42). Here again, the first-person narration provides coherence, allowing the scene of Scout's fight with Cecil Jacobs to be shortened and placing emphasis on the relationship between Atticus and Scout. The subtext of their conversation could perhaps be viewed as a reflection of traditional



views that women should not be too aggressive or physical, but this scene, coupled with earlier scenes reflecting social values, is not couched in terms of Scout's transgressive behavior as a woman-to-be. The female voice in the film is not used to demonstrate the book's concern with female identity; rather, it reinforces the male-centered society which Atticus represents and which the film is gradually moving toward in focusing on the trial of Tom Robinson.

Another instance during which the female narrator intrudes on the objective, male-centered gaze of the camera occurs when Jem and Scout discuss the presents Boo Radley leaves for them in the knot-hole. At this point in the film, the attempt to convey the book's female narrative center falls completely apart. Not until after the very long trial scene does the camera emphasize the children's perceptions or the female narrator's angle of vision again. Instead, the audience is in the adult male world of the courtroom, with mature male authority as the center of attention. Immediately after the trial, the film seems most concerned with Jem's reactions to the trial, Jem's recognition of the injustice of the verdict in the Tom Robinson case, and Jem's desire to accompany his father when he tells Helen Robinson that Tom has been killed. Scout is unable to observe directly the last event, and, as a result, the narration is inconsistent--by and large from the rape trial to the end of the film.

The film does, however make use of voice-over narration twice more. In the first instance, the female narrator again provides the transition in time and place to move from the previous scene, the revelation of Tom Robinson's death to his wife, into the confrontation between Atticus and Bob Ewell. As the camera focuses on an autumn scene with Scout dressed in a white dress, Jean Louise prepares the audience for the climax, which soon follows: "By October things had settled down again. I still looked for Boo every time I went by the Radley place. This night my mind was filled with Halloween. There was to be a pageant representing our county's agricultural products. I was to be a ham. Jem said he would escort me to the school auditorium. Thus began our longest journey together" (Foote, p. 72). Following this passage is the climactic scene, when Bob Ewell attacks Scout and Jem and Boo Radley successfully rescues them.

Shortly thereafter, the camera focuses on Scout's recognition of Boo as the protector and savior of Jem and her, and for the remainder of the film, the narration, arguably for the first time, is centered entirely on Scout's perception of the adult male world. She hears Heck Tate and Atticus

debate over what to do about exposing the truth that Boo has killed Ewell while defending the children. The movement of the camera and her facial expression clearly indicate that Scout sees the meaning behind the adult's desires to protect Boo from the provincial Maycomb community which has marginalized him--and this scene signifies Scout's initiation into the world of adulthood.

As the film draws to a close, Scout, still in her overalls which will not be tolerated much longer in this society, walks Boo home. For the last time the audience hears the female voice:

Neighbors bring food with death, and flowers with sickness, and little things in between. Boo was our neighbor. He gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch, and chain, a knife, and our lives. One time Atticus said you never really knew a man until you stood in his shoes and walked around in them. Just standin' on the Radley porch was enough. ... The summer that had begun so long ago ended, another summer had taken its place, and a fall, and Boo Radley had come out. ... I was to think of these days many times; -of Jem, and Dill and Boo Radley, and Tom Robinson ... and Atticus. He would be in Jem's room all night. And he would be there when Jem waked up in the morning. (Foote, pp. 79-80)

The film ends, when, through a window, Scout is seen climbing into Atticus's lap while he sits near Jem. The camera gradually moves leftward away from the two characters in the window to a long shot of the house. By the end, then, the film has shifted perspective back to the female voice, fully identified the narrator as the older Scout (Jean Louise), and focused on the center of Scout's existence, her father (a patriarchal focus). The inconsistent emphasis on Scout and her perceptions makes the film seem disjointed.

Noting the patriarchal center of the film, Amy Lawrence suggests the possibility for a feminist reading. She argues that the disembodied narrator--as well as the author, Harper Lee, and the characters of Scout and Mayella Ewell--provides a "disjointed subjectivity" on film which is characteristic of "the experience of women in patriarchy" (p. 184). Such "disjointed subjectivity" is, however, missing from the novel, which centers on Scout's perceptions of being female in a male-dominated South. The novel's female-centered narration provides an opportunity for Lee to comment on her own childlike perceptions as well as her recognition of the

problems of growing up female in the South. The feminine voice, while present in the film, receives far too little emphasis.

