

# Contemporary Classics

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD  
Harper Lee

*Contemporary Classics*

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# TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

## BIOGRAM Early Life

A descendant of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee, Harper Nelle Lee was born April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama, a small town about sixty miles west of Montgomery. Lee was the youngest of Amasa and Frances Finch Lee's three children.

Until 1944 when she entered Huntington College in Montgomery, Harper Lee attended local schools. Later, as a Fulbright Scholar, Lee spent a year at Oxford. Then from 1945 to 1949, she studied law at the University of Alabama.

In 1950, Lee left the university without completing all the work for her law degree. Though her schooling was abbreviated, Lee regarded it as valuable. She later commented that she considered her law background "good training for a writer" because law demands logical, precise thinking and because the cases provide excellent and unlimited sources for ideas.

After quitting school, Lee moved to New York City. There she worked for first the reservations department of Eastern Air Lines and then British Overseas Air Corporation. When she was not working for the air lines, Lee spent her time writing sketches and stories.

## The Writer

Although Lee became an enthusiastic reader at an early age and had been writing for several years, she had never been published before the appearance of her successful novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Originally the novel was one of a number of short stories that Lee submitted to a literary agent. The agent encouraged Lee to expand on the short story, so she gave up her reservations job; moved into a small, cold-water apartment; and devoted her energies to writing. Eventually, her expanded short story became *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In 1957 Lee submitted the lengthened version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* to J. P. Lippincott. But the publisher rejected the book because it seemed more like a series of short stories than a unified novel. Instead of giving up, Lee revised and rewrote once more. At last, in July 1960, the book was published.

The extra effort Lee put into the project proved well worthwhile. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was awarded the 1961 Pulitzer Prize for distinguished fiction. It was the first time since 1942 that a woman had been cited for this honor. The book also received both the Paperback of the Year Award and the National Con-



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ference of Christians and Jews Brotherhood Award. It was a favorite choice with four major book clubs, remained on the bestseller list for more than eighty-five weeks, and eventually became an Oscar-winning movie.

The critics loved the book, too. Richard Sullivan hailed it as "a first novel . . . of rare excellence . . . a story so admirably done that it must be called both honorable and engrossing." Truman Capote, one of Lee's childhood friends, celebrated Lee's triumph as well. He characterized her as "someone rare . . . a writer with the liveliest sense of life and the warmest, most authentic humor."

Although Lee currently writes, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is her first and only published manuscript. Part of the reason for Lee's scanty publishing record is her slow writing speed. For her, writing is the most difficult task imaginable. Typically, Lee begins writing at noon and stops in early evening after producing perhaps only a page or two. Then she sets those pages aside for a time, rewriting and revising when her view is fresh and objective.

Even with only one novel to her credit, Lee remains a major writer. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the classics of American literature.

## Parallels

There are several parallels between Lee's life and her novel. Lee's lawyer-father, whose middle name was Finch, served as the prototype for lawyer Atticus Finch. Lee has stated that her father is "one of the few men . . . who has genuine humility, and it lends him a natural dignity. He has absolutely no ego drive, and so is one of the most beloved men in this part of the state." Also like the Finches, the Lees have old, deep family ties to the South.

There are resemblances between Lee and her narrator, Scout Finch, as well. Lee was a tom-

boy and an independent, curious child. During the time of the story (1933-1935), she would have been precisely Scout's age.

The fictional Maycomb, Alabama, is another product of Lee's life. Maycomb is modeled after Lee's native Monroeville. The schoolyard described in the novel is the same one where she played as a youngster. The courtroom in Maycomb is a detailed replica of the Monroeville courtroom. The weathered house where a secretive recluse might have lived became the Radley Place. According to Lee, "I remembered it as the old Hodge Place. No one lived here, so a lot of the children called it haunted, and they used it as a clubhouse."

Lee also created a cast and speech pattern based on childhood memories. Characters in the novel are composites of people and "types" she knew from her early years, and her rendering of Southern dialect is a record of Monroeville speech.

## STYLISTIC DEVICES

### Setting

The story is set in Maycomb, Alabama, between 1933 and 1935. This setting is intrinsically linked with character, plot, and theme.

