

## PART 1: Questions for Discussion (Do #9, 19, AND 18)

1. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has achieved a prominent place in American culture, both as a book that won the Pulitzer Prize and was voted by librarians as the best novel of the century and as extraordinarily popular film. What had you heard about the novel before you read it? Had you seen the film? How was your experience of the book different from what you expected? How is it different from the film?
2. In her Foreword, Harper Lee asks that her book be spared an Introduction. "Introductions," she writes, "inhibit pleasure, they kill the joy of anticipation, they frustrate curiosity." Do you agree? Why would an introduction hinder rather than help a reader approach a book? Why is it sometimes better just to jump right into the story?
3. What kind of town is Maycomb, Alabama? How does Lee create such a vivid sense of the particular place and time in which her story is set? What details about the town, its history and its inhabitants, make the place feel real? Why is the setting important for the story? How would the story be different if it were set in New York City or North Dakota?
4. In what ways is the 1930s era, with WWII looming on the horizon and the Great Depression in full swing, relevant to the events of the novel? How does what was happening in Nazi Germany at the time parallel relations between blacks and whites in the American South?
5. On the opening page of the novel, Scout Finch says that "When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading up to [Jem's] accident." How old do you think Scout is when she writes the story? How is the Scout who narrates the events of the story different from the Scout who experiences them?
6. When Scout thoughtlessly remarks on the impoverished Walter Cunningham's bad table manners, Calpurnia takes her aside and explains: "There's some folks who don't eat like us...but you ain't called on to contradict 'em at the table when they don't. That boy's yo' comp'ny and if he wants to eat up the whole table cloth you let him, you hear?" [p. 27]. What important lesson is Calpurnia imparting to Scout in this scene? How is this lesson related to the novel's larger themes? Why is it significant that it comes, in this instance, from Calpurnia?
7. When Scout complains about her teacher, Atticus tells her that "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" [p. 33]. Where in the novel does Atticus himself demonstrate this kind of empathy? How does he regard those who criticize, ridicule, or threaten him? How would this ability to empathize with others help solve the problems that arise from racism and prejudice?
8. What kind of young girl is Scout Finch? In what ways is she both a familiar and an unusual character? Did you identify with her? How does she change over the course of the novel? What does she learn? Why does she resist Aunt Alexandra's efforts to turn her into a "lady"?
9. Why is Boo Radley, a man who is hidden away for nearly the entire novel, such an important figure in *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Why are Jem and Scout and Dill so fascinated by him? In what ways is it both ironic and appropriate that the man Jem and Scout most fear is the one who saves them?
10. Why does Atticus accept Tom Robinson's case, even though he knows he will lose it? What do the reasons for his acceptance tell us about his character?
11. Because the courtroom is so crowded, Scout and Jem watch Tom Robinson's trial from the "Colored balcony" with the Reverend Sykes and the rest of Maycomb's black community. Why would Lee place them there? What is the symbolic significance of Scout and Jem viewing the trial from this perspective?

12. Tom Robinson makes a huge mistake when, during the prosecutor's cross-examination, he says that he "felt right sorry" for Mayella. Why would the whites in the courtroom find this statement so disturbing?
13. In his closing arguments, Atticus asserts that Mayella accused Tom Robinson of rape "in an effort to get rid of her own guilt" for trying to seduce him. Can you think of other instances of this psychological dynamic—one group projecting its guilt onto another and then punishing that group to preserve its own "innocence"?
14. Atticus also insists to the jury that "there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal—there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution, gentlemen, is a court" [p. 234]. Does the jury's guilty verdict invalidate Atticus's claims? Are the courts today "the great levelers," making us all equal, as Atticus believes, or do wealth and race play an inordinate role in the way justice is distributed in America?
15. Although *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in the 1930s, it was published in the 1960, just as the civil rights movement was gathering force. In what ways does the book reflect a 1960s perspective on racial issues?
16. When Atticus gives Jem and Scout air-rifles, he tells them: "Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird". Why does Atticus feel this way? Why do you think Lee chose this phrase for her title?
17. Lee creates a cast of vivid women characters in the novel: Calpurnia, Aunt Alexandra, Miss Maudie, Miss Stephanie, Mrs. Dubose, and the matrons of Aunt Alexandra's missionary circle. What do these characters add to the novel? What varying attitudes towards such issues as race, religion, and education to they express? Why does Aunt Alexandra, in particular, oppose Atticus's ways of raising his children and his defense of Tom Robinson?
18. What qualities make Atticus such an appealing figure? What beliefs does he live by? Does his behavior conform to his ideals? How does he impart his ideals to his children and his community? Is he a believable character, or too good to be true?
19. To what extent is the novel's emotional power dependent on Tom Robinson's death? How would the novel be different if he had been acquitted or simply sent to prison?
20. In what ways does *To Kill a Mockingbird* speak to the current racial issues that confront America? In what ways does it address the larger themes of growing up, learning right from wrong, and becoming an understanding, compassionate person?
21. Discuss Atticus's parenting style. What is his relationship to his children like? How does he seek to instill conscience in them?
22. Analyze the trial scene and its relationship to the rest of the novel.
23. Discuss the author's portrayal of the black community and the characters of Calpurnia and Tom Robinson. Are they realistic or idealized?