In the novel the narrative voice allows readers to comprehend what the film does not explain. Though some critics have attacked Lee's narration as weak and suggested that the use of first person creates problems with perspective because the major participant, first-person narrator must appear almost in all scenes, the novel's consistent use of first person makes it much clearer than the film that the reader is seeing all the events through a female child's eyes. Once the children enter the courtroom in the film, the center of attention is the adult world of Atticus Finch and the rape trial--not, as the book is able to suggest, the children's perceptions of the events which unravel before them.

Although it is clear in the film that Scout is a tomboy and that she will probably grow out of this stage in her life (witness the very feminine and Southern drawl of the female narrator, who, though not seen, conveys the image of a conventional Southern lady), the film, which does not openly challenge the perspective of white heterosexuals (male or female) nearly to the degree the novel does, does not make Scout's ambivalence about being a female in an adult male world clear enough. Because the novel's narrative vision is consistently first person throughout and as a result focused on the older Scout's perceptions of her growing-up years, the female voice is unquestionably heard and the narration is focused on the world of Maycomb which she must inevitably enter as she matures.

Furthermore, a number of significant questions about gender are raised in the novel: Is Scout (and, by implication, all females) an outsider looking on an adult male world which she knows she will be unable to enter as she grows into womanhood? Is her identification with Atticus due not only to her love and devotion for a father but also to his maleness, a power and freedom she suspects she will not be allowed to possess within the confines of provincial Southern society? Or is her identification with Atticus due to his androgynous nature (playing the role of mother and father to her and demonstrating stereotypically feminine traits: being conciliatory, passive, tolerant, and partially rejecting the traditional masculine admiration for violence, guns, and honor)? All three of these questions may lead to possible, even complementary readings which would explain Scout's extreme identification with her father.

As in the passage quoted at the beginning of this essays, the novel focuses on Scout's tomboyishness as it relates to her developing sense of a female self. Also evident throughout the novel is Scout's devotion to her father's opinions. Atticus seems content with her the way she is; only when others force him to do so does he concern himself with traditional stereotypes of the Southern female. Especially significant with regard to Scout's growing sense of womanhood is the novel's very important character, Aunt Alexandra, Atticus's sister, who is left out of the film entirely. Early in the novel, readers are made aware of Scout's antipathy for her aunt, who wishes to mold her into a Southern lady. Other female authority figures with whom Scout has difficulty agreeing are her first-grade teacher, Miss Fisher, and Calpurnia, the family cook, babysitter, and surrogate mother figure. When the females in authority interfere with Scout's perceptions concerning her father and their relationship, she immediately rebels, a rebellion which Atticus does not usually discourage--signifying her strong identification with male authority and her recognition that the female authority figures threaten the unique relationship which she has with her father and which empowers her as an individual.

Exactly why Scout identifies with Atticus so much may have as much to do with his own individuality and inner strength as the fact that he is a single parent and father. Since the mother of Scout and Jem is dead, Atticus has assumed the full responsibility of playing mother and father whenever possible--though admittedly he employs Calpurnia and allows Alexandra to move in with them to give the children, particularly Scout, a female role model. However, Atticus is far from a stereotypical Southern male. Despite his position as a respected male authority figure in Maycomb, he seems oblivious to traditional expectations concerning masculinity (for himself) and femininity (for Scout). The children in fact see him as rather unmanly: "When Jem and I asked him why he was so old, he said he got started late, which we felt reflected on his abilities and his masculinity" (p. 93). Jem is also upset because Atticus will not play tackle football. Mrs. Dubose criticizes Atticus for not remarrying, which is very possibly a subtle comment on his lack of virility. Later the children learn of his abilities at marksmanship, at bravery in watching the lynch mob ready to attack Tom Robinson, and at the defense of the same man. Perhaps this is Lee's way of suggesting that individuals must be allowed to develop their own sense of self without regard to rigid definitions of gender and social roles.