Maycomb is a typical remnant of the Old South—as are the characters who live there. Lee's detailed description of the tradition-bound, decaying town prepares the reader for characters who cling to their ancient prejudices. Those prejudices create an atmosphere as tense and heated as the novel itself sometimes becomes. Given this setting, the explosive events that occur in Maycomb seem sadly inevitable.

The setting functions on a symbolic level, too. For example, the descriptions of the Radley Place and Ewell homestead function as metaphors. One represents the decaying, genteel South, the other the thriving "white trash" element.

### Point of View

Lee uses first-person limited narration to tell her story. In retrospect, a grown Scout Finch narrates events from three years of her childhood and tells the effects of those events upon herself, her brother, her father, and inhabitants of Maycomb.

Using a child to tell the story has several advantages. Because Scout's vision of the world is uncluttered, she can serve as a truthful witness to events and facts that the adult community neither wishes to see nor understand.



Yet because she makes her comments with matter-of-fact, humorous, and benign interest, the reader does not feel preached at.

There are, however, possible criticisms of Lee's narrative choice. Scout's photographic recall of detail, her sometimes sophisticated vocabulary, and her intuitive grasp of people and problems do not always seem plausible.

### Tone

Tone is the expression of an author's attitude toward his or her subject. Lee—whose theme is the need for human understanding and conscience—chooses an appropriately humorous yet tender tone. Scout's observations may be understated, exaggerated, ironical, or bluntly forthright. Nevertheless, they are nearly always amusing and colored with compassion. Although Scout can see their frailties, she—like the author—loves the people of the South.

### Means of Characterization

Lee uses three methods of characterization in combination with three literary devices to create her characters.

#### A. Methods

1. Discursive method: In a straightforward manner, narrator Scout feeds the reader information about a person.
2. Dramatic method: Characters reveal themselves through actions and words.
3. Character appraisal method: Characters comment about other characters.

#### B. Devices of Characterization

1. Specific detail (or imagery): Generally, the five types of detail that are used include actions, thoughts, physical appearance, events, and a character's immediate surroundings.
2. Authentic dialogue: Vocabulary, grammar, and tone of voice all help create characters. The scholarly, unemotional speeches of Atticus; the impassioned, immature taunts of children; and the illiterate, bovine testimony of the Ewells are all examples of Lee's effective use of dialogue.
3. Juxtaposition: Dissimilar events or people are placed side by side, highlighting differences for the reader. It is another way of demonstrating a point and taking a reader to a conclusion that is not forced by the author. The following are juxtaposed: Atticus Finch and Alexandra, Bob Ewell and Tom Robinson, Miss Maudie and Miss Stephanie, Jem and Scout, and Cecil and Francis.

### Irony

Irony is the difference between what is said or done and the actual meaning of the words or incident. Lee uses irony extensively for the purpose of subtly implying themes and reveal-

ing character. One example of irony is Miss Caroline's dissatisfaction with Scout because Scout can read and write before she is supposed to. Miss Caroline is obviously not the progressive teacher she is purported to be. Another even more significant irony is the activities of the ladies' missionary circle. These women are engrossed by the problems and poverty of an African tribe, but they are unconcerned about living conditions for blacks in Maycomb.

### Symbolism

The mockingbird image or symbol, which occurs four times in the novel, is Lee's most important one. The first reference occurs when Atticus reminds his trigger-happy children that it is a sin to kill mockingbirds. To him, mockingbirds are harmless creatures who give joy with their song.

The second reference takes place after Tom Robinson's death. In an editorial, Mr. Underwood compares Tom's shooting to the senseless killing of songbirds. Like the mockingbird, Tom was a good but helpless innocent.

The third reference is a brief but important one. As Jem and Scout pass the Radley Place on their way to the Halloween pageant, they hear a mockingbird singing. This time the bird symbolizes another good and gentle innocent, Boo Radley, who will generously save the children he loves.

The final reference occurs when Heck Tate suppresses the fact that Boo stabbed Bob Ewell to protect the children. Tate wants to keep this knowledge secret because he knows that public attention would destroy the gentle recluse. Although the plan bothers Atticus, he accepts it. When he asks Scout if she understands why he's agreed to keep silent, she replies that telling the truth would be similar to killing a mockingbird.

