



*Harper Lee's
To Kill a Mockingbird*

Questions for Socratic Discussion
by Missy Andrews



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QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i> . Harper Lee (1960) ISBN: 10: 0446310786
<i>Plot</i>	Two children, Scout and Jem Finch, become witnesses and victims to social bigotry and racism when their father, a court appointed attorney, defends an innocent black man accused of raping a white woman.
<i>Setting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maycomb County Alabama during the Great Depression of the 1930s • Pivotal years in the childhood of the main characters • A hierarchical society based on race, class, and economics. A segregated society.
<i>Characters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scout Finch, the narrator who recounts this story from her childhood in retrospect • Jem Finch, Scout's older brother • Atticus Finch, Scout and Jem's father, an attorney who is appointed to defend Tom Robinson • Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman • Boo Radley, the town shut-in whom everyone in town thinks is insane • Bob Ewell, father of Mayella Ewell and litigant against Tom Robinson • Dill, the Finches' neighbor waif whose mother's bad behavior puts his innocence at risk • Miss Maudie Atkinson, neighbor to the Finches • Mrs. Dubose, neighbor who courageously quits her morphine habit in order to die free from addiction • Calpurnia, the Finches' housekeeper • Aunt Alexandra, Atticus's sister • Mr. Cunningham, father of one of Scout's schoolmates and the mob leader in front of the courthouse • Various other neighbors in the town
<i>Conflict</i>	Man vs. Man Man vs. Society
<i>Theme</i>	Coming of Age Loss of Innocence Maturity Empathy Justice Virtue
<i>Literary Devices</i>	Imagery Symbolism/Motif: the Mockingbird

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



1. Where does this story happen?

The story takes place in the American South before the era of civil rights reform. The author describes Maycomb, Alabama, as “a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop; grass grew on the sidewalks, the courthouse sagged in the square. Somehow, it was hotter then: a black dog suffered on a summer’s day; bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade of the live oaks on the square. Men’s stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon, after their three-o’clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum” (5). The scorching weather made residents languid. No one hurried. Their entire world was Maycomb. It was all they knew and all they wished to know” (1a, e).

Maycomb society was akin to English society and suffered from the same social castes. “There was indeed a caste system in Maycomb, but to my mind it worked this way: the older citizens, the present generation of people who had lived side by side for years and years, were utterly predictable to one another: they took for granted attitudes, character shadings, even gestures, as having been repeated in each generation and refined by time. Thus the dicta No Crawford Minds His Own Business, Every Third Merriweather is Morbid, The Truth Is Not in the Delafields, All the Bufords Walk Like That, were simply guides to daily living: never take a check from a Delafield without a discreet call to the bank Miss Maudie Atkinson’s shoulder stoops because she was a Buford; if Mrs. Grace Merriweather sips gin out of Lydia E. Pinkham bottles it’s nothing unusual – her mother did the same...” (131). Being a member of an old, established family bettered one’s social standing. “Being Southerners, it was a source of shame to some members of the family that we had no recorded ancestors on either side of the Battle of Hastings...” (3).

Social classes in Maycomb include the old landed class and working class professionals whom Jem calls “ordinary folks” (226), poor farmers (who are not to be confused with what characters in the story term poor white trash), and black negroes. Jem discusses the town pecking order with Scout in chapter 23 of the story: “You know something, Scout? I’ve got it all figured out, now. I’ve thought about it a lot lately and I’ve got it figured out. There’s four kinds of folks in the world. There’s the ordinary kind like us and the neighbors, there’s the kind like the Cunninghams out in the woods, the kind like the Ewells down at the dump, and the Negroes” (226). This conversation continues as Jem ponders the distinctions between each class, probing their origins until

his younger sister Scout concludes, “Naw, Jem, I think there’s just one kind of folks. Folks” (227). Characters among the landed class were wealthier than most, but largely middle class in comparison to real wealth. Our main character came from this kind of people historically. However, her father left the family homestead to take up Law and become a working class professional. He considers himself poor, but isn’t nearly as needy as some of his farmer neighbors, some of whom employ him and compensate him for his work with produce from their farms. These men, although poor, work hard and demonstrate thrift and integrity. Their counterparts, the poor white trash, do neither of these: instead they are given to strong drink and poor character. Atticus describes such men to his son, Jem. “As you grow older, you’ll see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don’t you forget it – whenever a white man does that to a black man, no matter who he is, how rich he is, or how fine a family he comes from, that white man is trash” (220). The main characters, Scout and Jem, motherless since birth, are raised by their father and their negro nanny Calpurnia. Cal is a member of the negro community and is treated like one of the Finch family. Even so, lines are still drawn between her community and the white neighborhoods. Segregation has divided the town between racial lines, intersecting only in the service industry. Although both the Finches and Calpurnia are Christians, they worship in segregated churches. (1h, j)

2. **When does this story happen?**

The story covers three years of time. It is placed historically in the post-Civil War segregated South, a time fraught with racial discrimination. Main characters Jem and Scout discuss this in chapter 16:

“Jem,” I asked, “what’s a mixed child?”

“Half white, half colored. You’ve seen ’em Scout. You know that red-kinky-headed one that delivers for the drugstore. He’s half white. They’re real sad.”