Scout's identification with Atticus may also be rooted in her recognition of the superficiality and limitations of being a Southern female. Mrs. Dubose once tells her: "You should be in a dress and camisole, young lady! You'll grow up waiting on tables if somebody doesn't change your ways ..." (p. 106). This is one of many instances in the novel through which the first-person narrator reveals Lee's criticism of Southern women and their narrowmindedness concerning gender roles. Even Atticus ridicules the women's attitudes. In one instance he informs Alexandra that he favors "Southern womanhood as much as anybody, but not for preserving polite fiction at the expense of human life" (p. 149). When Scout is "indignant" that women cannot serve on juries, Atticus jokingly says, "I guess it's to protect our frail ladies from sordid cases like Tom's. Besides ... I doubt if we'd ever get a complete case tried--the ladies'd be interrupting to ask questions" (p. 224). This seemingly sexist passage may in fact be the opposite; having established clearly that Atticus does not take many Southern codes seriously, Lee recognizes the irony in Atticus's statement that women, including his own independent-minded daughter, are "frail." Admittedly, few women characters in the novel are very pleasant, with the exceptions of Miss Maudie Atkinson, the Finches' neighbor, and Calpurnia. Through the first-person female voice, Southern women are ridiculed as gossips, provincials, weaklings, extremists, even racists--calling to mind the criticism of Southern manners in the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. Of Scout's superficial Aunt Alexandra, Lee writes: "... Aunt Alexandra was one of the last of her kind: she has river-boat, boardingschool manners; let any moral come along and she would uphold it; she was born in the objective case; she was an incurable gossip" (p. 131). Scout's feelings for Alexandra, who is concerned with family heritage, position, and conformity to traditional gender roles, do alter somewhat as she begins to see Alexandra as a woman who means well and loves her and her father, and as she begins to accept certain aspects of being a Southern female. As Jem and Dill exclude her from their games, Scout gradually learns more about the alien world of being a female through sitting on the porch with Miss Maudie and observing Calpurnia work in the kitchen, which makes her begin "to think there was more skill involved in being a girl" than she has previously thought (p. 118). Nevertheless, the book makes it clear that the adult Scout, who narrates the novel and who has presumably now assumed the feminine name Jean Louise for good, is still ambivalent at best concerning the traditional Southern lady.

Of special importance with regard to Scout's growing perceptions of herself as a female is the meeting of the missionary society women, a scene

which, like Aunt Alexandra's character, is completely omitted from the film. Alexandra sees herself as a grand host. Through observing the missionary women, Scout, in Austenian fashion, is able to satirize the superficialities and prejudices of Southern women with whom she is unwilling to identify in order to become that alien being called woman. Dressed in "my pink Sunday dress, shoes, and a petticoat," Scout attends a meeting shortly after Tom Robinson's death, knowing that her aunt makes her participate as "part of ... her campaign to teach me to be a lady" (p. 232). Commenting on the women, Scout says, "Rather nervous, I took a seat beside Miss Maudie and wondered why ladies put on their hats to go across the street. Ladies in bunches always filled me with vague apprehension and a firm desire to be elsewhere ..." (p. 232).

As the meeting begins, the ladies ridicule Scout for frequently wearing pants and inform her that she cannot become a member of the elite, genteel group of Southern ladyhood unless she mends her ways. Miss Stephanie Crawford, the town gossip, mocks Scout by asking her if she wants to grow up to be a lawyer, a comment to which Scout, coached by Aunt Alexandra, says, "Nome, just a lady" (p. 233)--with the obvious social satire evident. Scout clearly does not want to become a lady. Suspicious, Miss Stephanie replies, "Well, you won't get very far until you start wearing dresses more often" (p. 233). Immediately thereafter, Lee exposes even further the provincialism and superficiality of the group's appearance of gentility, piety, and morality. Mrs. Grace Merriweather's comments on "those poor Mruna" who live "in that jungle" and need Christian salvation reflect a smug, colonialist attitude toward other races. When the women begin conversing about blacks in America, their bigotry--and Scout's disgust with it--becomes obvious.