Thus the mockingbird symbolizes harmless, gentle people who are destroyed for no reason by those who are insensitive and often cruel.

Other less significant symbols include the book *The Gray Ghost*, which symbolizes Boo; the mad dog, which represents defective, hapless creatures like Tom who are destroyed; and Mrs. Dubose's flowers, which stand for hope and spirit.

### Central Themes

Two central themes are at the core of Lee's book. The first is the need for compassion. *To Kill a Mockingbird* does not simply deal with the issue of racial hatred. The inclusion of Boo Radley makes it apparent that the author's plea for human understanding extends to anyone who is "different."

Lee also stresses the need for conscience. She shows that those with conscience and personal integrity are the ones with compassion toward humanity. Atticus, the prime example of the

conscientious man, strives to instill this sense of integrity into his children. By the time the novel has ended, we see he has succeeded.

Themes that are subdivisions of the above include maturation, prejudice, discrimination, and tolerance.

### SYNOPSIS

Set in Maycomb, Alabama in the mid-1930s, the story centers around six-year-old Jean Louise Finch—or Scout—and Jem, her ten-year-old brother. Now as an adult, Scout looks back at her childhood and tells of the momentous events and influential people of those years. Among all the influences, the most powerful was Atticus Finch, her father.

As she recounts her memories, Scout quickly reveals her obsession with Arthur "Boo" Radley, the neighborhood recluse. The children, influenced by rumors about Boo, are fascinated and frightened by him. Thoughtlessly, they manufacture pranks and games centering around Boo.

However, the children begin to question the stories about Boo and to examine their own behavior after they discover Boo is probably the source of unexplained gifts and kindnesses. Their doubts grow as his kind acts become more frequent.

Meanwhile, the children learn another important lesson from Atticus and a neighbor, Maudie Atkinson: It is a sin to kill mockingbirds because they are harmless and give lovely song. Even so, the children still tend to see gentleness as a form of cowardice. However, when Atticus displays his courage by shooting a mad dog, the children become convinced that a gentle man can be as brave as any other.

Atticus' convictions and courage are demonstrated again when he defends Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of raping a white girl. Through the watchful eyes of Scout and Jem, the town's strong racist traditions are closely examined during the trial. Unfortunately, though Atticus' eloquent and well-reasoned defense undoubtedly convinces the jury of Tom's innocence, they are not brave enough to defy public opinion. Tom is sentenced to prison and shot while trying to escape.

The children again become involved when Bob Ewell, the drunken father of Tom's accuser, attacks them in an effort to avenge himself and his daughter. However, Boo Radley, who has been silently watching over Jem and Scout, kills Ewell in order to save the children.

Scout's experiences lead her to a well-considered conclusion. Scout realizes that people can be like mockingbirds: good and innocent creatures who are senselessly forced to suffer. From Atticus' examples and precepts, Scout has learned the importance of human conscience, compassion, and understanding.

*Behavioral Objective 2.*  
Identifies the point of view.  
Means: Class discussion.

*Behavioral Objective 3.*  
Suggests advantages of the particular point of view.  
Means: Class discussion.

**INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVE G.**  
Understands the use of irony in the novel.

*Behavioral Objective 1.*  
Defines the term "irony."  
Means: Teacher-guided discussion.

*Behavioral Objective 2.*  
Cites examples of irony in the novel.  
Means: Class discussion; Study Guide questions.

*Behavioral Objective 3.*  
Explains the effect the use of irony has on novel.  
Means: Class discussion; teacher-guided discussion; Study Guide questions.



## GUIDON STUDY QUESTIONS

### Part One

#### Chapter One

1. *What is the function of relating the Finch family history at the outset of the novel?*

The function of relating the Finch family history at the outset of the novel is to indicate the tradition-bound nature of Southern life at the time. The brevity of the history and the "disgrace" in not having record of ancestors on either side of the Battle of Hastings indicates the maverick qualities of the present generation Finches. Thus the Finch stand and the jury's verdict in the Robinson indictment are foreshadowed.