“Sad, how come?”

“They don’t belong anywhere. Colored folks won’t have ’em because they’re half white; white folks won’t have ’em ’cause they’re colored, so they’re just in-betweens, don’t belong anywhere” (161).

With dialogue like this, the author seeks to call Southern attitudes regarding race and social morés into question, urging the segregated South to mature beyond its ignorant and childish practices and to discover what is clear even to the children. “...there’s just one kind of folks. Folks” (227). (2a, d)

The story takes place in the main characters’ childhoods. As the story opens, Jem is ten years old, and he is nearly thirteen at the time of the climactic attack. Likewise, the story follows its narrator Scout from age 6 through 9. As such, the pages are saturated with sunshine, making the shadows of conflict stark by contrast. And shadows there are. Into this childhood intrude the ugly realities of racial discrimination, hatred, and murderous vengeance, all of which threaten not only to devastate childish innocence, but

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



3. Who is the story about? (Protagonist)

It's difficult to separate the three main characters in the story as their lives and destinies are so entwined. The Finches, young Jem, Scout, and their father Atticus, share the role of protagonist. Of these, it is Scout who narrates the tale retrospectively from the relative safety and distance of adulthood. Yet as she speaks of those childhood years and their contents, pivotal events that would change her forever, her voice and tone become again those of a six to nine year old tomboy, full of imagination and mischief, largely trusting and carefree in a world pregnant with malignity and care that calls for caution.

Jem Finch -

Although Scout narrates the story, telling of events she experienced with her brother, Jem, it is truly Jem's story that she tells. She, like most younger siblings, is witness to changes in Jem that precipitate changes in herself. In the opening lines of the story, Scout orients readers to bear witness with her to her brother's critical years in the process of coming of age: "When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed, and Jem's fears of never being able to play football were assuaged, he was seldom self-conscious about his injury. His left arm was somewhat shorter than his right; when he stood or walked, the back of his hand was at right angles to his body, his thumb parallel to his thigh. He couldn't have cared less, so long as he could pass and punt" (p.3). With a frankness absent any sentimentality, Scout includes her readers in her retrospective so that they know from the outset that Jem lives to tell. Not only that, but re-readers will appreciate the assurance that the author provides through her narrator regarding the effects Jem's harrowing experience will have upon his psyche. That he recovers not only his health, but his perspective and remains "unselfconscious" of his injuries, still more concerned with football than the lurid realities his attack evidenced suggests that at least one mockingbird in the story is spared devastation. As a matter of fact, Lee begins to answer one of her major story questions even as she begins her novel: Will the children manage to come to maturity through their experiences without losing their innocence? Jem's full recovery and healthy psychological state foreshadow not only a growing story conflict, but also a good resolution.

Jem, Scout's elder brother by four years, is a typical boy. He loves football, action, and mischief. The last of these finds him and his tagalong little sister regularly. He has an active imagination, but not so active as to furnish him with respect for the manliness of his aging father, a respectable town lawyer who refuses to play in the yearly

father-son football games or hunts. Jem is crestfallen and watches the game from the sidelines under a cloud of gloom. However, when an incident with a mad dog reveals his father's local legend sharpshooter status as "One-Shot Finch," Jem learns to think differently about manhood. That Atticus never told them about his talent does not escape Jem's notice: "Atticus is real old, but I wouldn't care if he couldn't do anything – I wouldn't care if he couldn't do a blessed thing...Atticus is a gentleman, just like me!" (99) In that moment, Jem finds a true model of manhood: necessary strength coupled with humility. On the cusp of adolescence, Jem is obsessed with manhood, and longs to take his place among the real men of Maycomb. He changes over the course of the story from a young scamp to an introspective and thoughtful young man. The events that precipitate these changes wrest childhood from the boy and assault him with manhood in his prime. (3m, n)

Scout Finch –

Scout, Jem's younger sister, takes precocious to a new level. She reads long before she enters school, thanks to her father's careful tutelage over the evening papers – a past time her first teacher, schooled in more modern philosophies of education, means to stop. Unlike Jem, Scout's not at all interested in the content of adulthood. She can't be tempted to any feminine pursuits, finding even the dress of her sex restrictive and stuffy. She prefers her overalls and Jem's company to anything else and trails after him throughout Part One of the story like a favorite playmate. Scout is frank, but truthful, an earnest devotee of her dad, and a faithful friend once won. She is open and unsuspecting, both common traits for 6-9 year olds. She never suspects anyone in her town of wishing her or her people harm. Both she and Jem are curious, especially about town gossip and its history. Most particularly, the children burn with curiosity regarding the introverted recluse that lives in the house next door, Boo Radley. Making his acquaintance is at once their most coveted wish and most fearful nightmare. (3b, d, f, m, n)