## PART 2: Topics for Research and Writing Projects (Choose 2)

1. Assume that Tom Robinson had not been killed after his conviction and write a paper exploring what you think would have happened if Atticus had brought his case before a higher court of appeals. Explain why you feel he would have won or lost. Or write a one-act play that dramatizes a second trial.
2. Harper Lee studied law and was no doubt influenced in writing her novel by some of the spectacular court cases that were revealing America's highly conflicted feelings about race. Research the Scottsboro Trial (1931), in which eight African American males were falsely accused of raping two white women while on a train to Memphis. What parallels do you find between the Scottsboro case and the fictional trial of Tom Robinson? How has Lee used material from real life to make her novel more powerful and relevant?
3. Alabama was the scene of some of the most intense and most significant struggles in the civil rights movement. Research the Birmingham bus boycott, the march on Selma, which was led by Martin Luther King, Jr., the attempted integration of public schools in Alabama, which Governor George Wallace temporarily blocked, and explore how reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* helps to illuminate these events. What does the novel tell us about both the prejudice and the compassion of the people of Alabama that made the civil rights struggles so crucial there?
4. In a 1964 interview, Harper Lee said about the craft of writing that "There's no substitute for the love of language, for the beauty of an English sentence. There's no substitute for struggling, if a struggle is needed, to make an English sentence as beautiful as it should be." Pick out several sentences in *To Kill a Mockingbird* that seem especially beautiful. Write a paper exploring what it is that makes these sentences so appealing? How would you describe Lee's style? Why is it so well-suited to the story she is telling?
5. In discussing whites' mistreatment of blacks, Atticus tells Scout and Jem: "Don't fool yourselves—it's all adding up and one of these days we're going to pay the bill for it. I hope it's not in you children's time." Write a paper exploring the ways we have paid and are still paying the "bill" for centuries of racial oppression.
6. Watch the film of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and discuss which version seems more powerful to you and why. How does the movie differ from the book? How have the screenwriter, director, and actors reshaped the material of the story to make the film? Do you agree with their choices?
7. When Atticus is preparing to defend Tom Robinson, he tells Uncle Jack: "Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don't pretend to understand...I just hope that Jem and Scout come to me for answers instead of listening to the town." Write a paper that explains why people in Maycomb do "go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up." What forces are responsible for their reactions? How does their racism manifest itself in the novel? You might want to approach this assignment by assuming the voice of a student in Maycomb composing a letter to Atticus Finch, or writing an editorial for the town's newspaper about Tom's trial.
8. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is very much about the moral education of Jem and Scout. Write a paper that explores what they learn about themselves and about the society in which they live during the course of the novel. Also explore the ways they learn what they learn. What kind of adults do you think they would turn out to be?
9. Atticus insists that to really understand someone, you have to get inside his skin. Imagine for a moment that you are Tom Robinson and write a paper in his voice. You might want to conceive of this as a series of diary entries composed before, during, and after the trial, as a letter to Atticus, after he has been convicted, or as an open letter to the town. Try to imagine how Tom would feel and what he would say.
10. Why do you think *To Kill a Mockingbird* has become a classic and has remained so popular? What is it about the book that keeps attracting readers over four decades after its initial publication? Why does it still speak to us so powerfully?