2. *What techniques are used to establish a feeling of mystery in the first chapter?*

An aura of mystery is established in the first chapter primarily through references to the Radley house and the "phantom" who lurks therein. The house is described as dark, rotted, and guarded. Light is kept out by oak trees, shutters, and closed doors. The mysteriousness of the Radley Place is intensified by the contrast of the delineated exterior with the unknown aspects of its inner sanctums.

The "phantom" of the Radley house is made to seem awful also by nondefinition. Neither Jem nor Scout has ever seen Boo Radley. Local lore, related in Chapter One, demonstrates the supposed malevolence of Boo Radley. Plant life on the Radley property is assumed poisonous. Damage to others' plant life, as during a cold snap, is said to be the result of Boo Radley's hoary breath when he has been malevolently abroad on a moonless night.

3. *Explain the manner of narration.*

The narration of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is handled through adult Jean Louise Finch's reflections on her childhood. Subordinating conjunctions such as "when," "since," and "then" show that the time of the narrative is the past. More strongly, the first and second paragraphs of the novel set the tone for reflection. The combination of totally-recalled dialogs, which must take place in the present tense, and retrospective evaluations of remarks (for example, the opening first paragraph of Chapter Nine) creates some confusion in analyzing the narration. In fact, critic W.J. Stuckey notes in *The Pulitzer Prize Novels* that Harper Lee fails "to always see things through the eyes of her young narrator." He asserts that the narrative shifts in viewpoint. Sometimes Scout is a mature adult, looking backward and evaluating the events of her childhood; at other times, Scout is a naive child.

4. *Cite details which establish the setting of the novel.*

Scout's vivid recall of Maycomb, Alabama, is not untouched by nostalgia, which causes her to describe sweaty women as frosted bakery products. The same nostalgia is shown in the recollection of flies flicked from boney mules' backs. The nostalgia is more than decorative; it is functional. It relates information on weather, transportation, and other concrete aspects of setting. These concrete aspects of setting, noticeably tempered with nostalgia, provide the reader with indications for interpreting the abstract aspects of setting such as prevailing intellectual, moral, and social mood.

5. *What attitudes seem prevalent as a result of elements of setting?*

The prevalent attitudes as the book opens appear to be outgrowths of elements of setting. The time of the novel is the early 1930s. The weight of The Depression causes a sluggishness. The people move slowly for the times themselves are sluggish. Horizons are tightly drawn; the effect is massive myopia. The civic concentration on self gives license to the complacency which always thrives when other spheres of thought and influence are ignored. The Maycomb complacency is embedded in the security which its structured definitions provide. The definitions which give Maycomb its security relate to how people, ethnic, racial, or familial, "will behave." Any threat to Maycomb's "security" will be viewed with hostility. Though perhaps unjustifiable, it must be remembered that a Great Insecurity has been sustained and "damages" to definitions have already been endured through economic leveling.

6. *Contrast Dill's family situation with the Finches'.*

Jem and Scout have been motherless since Scout



Scout shows her sensitivity and compassion through other proper gestures. She allows Boo Radley the role of gentleman when she takes his arm promenade-style rather than leading him home in a humiliating and embarrassing manner. From Boo's porch, she views the neighborhood and town as Boo must see it. She slips into his point of view as Atticus has long urged her to do. She feels sorrow for not having given commensurately to Boo for all he has given her, including her life.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### An examination of motivation

1. *Why did Jem and Scout harass Boo Radley? Why did they suddenly stop their harassment?*

Like all children, they considered their harassment of Boo to be a game and didn't realize the implications. They were cruel without realizing it. They stopped their harassment when they began to question their beliefs concerning Boo. As they became aware that he perhaps was different from what they had always believed, their game ceased. In other words, as they matured they became more sensitive towards Boo.

2. *Why did Boo Radley carve soap-dolls in the images of Jem and Scout and why did he place them in the knot-hole?*

Boo loved the children; in his simple way, he was trying to show his affection and to communicate with them.

3. *What in Tom Robinson's nature prompted him to become involved with Mayella Ewell?*

Robinson was genuinely a kind man who felt compassion for others. He saw that Mayella was a lonely girl who was without friends. She was trapped in her existence by an indifferent father. He felt sorry for her as a fellow human; he was only trying to help her.

