

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD



HARPER LEE



- *published 1960* -



Overview

- * sole novel written by Harper Lee
(* 1926 in Alabama, USA)
- * **topic:** protagonist Scout Finch narrates her childhood retrospectively having experienced incidents of human evilness, racism, injustice, ...
- * setting of the book
 - * **time:** depression, 1933-1935 (3 years)
 - * **place:** fictional town, Maycomb (Alabama)
 - * **atmosphere:** childlike, innocent, nostalgic, humorous; *later:* dark and critical of society
- * **outline of this presentation**
 - * **story plot**
 - * **themes and historical background**
 - * **literary genre**



plot of the story

- * **setting** of story: *tired old town - Maycomb during 1930s*
- * narrator **Scout Finch** lives together with her older brother **Jem** and their older widowed father **Atticus**, a lawyer
- * they have a friend who comes during summer - **Dill**. Dill and Scout like each other, eventually he asks her to marry him
- * the three have a lot of fun together especially trying to get "**Boo**" **Radley** out of his old, mysterious house but never succeed
- * Atticus is appointed to defend a black man, **Tom Robinson**, accused of having raped a white woman, **Mayella Ewell**
- * many disapprove, taunt Scout and Jem, even try lynching Tom
- * Scout learns a lot about life especially about how to treat blacks, e.g. **mutual respect, tolerance**
- * at the trial, Atticus proves that Mayella and her father, the town drunk **Bob** are lying
- * nonetheless Tom is convicted guilty - shocking Jem and Atticus

racial injustice and Civil Rights

- * **abolition** of slavery in 1865 (13th amendment of US constitution)
- * “**seperate but equal**” doctrine → “**Jim Crow**” laws evolved
- * **segregation** of public schools, places, transport, restrooms...
on both sides; blacks inferior to whites
- * 1955: **Montgomery Bus Boycott**, '56: **riots** at the U. of Alabama
- * book grasped the problems addressed during this time and its roots
- * 1964: **Civil Rights Act** - 1968: death of **Martin Luther King Jr**

- * *To kill a Mockingbird*:
 - * Southern **prejudices** (“*All negroes lie.*”), “**caste system**”
 - * **interracial** sexual contact = death sentence (*Tom*) / expulsion
 - * Atticus is the only one defending blacks (*trial, when lynching Tom*)
 - * **racial injustice**: Tom is convicted guilty though he did not commit a crime.

plot of the story - 2

- * Tom is **shot** when trying to escape from prison
- * humiliated by the trial, **Bob** vows **revenge** - spits in Atticus' face, terrorises Tom Robinson's widow and assaults Scout and Jem
- * Jem breaks his arm but suddenly the mysterious **Boo Radley** comes to their **help** - accidentally Bob gets killed in the struggle
- * the town's sheriff decides that it was an **accident** (*"There's a black man dead for no reason. Now the man responsible for it is dead."*); Atticus agrees
- * standing on "Boo" Radley's porch, Scout **understands** how much he helped and gifted secretly to them (*"Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them."*)

other major themes

- * **social class** - Lee's aspiration: "*to be ... the Jane Austin of South Alabama.*"
 - * Walter, poor classmate of Scout, is invited to eat with the family because he has no money to buy lunch (**Atticus' moral education**)
 - * Scout's aunt Alexandria forbids Scout to consort with Walter (**overcomplicated, rigid social hierarchy of Maycomb**)
 - * **criticises gender and class** roles which intensify **prejudice**
- * **courage and compassion** - e.g. Atticus defending a black person
 - * Atticus to Jem: "*Courage is when you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what.*"
- * **death of innocence** (*mockingbird = innocence, e.g. Tom Robinson*)

literary genre

- * **Southern Gothic** - part of American literature of the (Deep)-South
 - * unusual, supernatural, ironic elements in order to create **suspense** + explore **social issues** and **culture of the South**
 - * the “**grotesque**” - possibility to highlight unpleasant aspects
 - * *examples:* near-supernatural qualities of **Boo Radley**, **racial injustice** involving **Tom Robinson**, grotesque **Bob Ewell**
- * **Bildungsroman** - “Coming-of-Age” story
 - * Scout and Jem learn a lot about life as they grow up
 - * youthful naivité, ↔ injustice, segregation of race and class, purity
verge of womanhood (Scout)
 - * quote by Jem after trial: *“It’s like bein’ a caterpillar wrapped in a cocoon ... I always thought Maycomb folks were the best folks in the world, least that’s what they seemed like.”*

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and my opinion about it?