Atticus Finch –

Atticus, Scout and Jem's father, is older than most of the parents of his children's peers. Unlike the rest of his landed family, he opted to leave his old homestead, Finch Landing, when he came of age to study law. Coming home, he established a practice in Maycomb, quickly earning a reputation for his intelligence and integrity. Simultaneously, he developed a "profound distaste for the practice of criminal law" due to the vulgarity and ignorance of many of the populace he sought to defend. (5) Atticus belonged to the town as much as the town belonged to Atticus: "He liked Maycomb, he was Maycomb County born and bred; he knew his people, they knew him, and because of Simon Finch's industry, Atticus was related by blood or marriage to nearly every family in town" (5). Equipped with a keen sense of justice and unimpeachable character, his career dealing with the underbelly of Maycomb society made him a loyal defender of the innocent and oppressed. He hadn't the stomach for meanness, and cautioned his son, Jem, against harming even the smallest of the innocents: "Atticus wasn't interested in guns. Atticus said to Jem one day, 'I'd rather you shot at tin cans in the back yard, but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit 'em, but

remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (90). Although uninterested in violence, events in the story make it clear that he'd earned the reputation of sharpshooter in his youth, a fact that astonishes Jem (97).

Maycomb papers describe Atticus as doing the jobs no one else will do. (116) Miss Maudie Atkinson describes him as one of the men in this world "born to do [our] unpleasant jobs for us... We're so rarely called on to be Christians, but when we are, we've got men like Atticus to go for us" (215). Atticus's Christian behavior, his gentleness and consideration, his integrity and moral code not only shine in the community darkness, but become a light that guides his son to maturity. Perhaps Jem comes to know his father best of all: "Atticus is a gentleman, just like me!" (99) Jem's desire to identify with his father offers the promise of shelter for Jem in the stormy seasons of the novel. (3b, f, h, j, m, p, q)

Motivations of the three protagonists vary:

Jem wants to be a man and strives to make sense of the world around him. (3m)

Scout wants to be free, to understand what's transpired around her, and by the story's close, has decided to aspire to the station of a lady. (3m)

Atticus wants to defend the right and to protect the innocent, in particular his client, Tom Robinson. When Tom is killed, he wishes to go about his business unmolested, to raise his kids without bigotry, cynicism, or hatred, and in comparative safety from the world.

Each of these protagonists is a kind of innocent like Atticus's mockingbirds, naïve to some degree about man's nature, trusting, unsuspecting, and earnest in service.

To their number we must add:

Boo Radley –

Boo is the retiring neighbor of the Finches whose colorful history, worthy of Maycomb gossip, captivates the imagination of the children. After a renegade spree as an adolescent that temporarily landed him in reform school, he disappeared into his parents' home and was never seen in public again. Reclusive and shy he watches the town from behind his shuttered windows, warming to the children who craved a glimpse of him. A silent guardian, his watchful presence permeates the story and teaches Jem and Scout some powerful object lessons. He, too, is an "innocent," a mockingbird. (3e, f, k, m, p, q)

Tom Robinson –

A black man who stands accused of raping a white woman, kind and upright Tom has lost his court battle before it ever starts. A father and husband, he is well known in the black community for his honesty and his work ethic. He demonstrates his

compassion for others by helping abused Mayella Ewell with small chores when he is able. In fact, it is his compassion for her that turns the white jury against him; they consider it audacity for a black man to pity a white woman. (204) A childhood farming accident robbed Tom of the use of his left arm, a fact that becomes important evidence in his trial. (186) Tom, too, is a mockingbird in the story. (3f, j, l, p, q)

Dill Harrison –

Dill is the sometime neighbor of Scout and Jem. His mother's neglect and low morals have robbed him of his innocence young. He finds haven at his aunt's home during the long idyllic summers of his childhood. He, too, is a kind of innocent in the story, exposed to the world's vulgarity prematurely. (3p, q)

Calpurnia –

Black housekeeper and nanny to Jem and Scout, Cal has her hands full. She loves the Finch family and is beloved by them. She provides the Finches with a touchstone to the black community. It's through her that Scout and Jem meet Reverend Sykes, the black pastor who thinks so highly of Atticus for his defense of Tom. (211) (3f, l)

Aunt Alexandra-

Atticus's old school sister who is summoned to his home to help him and the children weather the storm of abuse Atticus's defense of Tom evokes. Stiff and starchy though she be, Scout learns to respect her grace under pressure and to emulate it. (236-237) (3f, l)

Miss Dubose-

Neighbor to the Finches, Mrs. Dubose is a cranky old woman who suffers from a debilitating disease. Her strength of spirit and will enabled her to face down the prescription morphine to which she'd become addicted, that she might meet her maker with a clear mind. An incident between her and Jem teaches the boy to control his temper and respect others, as he doesn't know the personal battles that they may fight. (3e, f, m, q)

Miss Maudie Atkinson-

Miss Maudie lives across the street from the Finches. She is, perhaps, their closest neighbor and friend. She helps to look after the children, informally, sharing her wisdom regarding human nature (and Atticus) with them. (42) Her observations influence the children and encourage them to adopt Atticus's general view of the world. (3f, o)

The Cunninghams-

These are the poor, uneducated farm family whose boy, Walter, Scout befriends after they've tussled in the schoolyard. Mr. Cunningham hires Atticus to help him with a

legal matter (his entailment) and pays him with hickory nuts and firewood. The Cunninghams are proud and refuse handouts. Although stirred to mob violence against Tom, Mr. Cunningham is chastened by his conscience in the presence of Scout, abandoning his intentions and taking his mob with him. (153-154) His encounter with Scout before the town jail demonstrates the humanizing effects of innocence on a mob and provides some hope that this might save the South from the devastating effects of racism in the end. He is the lone juror who refuses to cast a guilty verdict for Tom. (31, m, o, p)