4. *Why did Mayella first tempt Tom Robinson, then bring charges against him?*

Mayella was lonely and wanted the attention and affection of any man. She then brought charges against Robinson because her actions ran counter to accepted Southern morality and thought. In order to clear her conscience and her supposed "good white reputation" she had to destroy the "evidence," Tom Robinson.

5. *Why did Atticus Finch have to defend Tom Robinson?*

As he explained to Scout, the case involved his conscience. Atticus knew Tom was innocent, knew why the charges had been brought against him, and knew what the outcome of the trial

would be; as both a man and a Southerner, he had to speak out publicly against discrimination and injustice.

6. *Following the trial, why did Bob Ewell threaten Atticus?*

Ewell knew that everyone realized he had beaten his own daughter and lied about Robinson. He further knew that everyone considered him scum and he blamed Atticus. He wanted revenge.

7. *Why did Scout lead Boo Radley to a shadowed chair on the porch but did not allow it to seem as if she were leading him home?*

She understood his shyness and knew that he would be more at ease in a shadowed place; however, she did not want it to seem as if she were treating him like a child by leading him home. She finally had developed a concern and compassion for others, especially Boo, and was acting accordingly.

### An examination of novel implications

1. *For what reasons is much of the first chapter devoted to Boo Radley?*

Scout is beginning to recollect her childhood which was much affected by Boo Radley. How, we do not know at this point, but we deduce from her vivid recall that the Radley Place and Boo are among her most vivid memories. The first chapter also provides much necessary exposition establishing a feeling of mystery and a sense of apprehension that is developed throughout the story.

2. *What implications are made about education in general in Chapter Two and Chapter Twenty-six?*

Some teachers are oblivious to children's needs, backgrounds, and abilities.

Some teachers try to impose their attitudes upon students.

Some schools aren't always concerned with education but worry about state-aid, legalities, etc.

Some children, perhaps, don't belong in school.

Some educations place emphasis on irrelevant things and overlook relevant things.

Some children learn at different rates and are stifled by rigid sequence demands.

3. *Discuss whether **To Kill a Mockingbird** expresses a pessimistic or an optimistic view of life.*

The novel could be considered optimistic because the jury deliberated several hours, not minutes, before convicting Robinson. This shows a

## Word Study

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Reproducible

TO KILL A  
MOCKINGBIRD

Choose the letter of the word or phrase that comes closest to the meaning of the main word.

## Part I

1. **assuage**

- a. decipher
- b. complete
- c. relieve
- d. express

2. **taciturn**

- a. silent
- b. tactful
- c. lazy
- d. boisterous

3. **vapid**

- a. full
- b. uninteresting
- c. evaporate
- d. quickly

4. **predilection**

- a. forecast
- b. dilemma
- c. event
- d. preference

5. **nebulous**

- a. hazy, indistinct
- b. strong
- c. clear
- d. foremost

6. **entailment**

- a. property limited to certain heirs
- b. lawsuit
- c. unpaid portion of taxes
- d. illegal use of public property

7. **condescension**

- a. statement
- b. act of compression
- c. treat others as inferior
- d. funny remark

8. **auspicious**

- a. awesome
- b. favorable
- c. distrustful
- d. unhappy

9. **scuppernong**

- a. tasty mushroom
- b. garden pest
- c. delicate flower of the South
- d. grape

10. **pestilence**

- a. unequalled event
- b. offense
- c. Bible story
- d. epidemic disease

11. **edification**

- a. process of instruction or improvement
- b. act of honor
- c. long awaited satisfaction
- d. disgrace

12. **ascertain**

- a. to mention
- b. to find out for sure
- c. to think about
- d. to release

13. **aberration**

- a. ghost
- b. different from normal
- c. ugliness
- d. power

14. **lineament**

- a. harshness
- b. medicine
- c. distasteful
- d. characteristic feature

15. **philippic**

- a. insincere praise
- b. polite questions
- c. harsh statements
- d. long speech against something

16. **umbrage**

- a. refuge or safety
- b. comfort
- c. offense or displeasure
- d. wonder

17. **rectitude**

- a. completion
- b. righteousness
- c. vast damage
- d. inferiority

18. **interdict**

- a. of higher mentality
- b. careful watch
- c. blessing
- d. official restraint

