

Title: Explanation of: "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Harper Lee
Novel, 1960

American Novelist (1926 -)

Other Names Used: Lee, Nelle Harper;

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To Kill a Mockingbird (1960), a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Harper Lee (1926-), tells the story of two children growing up in a small rural community in the early 1930s.

Set in Maycomb, Alabama, the story is narrated by six-year-old Jean Louise Finch, nicknamed Scout, who recalls her experiences from an adult perspective. She tells the story of her widowed father, Atticus, and his legal defense of Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. In the three years surrounding the trial, Scout and her older brother, Jem, witness the consequences of prejudice and hate while at the same time seeing the values of courage and integrity through their father's example.

The story develops as Scout, Jem, and their friend Dill spy on Boo Radley, a reclusive figure who is generally feared by the neighborhood children; Boo has not been seen since he was arrested and subsequently released from jail fifteen years earlier. Scout and Jem begin to discover small gifts hidden in a tree located on Radley's property. But that mystery is soon overshadowed by Tom Robinson's impending trial.

In the weeks leading up to the trial, the children suffer the taunts of classmates whose parents object to Atticus's defense of a black man. Atticus hopes that his own tolerance will positively influence his children, who are vulnerable to the entrenched racism of the community. Jem and Scout receive air rifles for Christmas, and in what becomes the refrain of the novel, Atticus cautions them that it is "a sin to kill a mockingbird," because mockingbirds do nothing but "sing their hearts out for us." The bird comes to represent all victims of oppression, and more particularly the African American community.

When Tom Robinson's trial finally begins, Mayella Ewell, the alleged rape victim, testifies before the court that Tom had attacked her after being invited onto her family's property. Atticus proves that Mayella actually tried to seduce Tom and that her father, Bob Ewell, forced her to make the accusation. Despite Atticus's convincing evidence, Tom is found guilty. Shortly after his conviction, Tom is killed trying to escape from prison.

The story reaches its climax when Bob Ewell, after being discredited in court, threatens the Finch family and ultimately attempts to kill Jem. The violent attack is stopped by a stranger who kills Ewell to save the boy's life. Jem's mysterious savior turns out to be Boo Radley. The divergent plot lines are ultimately connected when Scout comments that to subject Boo to a public trial would be "like shootin' a mockingbird."

Lee's first and only novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published during the civil rights movement and was hailed as an exposé of racism in Southern society. The initial critical response to Lee's novel was mixed. Some critics lauded the book as an insightful examination of racism and a powerful rendering of modern heroism. Others found fault with Lee's narrative voice, asserting that she fails to integrate the voice of the adult Scout with the childish perspective of the young narrator.

The book has endured as a mainstay on high school and college reading lists, and it has never gone out of print. Critics view *To Kill a Mockingbird* as one of the most sensitive depictions of the American South in contemporary fiction. It was adapted to film in 1962 as a major motion picture starring Gregory Peck.

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