

AP Language and Composition Summer Reading Assignment

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

Over the summer, read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Written by Harper Lee in 1960 as the Civil Rights Movement was gaining speed, this is a story of growing up during the Great Depression in a world that, in many ways, was completely defined and controlled by prejudice and racial segregation. The novel is fiction, but Lee draws from her own experiences growing up in Alabama during the 1930s. Unfortunately, the school cannot check out books over the summer, so please purchase this book (in hard copy), and bring it to class in September.

Before reading, read the provided background on Harper Lee and the novel. This will help you understand the novel's historical context.

While reading, use the following schedule to respond to the novel. The assignment needs to be typed (and SAVED) so that it can be submitted to TurnItIn.com in September. For each of the 8 sections listed, select a quote that relates to one of the listed thematic topics. Type up the quote and its citation. Then, explain how each quote relates to a thematic topic. Analyze how specific details and phrases in the quote develop significant messages about these topics. The explanation needs to be written in paragraph form, and should be 6-8 sentences in length. You may use different thematic topics throughout your responses.

Reading Sections

Chapters 1-4
Chapters 5-8
Chapters 9-11
Chapters 12-14
Chapters 15-17
Chapters 18-21
Chapters 22-26
Chapters 27-31

Possible Thematic Topics

Ignorance vs. Knowledge
Cowardice vs. Heroism
Guilt vs. Innocence
Prejudice (stereotypes) vs. Tolerance
Injustice vs. Justice (truth)

After reading,

- We encourage you to watch the Academy Award winning film that brilliantly captures the novel's essential characters and themes.
- You may want to read the novel's "sequel" entitled *Go Set a Watchman* that was released in July 2015. While *Go Set a Watchman* is set after *To Kill a Mockingbird* and with some of the same characters, it was actually written before *TKaM*.

When you return to school:

- Early in September, you will have an objective test over the novel (before we actually have any discussions on it).
- You will submit your quotation and theme tracking assignment to TurnItIn.com.
- You will write a synthesis essay that uses *TKaM* as one of the sources. Specific information on the essay will be given out at the beginning of the year.
- Be prepared to share your ideas and opinions about the book in discussions.

If you have questions over the summer, please email Ms. Dean (DeanK@issaquah.wednet.edu).

Introducing the Novel

Mockingbirds 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.

—*To Kill a Mockingbird*

In 1991 the Library of Congress conducted a survey of book readers. Readers were asked to cite books that had made a difference in their lives. One of the books most often cited was Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The only book ranked higher by readers was the Bible.

Harper Lee's novel, originally published in 1960, opens with an adult Scout Finch reminiscing about her childhood. Through Scout's memories, the reader is transported into the world of a small southern town in the 1930s. Using a literary technique called **flashback**, Lee interrupts Scout's chronological narrative to reach back in time and enhance and amplify the story with prior events.

Throughout her childhood, Scout develops and expands her values and ideas as she encounters characters who come from all levels of Maycomb's society. While other novels have explored similar themes as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, few have done so in such a rich and enduring way. Scout learns about justice and injustice by watching the trial of an African American man. She witnesses the divisions of class and race in her small town. She discovers courage, both in herself and in those around her, and she comes to respect the diversity of the people in her community, people such as Tom Robinson and Boo Radley. There is rarely a situation in which Scout does not learn something new about education, superstition, bravery, or cowardice.

The story Lee tells evolves in a world where children lose their innocence as they grow up and encounter the harsh realities of adult life. Yet Lee's story is also about accepting people for who they are, whether they have a different skin color, like Tom Robinson, or are eccentric, like Boo Radley.

In a review of the novel for the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, Richard Sullivan praised Lee's ability to tell a story. He wrote:

There is a wit, grace, and skill in the telling. . . . [Each character] contributes to the quiet, sustained humor, the occasionally intense drama, the often taut suspense which all rise out of this rich and [diverse] complex of human relationships.

Today, the novel is as widely read as it was in 1960. But it is more than a best-seller. It is a book that continues to influence its readers through its insightful depiction of human weaknesses and strengths in an imperfect society. Keith Waterhouse in his 1960 review of the novel said:

Miss Lee does well what so many American writers do appallingly: she paints a true and lively picture of life in an American small town.

The Time and Place

To Kill a Mockingbird is set in a small town in rural Alabama in the early 1930s. Harper Lee, who was born in Monroeville, Alabama, would have been about the same age as Scout Finch at the time the story takes place. Many of the events that Lee experienced as a child were incorporated into the story that she wrote more than thirty years later.

The novel is set during the Great Depression, at a time in which millions of Americans lost their jobs. Many people also lost their homes, their land, and their dignity. They lived in flimsy shacks and stood in bread lines to receive government handouts of food. Some "rode the rails" to look for work in other towns, but the situation was dismal everywhere.

At the start of the Great Depression, about half of the African American population lived in the South. With few jobs available, blacks often found themselves edged out by whites, even for the poorest paying jobs. Racial tensions, which had existed since the end of the Civil War, increased. Mob actions by whites that led to the

hanging of African Americans and of those who sympathized with them continued throughout the South.

In Alabama, as in other southern states, segregation was a way of life in the 1930s. Schools, restaurants, churches, courtrooms, hospitals, and

all other public places had separate facilities for African Americans. In some courts, African Americans were even required to swear on separate Bibles. The Ku Klux Klan, a southern terrorist group, preached white superiority and engaged in violence against African Americans.

Did You Know?

By the time Harper Lee was old enough to read a newspaper, the notorious Scottsboro Trials had been in the news for several years. The Alabama trial, which made national headlines, served as an ugly reminder of racial bigotry in the 1930s.

In March 1931, nine African American youths were arrested and charged with raping two white women. Over the next five years, a series of trials was held. The first trial began just twelve days after the arrest and lasted only three days. In spite of evidence of the men's innocence, eight of the nine men were found guilty and sentenced to death. The extreme sentences and hasty trial left many observers outraged. The case was appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, and several sets of new trials were held. By 1937 four of

the defendants were freed, while the others were sentenced to long prison terms.

The Scottsboro Trials share several similarities with the fictional trial of Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Like the Scottsboro defendants, Tom is charged with raping a white woman. There is also a parallel between Atticus Finch and Judge James E. Horton. Both acted in the interest of justice when an African American was wrongfully accused. In a 1933 trial of one of the Scottsboro defendants, Judge Horton set aside the jury's guilty verdict because he believed the jurors had ignored the evidence. Both the fictional and real trials had all-white juries. In the South of the 1930s, African American citizens were commonly excluded from serving on juries.