4. Who else is the story about?

Bob Ewell--

Clearly the antagonist in the story, Bob Ewell is a man of no character and little sense. Racial bigotry and alcoholism define and motivate him. His multitude of children bear the brunt of his sloth and abuse. Locating his residence next to the town dump, the author makes it clear that Ewell is of the white trash variety in the social hierarchy. His seamy story is artfully and tactfully represented in the courtroom scenes where he plays the enraged father of a raped daughter, but blindly betrays himself as the liar and abuser before the witness of the town. Thereafter, he adds murderous grudgeholder to his list of negative traits, stalking Atticus and his family for vengeance for his “tarnished reputation.” (4a, h, k, n)

Mayella Ewell—

The victim of Tom Robinson’s supposed crime, this girl evokes pity. Abused and lonely, she reaches out to Tom for friendship, first plying him for much needed help, then later with unsolicited and unwelcome affection. This discovered by her father, she endures his wrath and beating, which necessitates a call for a doctor and the eventual accusation of Tom for a rape he never committed. Although influenced by her father, Mayella evokes sympathy not only because of her status as a victim of her father’s lifestyle, but also because of her desire to raise herself from the mire of poverty. Lee describes her attention to beautifying her surroundings in her unfortunate home: “One corner of the yard, though, bewildered Maycomb. Against the fence, in a line, were six chipped-enamel slop jars holding brilliant red geraniums, cared for as tenderly as if they belonged to Miss Maudie Atkinson, had Miss Maudie deigned to permit a geranium on her premises. People said they were Mayella Ewell’s” (170-171). In spite of her impoverished condition, Mayella carves out a small place to assert her individuality.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



5. What does the protagonist want?

Should one consider Jem the major protagonist, the story charts the following desires:

- to see Boo Radley
- to be a gentleman like Atticus
- to understand the world around him and discover his place in it. To grow up.

Since Scout follows Jem throughout the story both literally and figuratively in his trajectory toward adulthood, these objectives describe her as well (with the slight omission of Jem's desire to be a man). Should one chart Scout's journey to maturity, her desires for safety, understanding, and maturity inform the plot.

Atticus underscores this in a conversation with his brother Jack when Scout is caught fighting at school: "Scout's got to learn to keep her head and learn soon, with what's in store for her these next few months. She's coming along, though. Jem's getting older and she follows his example a good bit now. All she needs is assistance sometimes" (88). Scout's not far behind Jem in this coming of age experience.

6. Why can't he have it?

Jem faces several challenges in his struggle to mature. In particular, the prejudices of what seem to be decent neighbors produce confusion in Jim as he endeavors to understand the social hierarchy into which he was born. Jem wants understanding, and the mob mentality, sin, and ignorance to which he is witness in the general community has the potential to create cynicism in his newly awakening conscience. Jem's main objective is to make sense of the world he's growing into and to find his moral compass or place within it. He is attempting to come of age. Violence and perversion of the world as well as his own selfishness and myopia makes this a process fraught with danger.

7. What other problems are there in the story?

As his community censures his father, Jem is led to consider the motivations and ideals that govern Atticus and to determine whether he will adopt similar values himself. Young and impressionable, Jem's desire to belong to the social group and the strong influence of popular thought threaten his journey to maturity. The bigotry of the white community, however, and the racial prejudices that result in Tom's sham conviction

offend Jem's sense of justice. His resulting anger at these injustices reveals his own sin nature, which threatens his intention to be a gentleman. Miss Maudie Atkinson and Atticus help him sort these things out. (215) These conflicts find their fullest expression in Bob Ewell's malevolent and vindictive nature, which threatens the lives of both Jem and Scout.

Scout's obstacles are similar to Jem's; yet, Scout is a hothead. She is naïve and innocent. Since she is subject to her culture and her elders, some of whom are malevolent, her innocence is at risk. Both Scout and Jem need to arrive at maturity without bitterness and cynicism.

This describes Atticus's greater goal as well, to see his children through the difficulties before them and shelter them as they progress from innocence to experience. This is a tall order in segregated Maycomb. The South, with all of its cultural biases, racism, and prejudices, threatens his every intention. He faces his children's undiscovered sin natures, their naivete, the ignorance of his neighbors, malevolent men, and even his own naïve determination to think well of others in his quest to raise his children to respectable adulthood.