Rather than the community of gentility and racism represented in the women of Maycomb, Scout clearly prefers the world of her father, as this passage reveals: "... I wondered at the world of women. ... There was no doubt about it, I must soon enter this world, where on its surface fragrant ladies rocked slowly, fanned gently, and drank cool water" (p. 236). The female role is far too frivolous and unimportant for Scout to identify with. Furthermore, she says, "But I was more at home in my father's world. People like Mr. Heck Tate did not trap you with innocent questions to make fun of you. ... Ladies seemed to live in faint horror of men, seemed unwilling to approve wholeheartedly of them. But I liked them. ... [N]o matter how undelectable they were, ... they weren't 'hypocrites'" (p. 236).

This obviously idealized and childlike portrayal of men nevertheless gets at the core of Scout's conflict. In a world in which men seem to have the advantages and seem to be more fairminded and less intolerant than women with their petty concerns and superficial dress codes, why should she conform to the notion of Southern ladyhood? Ironically, Scout, unlike the reader, is unable to recognize the effects of female powerlessness which may be largely responsible for the attitudes of Southern ladies. If they cannot control the everyday business and legal affairs of their society, they can at least impose their code of manners and morality.

To Scout, Atticus and his world represent freedom and power. Atticus is the key representative of the male power which Scout wishes to obtain even though she is growing up as a Southern female. More important, Lee demonstrates that Scout is gradually becoming a feminist in the South, for, with the use of first-person narration, she indicates that Scout/Jean Louise still maintains the ambivalence about being a Southern lady she possessed as a child. She seeks to become empowered with the freedoms the men in her society seem to possess without question and without resorting to trivial and superficial concerns such as wearing a dress and appearing genteel.

Harper Lee's fundamental criticism of gender roles for women (and to a lesser extent for men) may be evident especially in her novel's identification with outsider figures such as Tom Robinson, Mayella Ewell, and Boo Radley. Curiously enough, the outsider figures with whom the novelist identifies most are also males. Tom Robinson, the male African American who has been disempowered and annihilated by a fundamentally racist, white male society, and Boo Radley, the reclusive and eccentric neighbor about whom legends of his danger to the fragile Southern society circulate regularly, are the two "mockingbirds" of the title. Ironically, they are unable to mock society's roles for them and as a result take the consequences of living on the margins--Tom, through his death; Boo, through his return to the protection of a desolate isolated existence.

Throughout the novel, however, the female voice has emphasized Scout's growing distance from her provincial Southern society and her identification with her father, a symbol of the empowered. Like her father, Atticus, Scout, too, is unable to be a "mockingbird" of society and as a result, in coming to know Boo Radley as a real human being at novel's end, she recognizes the empowerment of being *the other* as she consents to remain an outsider unable to accept society's unwillingness to seek and know before it judges.

And it is perhaps this element of the female voice in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* which most makes Horton Foote's screen adaptation largely a compromise of the novel's full power.

Source: Shackelford, Dean. "The Female Voice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Narrative Strategies in Film and Novel." *Mississippi Quarterly* 50.1 (Winter 1996): 101-113. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 194. Detroit: Gale, 2005. Literature Resource Center.  
<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

### **Discussion Questions** Source: *NoveList*

1. Why is this book considered a classic children's or young adult book when it deals with such serious subjects?
2. What does Boo Radley represent?
3. What is the meaning and importance of the title?
4. What does the story of Mrs. Dubose have to do with the case of Tom Robinson?
5. Why does Aunt Alexandra come to stay with them?
6. What is the importance of books and reading in the Finch household?
7. What does Miss Maudie mean when she says "His food doesn't stick going down, does it?"
8. Does this book pertain to the world we live in today?

### **Multimedia**

#### ***After 50 Years, 'To Kill A Mockingbird' Still Sings America's Song*** **(Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128340180>

A discussion of the novel on NPR's *Morning Edition*.

#### ***Why 'To Kill A Mockingbird' Still Speaks To Me*** (Radio Broadcast)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128466065>



A personal reflection on the novel, from NPR.