19. **palliation**

- a. horrified
- b. to lessen seriousness
- c. act of being upset
- d. growing weak

20. **cantankerous**

- a. quarrelsome
- b. good-natured
- c. quiet
- d. fearful

## Part II

1. **habiliments**

- a. clothes
- b. implements or tools
- c. objects of habit
- d. protest

2. **contentious**

- a. crazy
- b. argumentative
- c. content
- d. strange

**Essay Test - Literal Level**

Reproducible

**TO KILL A  
MOCKINGBIRD**

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Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Trace the development of Scout Finch's concern for the feelings of others.
  2. Describe the philosophical basis of Atticus' relationship with his children.
  3. Contrast the building of the two major climaxes of the novel (the trial verdict and the trip home from the Halloween pageant).
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**Essay Test - Interpretive Level**

Reproducible

**TO KILL A  
MOCKINGBIRD**

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Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. "He well knows what snares are spread about his path, from personal animosity . . . and possibly from popular delusion. But he has put to hazard his ease, his security, his interest, his power, even his . . . popularity . . . He is traduced and abused for his supposed motives. He will remember that obloquy\* is a necessary ingredient in the composition of all true glory: he will remember . . . that calumny and abuse are essential parts of triumph . . ."—Edmund Burke

Apply the preceding quotation to Atticus' decision to defend Tom Robinson.

2. What is the thematic significance of the title *To Kill A Mockingbird*?
3. Before the trial, the general mood of the community is best expressed when Scout's innocent intrusion thwarts an act of violence. This same incident also foreshadows the verdict. Describe the incident and how it serves to foreshadow.

\*obloquy—abuse; violent speech against

Reproducible

# TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

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**MATCHING** Match each character with the proper description.

- |                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| ___ 1. Scout           | a. open-minded woman and friend of the children |
| ___ 2. Jem             | b. Jem and Scout's father                       |
| ___ 3. Atticus         | c. accuses Tom Robinson of attacking her        |
| ___ 4. Dill            | d. breaks a morphine habit                      |
| ___ 5. Aunt Alexandra  | e. Finches' housekeeper                         |
| ___ 6. Tom Robinson    | f. narrator of the story                        |
| ___ 7. Mayella Ewell   | g. visits during the summer                     |
| ___ 8. Bob Ewell       | h. sheriff of Maycomb                           |
| ___ 9. Boo Radley      | i. judge at the trial                           |
| ___ 10. Calpurnia      | j. mysterious neighbor the children try to see  |
| ___ 11. Miss Maudie    | k. refuses to accept charity                    |
| ___ 12. Mrs. Dubose    | l. Scout's older brother                        |
| ___ 13. Heck Tate      | m. tries to kill Jem and Scout                  |
| ___ 14. Mr. Cunningham | n. attempts to make a lady of Scout             |
| ___ 15. John Taylor    | o. hard-working black man charged with rape     |

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**TRUE-FALSE** Mark each statement either true or false.

- \_\_\_ 16. Aunt Alexandra heartily disapproves of the way Atticus is raising his children.
- \_\_\_ 17. The black community of Maycomb is bitter toward Atticus.
- \_\_\_ 18. In Maycomb, the word of an honest black man outweighs that of a dishonest white man.
- \_\_\_ 19. For a short while, Jem and Scout think that their father is feeble and untalented.
- \_\_\_ 20. Atticus doesn't think Bob Ewell will carry out his threats.
- \_\_\_ 21. Miss Maudie feels Boo Radley is a victim of his father's sternness and obsession.
- \_\_\_ 22. To protect Jem from scandal, Heck Tate claims Bob Ewell fell on his own knife.



## Contemporary Classics Study Questions

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### Part One

#### Chapter One

1. What is the function of relating the Finch family history at the outset of the novel?
2. What techniques are used to establish a feeling of mystery in the first chapter?
3. Explain the manner of narration.
4. Cite details which establish the setting of the novel.
5. What attitudes seem prevalent as a result of elements of setting?
6. Contrast Dill's family situation with the Finches'.

#### Chapter Two

7. What satirical points are being made about education through Scout's experiences in school?