8. What happens in the story?

- Jem gets a "strong dose" (212)
- Bob Ewell spits on Atticus and threatens him. (217 and 248)
- Atticus won't carry a gun.
- October comes with Halloween and darkness. (254-255)

9. How is the main problem solved?

Jem achieves understanding and adopts Atticus's tone and views. (238, 259, 265)
(9a)

Jem accomplishes this through the constancy of his father and good neighbors. (215, 221, 225, and 281) (9b)

The situation has a satisfying, if horrifying resolution. Bob Ewell is thwarted in his attack on the children. (260-263)

The pivotal plot moment comes in the form of an attack on the children by a drunken and vengeful Bob Ewell. Having been exposed in the courtroom by Atticus's defense, Ewell swears to extract revenge. He preys on the children as they walk alone one night after a school pageant. The violent encounter leaves Jem unconscious with a broken arm. Scout, who suffers the entire incident from inside a chicken wire ham costume she has worn for the pageant, struggles to make sense of the action. Grabbed from behind, she hears Jem fighting her attacker. Once the scuffling and sounds of

struggle cease, she locates an unconscious man, presumably their attacker, with her bare feet: “My toes touched trousers, a belt buckle, buttons, something I could not identify, a collar, and a face. A prickly stubble on the face told me it was not Jem’s. I smelled stale whiskey” (263). Through her narrow peephole, she sees Jem, unconscious, being carried home in the arms of a stranger. “[I] looked down to the street light. A man was passing under it. The man was walking with the staccato steps of someone carrying a load too heavy for him. He was going around the corner. He was carrying Jem. Jem’s arm was dangling crazily in front of him” (263). Once at home, Scout discovers their deliverer to be the elusive Boo Radley. Aiding the children, he has slain Bob Ewell, their attacker. The entire episode stuns Atticus, whose gentleness never allowed him to imagine Ewell capable of making good on his threats. That the catastrophe is prevented by Boo, an innocent, underscores the significance of preserving mockingbirds.

Other pivotal moments include a conversation between Jem and Scout in chapter 25 regarding her intentions to squash a roly-poly: “Don’t do that, Scout. Set him out on the back steps” (238). Jem’s admonition suggests he has internalized his father’s moral teaching regarding the treatment of innocents. When Scout questions why she “couldn’t mash him,” he replies, “Because they don’t bother you...” (238). Scout concludes that her brother is “getting more like a girl every day...” (239). This passing incident reinforces one of the story’s major themes, preserving innocence and preventing violent injustice. It answers the question of whether or not Jem will adopt his father’s values or his society’s and suggests that he is maturing.

Finally, Atticus’s conversation with Scout after the attack about Heck Tate’s decision to bury the truth of the incident to spare Boo public exposure marks a third possible climactic moment:

“Scout,” [Atticus] said, “Mr. Ewell fell on his knife. Can you possibly understand?”

Atticus looked like he needed cheering up. I ran to him and hugged him and kissed him with all my might. “Yes, sir, I understand,” I reassured him. “Mr. Tate was right.”

Atticus disengaged himself and looked at me. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it’d be sort of like shootin’ a mockingbird, wouldn’t it?” (276)

Scout’s understanding bears evidence that she, too, has internalized Atticus’s lessons and like Jem has found her way safely through the confusion to moral security. (9d)

Jem’s conversation with Scout might also be identified as an element of foreshadowing, planted to suggest his preparedness for the final, violent obstacle to his well-being. Bob Ewell’s attack, Boo’s rescue, Heck Tate’s decision, and Scout’s subsequent conversation with Atticus might just as well be interpreted as validation that Jem will be fine. Since Scout has matured alongside her brother, learning from him, her

ability to navigate the scenario without moral confusion or compromise assures the reader that her brother, too, will triumph. (9d, e)

10. How does the story end?

The story ends with Scout taking Boo’s hand and walking him home. Standing on the porch of the Radley house, she considers the town from his vantage: “Street lights winked down the street all the way to town. I had never seen our neighborhood from this angle...” (278). She imagines Boo watching her brother and her at play through the seasons. “It was still summertime, and the children came closer. A boy trudged down the sidewalk dragging a fishingpole behind him. A man stood waiting with his hands on his hips. Summertime, and his children played in the front yard with their friend, enacting a strange little drama of their own invention. It was fall, and his children fought on the sidewalk in front of Mrs. Dubose’s... Winter, and his children shivered at the front gate, silhouetted against a blazing house... Summer, and he watched his children’s heart break. Autumn again, and Boo’s children needed him” (279). Lee artfully depicts Scout’s growing realization that Boo has claimed Jem and herself as his own throughout the years. Never a dangerous foe, but always a gentle guardian, Boo has witnessed everything from afar. She concludes: “Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough” (279). Scout’s newly gained perspective punctuates her recent conversation with Atticus and assures her budding maturity. In the story’s final scene, Lee depicts Atticus sitting up through the night watches with Jem, a sure and stable anchor providing all the necessary security for his children.

Scout’s parting words validate the reader’s belief that the children will be well. Not only have they weathered the confusion and violence that beset them, but they have also retained their childish spirits in the process: “As I made my way home, I thought Jem and I would get grown but there wasn’t much else left for us to learn, except possibly algebra” (279). (10a, f)

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



11. What do they learn?

The children have learned to see the world through the eyes of others. (11a)

They do in fact begin to act differently. (228, 238-239, and 259) (11b)

Scout's conversation with Atticus provides explanation regarding the things she has learned throughout the story. In this, she draws upon the mockingbird motif. Her narrative on the Radley porch provides further explanation. (11e, f)

