Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

To Kill a Mockingbird

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Plot

- Maycomb, Alabama, 1933 to 1935. Scout Finch, looking back as an adult, tells the story of her childhood with her brother Jem, their friend Dill and their father Atticus, a lawyer. Calpurnia, their Black cook, helps bring them up.
- Part One: the children are fascinated by their hidden neighbour, Boo Radley, who secretly leaves gifts in a tree. They learn about courage from Mrs Dubose, who fights her morphine addiction before she dies.
- Part Two: Atticus defends Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of raping Mayella Ewell. Atticus shows Tom's left arm is useless and that Mayella was beaten by a left-handed man, like her father, Bob Ewell. The all-white jury still finds Tom guilty, and he is later shot dead trying to escape.
- Bob Ewell attacks Jem and Scout on Halloween night. Boo Radley saves them and kills Ewell. The sheriff says Ewell fell on his own knife, to protect Boo, and Scout finally stands on Boo's porch and sees the street as he does.

Characters

- Scout: a curious, outspoken tomboy who grows in understanding. Jem: matures through the trial and is deeply hurt by its injustice.
- Atticus: calm, fair and brave; he teaches **empathy** and stands up for Tom when the town is against him.
- Tom Robinson and Boo Radley are the novel's "mockingbirds": innocent people harmed by others.
- Bob Ewell: poor, cruel and racist. Mayella: lonely and abused, she accuses Tom to hide her own actions.

Themes and context

- Racism and injustice: the **Jim Crow laws** kept Black and white Americans apart in the South. The Scottsboro case (1931), in which nine Black teenagers were falsely accused, is often linked with Tom's trial.
- Innocence and growing up, courage (Atticus and Mrs Dubose), **empathy** (seeing things from another's point of view), and class, from the respectable Finches to the poor Cunninghams and the Ewells.
- Harper Lee published it in 1960, during the civil rights movement, so readers saw the 1930s through the struggles of their own time.

Key quotations

- Atticus says it is "a sin to kill a mockingbird", which explains the title.
- Scout's simple "Hey, Boo" at the end shows how her fear has turned into understanding.

How to get top marks

- Write about the narrative voice: adult Scout looks back on her younger self, so we see events with a child's innocence and an adult's understanding.
- Link the two parts: Boo Radley and Tom Robinson are both judged by rumour and **prejudice**.
- Use context to explain, not just to add facts: the jury's verdict shows how the law served white people in the South.

Key terms

Narrator	The voice that tells the story; here an adult Scout looking back.
Jim Crow laws	Laws in the southern USA that enforced racial segregation.
Symbol	An object or character that stands for an idea, like the mockingbird for innocence.
Prejudice	An unfair opinion of someone because of their group.
Empathy	Understanding how someone else feels.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where is To Kill a Mockingbird set?
2. Who narrates the novel?
3. Who is Tom Robinson accused of raping?
4. What evidence shows Tom could not have beaten Mayella?

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5. Who saves Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell?
6. What does the mockingbird stand for?
7. Whose courage in fighting her addiction does Atticus admire?
8. When was the novel published?

Answers

1. Maycomb, Alabama
2. Scout Finch, as an adult looking back
3. Mayella Ewell
4. His left arm is useless
5. Boo Radley
6. Innocence
7. Mrs Dubose
8. 1960

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

Free revision for GCSE and KS3 at lycolearn.co.uk. Some notes are for one exam board only, and say so in brackets.

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