### ***To Kill A Mockingbird* (Movie)**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1259209>

(Call number: DVD Drama To)

Gregory Peck plays a southern lawyer who defends a black man accused of rape in this film version of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. The way in which it captures a time, a place, and above all, a mood, makes this film a masterpiece.

### **Further Reading**

### ***Hey, Boo: Harper Lee & To Kill A Mockingbird* (Movie)**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1389988>

(Call number: DVD 813 He)

Fifty years after winning the Pulitzer Prize, *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains a beloved best seller and quite possibly the most influential American novel of the 20th century. Mary McDonagh Murphy's *Hey, Boo* explores the *To Kill a Mockingbird* phenomenon and unravels some of the mysteries surrounding Harper Lee, including why she never published again. It also brings to light the context and history of the novel's Deep South setting and the social changes it inspired after publication.

### ***Mockingbird: A portrait of Harper Lee* by Charles Shields**

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1268173>

(Call number: 921 Lee)

The colorful life of the remarkable woman who created *To Kill a Mockingbird*--the classic that became a touchstone for generations of Americans *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the twentieth-century's most widely read American novel, has sold thirty million copies and still sells a million yearly. Yet despite the book's perennial popularity, its creator, Harper Lee has become a somewhat mysterious figure. Now, after years of research, Charles J. Shields has brought to life the warmhearted, high-spirited, and occasionally hardheaded woman who gave us two of American literature's most unforgettable characters--Atticus Finch and his daughter, Scout--and who contributed to the success of her lifelong friend Truman Capote's masterpiece, *In Cold Blood*. At the center of Shields's lively book is the story of Lee's struggle to create her famous novel. But her life contains many other highlights as well: her girlhood as a tomboy in overalls in tiny Monroeville, Alabama; the murder trial that made her beloved father's

reputation and inspired her great work; her journey to Kansas as Capote's ally and research assistant to help report the story of the Clutter murders; the surrogate family she found in New York City. Drawing on six hundred interviews and much new information, *Mockingbird* is the first book ever written about Harper Lee. Highly entertaining, filled with humor and heart, this is an evocative portrait of a writer, her dream, and the place and people whom she made immortal.

**Read-Alikes** Source: *NoveList*

**\*Book Club To Go!\*** *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1352121>

(Call number: Fiction Angelou)

Sent by their mother to live with their devout, self-sufficient grandmother in a small Southern town, Maya and her brother, Bailey, endure the ache of abandonment and the prejudice of the local "powhitetrash." At eight years old and back at her mother's side in St. Louis, Maya is attacked by a man many times her age-and has to live with the consequences for a lifetime. Years later, in San Francisco, Maya learns about love for herself and the kindness of others, her own strong spirit, and the ideas of great authors ("I met and fell in love with William Shakespeare") will allow her to be free instead of imprisoned. Poetic and powerful, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a modern American classic that will touch hearts and change minds for as long as people read.

***Wolf Whistle*** by Lewis Nordan

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1085069>

(Call number: Fiction Nordan)

In 1956, a black boy named Emmett Till was murdered for wolf-whistling at a white woman. The two white men responsible were tried-and acquitted-in a Mississippi town near Lewis Nordan's boyhood home. These events changed him forever. In this extraordinary novel, Nordan transforms one of America's most notorious racial killings into a magical mystery ride of hilarity and horror that you will never forget.

***The God of Small Things*** by Arundhati Roy

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1119716>

(Call number: Fiction Roy)

Winner of the 1997 Booker Prize.

***Ellen Foster*** by Kaye Gibbons

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1027519>

"When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy. I would figure out this or that way and run it down through my head until it got easy." So begins the tale of Ellen Foster, the brave and engaging heroine of Kay Gibbons's first novel, which won the Sue Kaufman Prize from the American Academy of Institute of Arts and Letters. Wise, funny, affectionate, and true, *Ellen Foster* is, as Walker Percy called it, "The real thing. Which is to say, a lovely, sometimes heartwrenching novel. . . . [*Ellen Foster*] is as much a part of the backwoods South as a Faulkner character--and a good deal more endearing."

### **Extras!**

Scout identifies strongly with her father. Discuss who your heroes were at her age with the group.