13. What is the main idea of the story?

From Atticus, the story derives themes of the significance of quiet virtue, faithfulness, defense of the justice of the oppressed, the importance of behaving like a gentleman or keeping a moral compass in the face of social persecution, and humility. Overall, the theme highlights the significance of defending the innocent. Utilizing the image of the mockingbird introduced with Atticus's words to Jem in Chapter 10, Lee develops this idea throughout the narration, illuminating the figurative mockingbirds or innocents among her cast of characters and punctuating significant plot moments in which the survival of innocents is at stake with further allusions to mockingbirds. Figurative mockingbirds in the story include Tom Robinson and his family, Boo Radley, Dill, Mayella Ewell to some extent, and even Atticus himself. Atticus is perhaps the least expected mockingbird. Having made a career in the underbelly of society, he has managed to retain his faith in his fellow man. He doesn't impugn Bob Ewell in his obvious motives. He is what he hopes to raise Jem and Scout to be; an innocent adult who has made it to maturity without adopting cynicism.

More significantly, however, Lee paints the South itself as a sort of mockingbird, threatened by the social unrest, its innocence precariously balanced as it struggles toward maturity of tolerance and social equality. Like the innocent children in the story, the south struggles with blindness in its inability to consider life from someone else's perspective. Writing for her Southern contemporaries on the eve of the Civil Rights Movement, she challenges their right to live at the expense of others. Adopting the voice of an innocent, she faces the ignorant mob of her neighbors like Scout before the mob at the jail in an effort to startle them into a moment of self-reflection and inspire their better humanity. Her attempt is evocative of Atticus's respect and gentleness, an inspiring determination to think the best of the individuals that compose the society around her. (13a, b, e)

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



16. Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader's mind?

Imagery—

“Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop; grass grew on the sidewalks, the courthouse sagged in the square. Somehow it was hotter then: a black dog suffered on a summer's day; bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade of the live oaks on the square. Men's stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon, after their three-o'clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum” (5). (16a, c)

Metaphor—

Lee compares the innocents in her story with mockingbirds, which “don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, 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” (90). Lee uses the metaphor to suggest the injustice of social innocents like children, oppressed races, and social misfits. She punctuates significant moments in the plot with haunting mockingbird calls. For example, as the children embark on their walk to the school the night of the fateful attack, a mockingbird accompanies them: “High above us in the darkness a solitary mocker poured out his repertoire in blissful unawareness of whose tree he sat in, plunging from the shrill kee, kee of the sunflower bird to the irascible qua-ack of a bluejay, to a sad lament of Poor Will. Poor Will. Poor Will” (254-255). Not only do the haunting calls intensify the loneliness of the place, but they also suggest the action which will soon occur. Scout's reference to the mockingbird in her conversation with Atticus after the attack utilizes the symbol as well. (16h, l) In this way, Lee underscores her theme through poetic literary devices.

17. Does the author use the characters and events in her story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way?

Dramatic Irony-

Lee utilizes dramatic irony by alerting readers to the story's outcome on the first page. The security of the children's lives is never really in question. Neither is their

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



18. Who is the author?

Nelle Harper Lee was born in Monroeville, Alabama on April 28th, 1926, as the youngest of four children born to Amasa and Frances Finch. Much like Lee's stalwart hero, Atticus Finch, Amasa served in Alabama state legislature from 1926 to 1938. In 1931 when Lee was only five years old, 9 black men were accused of raping 2 white women near Scottsboro, Alabama. 5 of the men were convicted and sentenced to long prison terms. Later known as "The Scottsboro Case," this event became an early seed for Lee's work.

Lee grew up next door to Truman Capote and they became lifelong friends and colleagues. Capote may have inspired Dill's character. While Capote chafed in the small-town scene and looked forward with eagerness to widening his world, Lee appreciated the slow and steady pace of life in their southern community with its population of just 7,000. Their differing perspectives on their small-town upbringings are reflected in their works. Lee with her *To Kill a Mockingbird* professed the wholesome, long-suffering truth of her family motto: "People are people anywhere you put them," while Capote's *In Cold Blood* showed a more cynical perspective on human nature in a rural community. Despite their contrasting views, the two remained close-friends throughout their lives, Lee even helped Capote with his research for *In Cold Blood*.

Lee wrote her own novel in the 1950's, publishing it in 1960 just before the height of the Civil Rights Movement. The novel was an instant success, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 and becoming a major motion picture in 1962. She sold over 15 million copies. After the initial clamor of fame, Lee was nominated for the National Counsel of the Arts by Linden B. Johnson and has since been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2007.

Yet, in the face of all this acclaim and attention, Lee became an introvert and declined interviews. Though she published a few short stories after *Mockingbird*, the classic stood as her only novel until the publication of *Go Set A Watchmen* in 2015. Though written previously to *Mockingbird*, the publisher billed it as a sequel to the classic. Like its predecessor, this work was heralded with world-wide anticipation. Amazon labeled it "the most preordered book" since J.K.Rowling's cult classic *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

Lee passed away soon after the publication of this final work, on February 19, 2016 in Monroeville, Alabama. She was 89.

ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. Who is the true protagonist of this story? How do you know?
2. Examine the setting of the story. How does the social atmosphere of this sleepy little Southern town influence the conflict of the story? Would the story be just as effective if the setting were drastically changed?
3. Jem searches for examples of true manhood throughout the story. Who are his primary examples of manhood? According to these examples, what is a good man?
4. Lee does an amazing job of placing her characters in settings which deepen or reflect their personalities. What do Mayella Ewell's surroundings communicate about her character? Boo Radley's?
5. What is the most important thing to Scout? What does she want most in all the world? Why can't she have it? What kind of a conflict is this?
6. Examine the symbol of the mockingbird. What does Lee intend to communicate with her metaphorical statement: "It's a sin to kill a mockingbird?" Who are the mockingbirds in the story?
7. What is Lee saying about the nature of maturity and youth in this story? Do you agree with her?

STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *themes* of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central *conflict*. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected – even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee: Story Chart #1 Jem Finch

SETTING

Maycomb County, Alabama.
A tired small town community whose members are set in their ways. The family of the widely respected local lawyer, Atticus Finch.
In the childhood of the main characters: Scout and Jem.

CHARACTERS

Jean-Louise "Scout" Finch, only daughter of Atticus Finch. She is six years old when the story begins.
Jem Finch, Scout's older brother, is right on the brink of maturity at ten years old.
Atticus Finch, their faithful father, a good man and a just one who is determined to do the right thing, against all odds.
Boo Radley, the shut-in who lives next door to the Finch family.
Tom Robinson, the black man on trial for a crime he didn't commit. Atticus's client.
Dill, Scout and Jem's childhood friend who lives next door.
Aunt Alexandra, Atticus's sister and the only dignifying influence for "Jean Louise."

Climax:

The attack. Issues of racial prejudice, mankind's perverse nature, and malevolence against mockingbirds converge and threaten Jem's very life. He proves himself a gentleman as he steps in to save his sister, an innocent.

Rising Action:

1. The Robinson case- people's words about his father threaten Jem's conception of true manhood.
2. Jem's own inability to consider others threatens his relationships
3. Bob Ewell's menacing threats endanger Jem and Scout. Will they have the chance to mature?

Denouement:

The rescue, medical treatment, and the serving of justice at the hands of unlikely hero, Boo Radley.

THEME:

It's a sin to kill a mockingbird.
(Innocence should be protected.)
Consider others.
Act a Gentleman.

Exposition:

Jem comes of age in a time of societal prejudice and bigotry. Eager to learn how to be a man, Jem must decide which of the many examples of maturity before him are worthy of emulation.

Conclusion:

Scout's perspective on page 1 as she recounts the story retrospectively. Jem continues to mature. He has the opportunity to grow in his understanding of these issues he has grappled with in this book.

PLOT

CONFLICT

Jem wants: To see Boo (Man vs. Self/Society)
To grow up and be a gentleman like Atticus (Man vs. Self)
To see justice and decency upheld (Man vs. Society)
To be safe (Man vs. Man)

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee: Story Chart #2 Scout Finch

SETTING

Maycomb County, Alabama.
 A tired small town community whose members are set in their ways.
 The family of the widely respected local lawyer, Atticus Finch.
 In the childhood of the main characters: Scout and Jem.

CHARACTERS

Jean-Louise "Scout" Finch, only daughter of Atticus Finch. She is six years old when the story begins.
 Jem Finch, Scout's older brother, is right on the brink of maturity at ten years old.
 Atticus Finch, their faithful father, a good man and a just one who is determined to do the right thing, against all odds.
 Boo Radley, the shut-in who lives next door to the Finch family.
 Tom Robinson, the black man on trial for a crime he didn't commit. Atticus's client.
 Dill, Scout and Jem's childhood friend who lives next door.
 Aunt Alexandra, Atticus's sister and the only dignifying influence for "Jean Louise."

Climax:

Standing on Boo's porch, Scout sees through another person's eyes (279). She gains the perspective and the understanding that she has been struggling for throughout the story.

Rising Action:

1. Aunt Alexandra and the community try to force Scout into the mold of a lady.
2. Scout's own naivete and hot-tempered nature get her into trouble.
3. Bob Ewell threatens Scout's life.

Denouement:

"Jem and I would get grown."

THEME:

Value of innocence, hope, goodness, and childlikeness.

Exposition:

Scout is very young at the start of the story, not as aware as Jem of the social tensions and issues at hand. She struggles to understand why all men aren't good and upright like her father.

Conclusion:

Atticus remains, a guard against the malevolence so that Jem and Scout can mature in safety.

PLOT

CONFLICT

Scout wants: Safety (Man vs Society/Man vs. Man)
 To understand (Man vs. Self)
 To be upright, a lady (Man vs. Self)

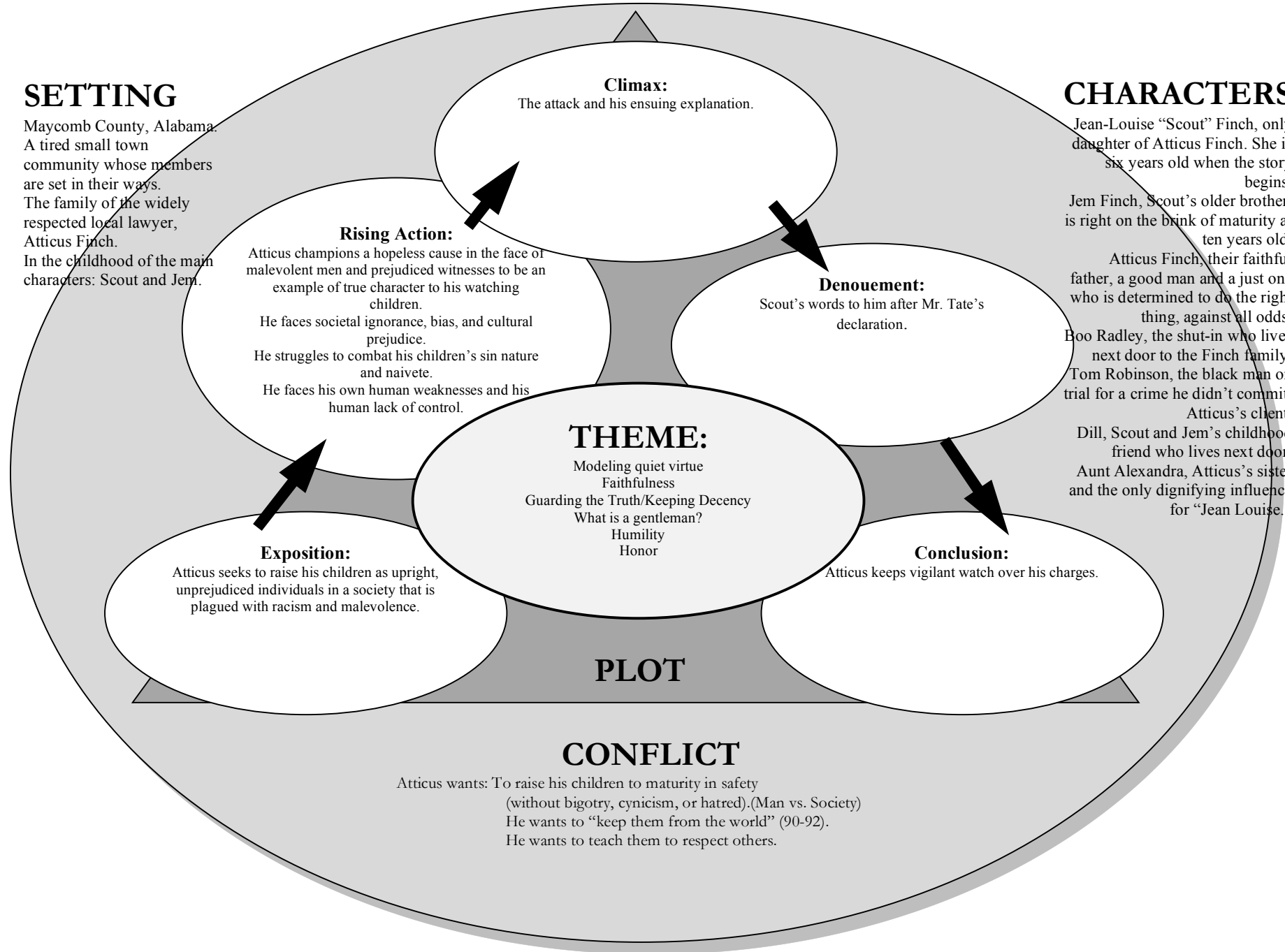
To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee: Story Chart #3 Atticus Finch

SETTING

Maycomb County, Alabama
 A tired small town community whose members are set in their ways.
 The family of the widely respected local lawyer, Atticus Finch.
 In the childhood of the main characters: Scout and Jem.

CHARACTERS

Jean-Louise "Scout" Finch, only daughter of Atticus Finch. She is six years old when the story begins.
 Jem Finch, Scout's older brother, is right on the brink of maturity at ten years old.
 Atticus Finch, their faithful father, a good man and a just one who is determined to do the right thing, against all odds.
 Boo Radley, the shut-in who lives next door to the Finch family.
 Tom Robinson, the black man on trial for a crime he didn't commit. Atticus's client.
 Dill, Scout and Jem's childhood friend who lives next door.
 Aunt Alexandra, Atticus's sister and the only dignifying influence for "Jean Louise."



Rising Action:

Atticus champions a hopeless cause in the face of malevolent men and prejudiced witnesses to be an example of true character to his watching children.
 He faces societal ignorance, bias, and cultural prejudice.
 He struggles to combat his children's sin nature and naivete.
 He faces his own human weaknesses and his human lack of control.

Climax:

The attack and his ensuing explanation.

Denouement:

Scout's words to him after Mr. Tate's declaration.

THEME:

Modeling quiet virtue
 Faithfulness
 Guarding the Truth/Keeping Decency
 What is a gentleman?
 Humility
 Honor

Exposition:

Atticus seeks to raise his children as upright, unprejudiced individuals in a society that is plagued with racism and malevolence.

Conclusion:

Atticus keeps vigilant watch over his charges.

PLOT

CONFLICT

Atticus wants: To raise his children to maturity in safety (without bigotry, cynicism, or hatred). (Man vs. Society)
 He wants to "keep them from the world" (90-92).
 He wants to teach them to respect others.

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee: Story Chart

