

To Kill a Mockingbird Study Questions

Note:

- *The highlighted questions are the ones I think are the most important and/or interesting questions to reflect on and discuss.*
- *The page numbers given in some questions may differ from other editions of the book.*

Chapters 1-3

1. Describe Scout, the narrator. What things does she say and do that reveal her personality?
2. Describe Jem. In what ways do you think he might be an influence on Scout?
3. Describe Atticus. What is his relationship with his children like—what things does he do that show his love and concern for them, and how does he treat them?
4. Describe Calpurnia. What does Scout think of her? Do you think her judgments of Calpurnia are fair? What is Atticus' relationship with her like?
5. Describe the setting of the novel. What do the events of Miss Caroline's first day of teaching reveal about the people of Maycomb County?
6. Describe the Radley family. Why do the people of Maycomb spread so many rumors about them? Do you think these rumors are true?
7. What predictions might you make about what's going to happen later in the story?

Chapters 4-6

1. What is Scout's attitude toward school? Why do you think she feels this way?
2. What do you think is the meaning of the objects Jem and Scout find in the tree at the edge of the Radley lot?
3. Why do you think Calpurnia and Scout's relationship has changed now that Scout is in school? How does Scout deal with the situation, and what does this show about her?
4. Why do you think Dill and Jem want to role play as the Radleys? What do you think the phenomenon of speculation about the Radleys says about human nature? (Think also of the "hot steams" the children discuss and Jem's explanation for the origin of the Indian-head pennies.)
5. Describe Dill's personality. What are you basing this description on?
6. Why doesn't Scout want to continue role-playing? Speculate on the significance of this event.
7. Describe the changes in Scout's behavior and her relationship with the boys. Find evidence of these changes in the text.
8. Describe Miss Maudie. What role do you think she might play in the novel? What is her explanation of the Radleys' strangeness?
9. What does Mr. Radley's contention that he shot at a "white nigger" show about his attitudes? What do the children say and do to avoid suspicion?

Chapters 7-9

1. What shock does Jem tell Scout he got when he went back to get his pants, and what do you think is the significance of this? Why was his cot trembling after he came back?
2. Why do you think Boo Radley made soap carvings in the shape of Jem and Scout? What do you think the broken pocket watch and the ball of twine might symbolize?
3. What do Jem and Scout decide to do in response to the gifts in the tree, and why? What is the real reason Mr. Radley fills the knot-hole with cement? Why do you think he would want to accomplish this?
4. What reaction does Jem have to the situation after asking Atticus whether the tree was really dying, and what does this show about him?
5. What do you think is the narrative purpose of the fire at Miss Maudie's house? How does Jem react to this plot development, and why? How does Atticus react to these revelations, and why?
6. What do you think Atticus means when he says that if he didn't defend Tom Robinson, he wouldn't be able to ask Scout and Jem to mind him?
7. Why does Scout let Francis get away with his claim that she called him a "whore-lady"? Why does the rest of the Finch family disapprove of Atticus? What do you think of their opinions?
8. Describe Uncle Jack based on the events of this chapter. What things does he say and do to give you this impression of him?
9. What things does Atticus want Scout to overhear, and why do you think he chooses this way of telling her?

Chapters 10 & 11

1. What do Jem and Scout think of their father, and why? What kinds of things do they wish he could do? What things does Miss Maudie tell Scout he can do, and how does she react? What does she mean when she says that she wishes he were "a devil from hell"?
2. Why is it a sin to kill a mockingbird, and what do you think this has to do with the story? Think about what a mockingbird might symbolize.
3. Why do you think Jem is shooting at a tin can rather than bluejays when Scout finds him in the backyard, and what does this show about him?
4. What might the mad dog symbolize (consider the fact that it is Atticus who saves the town from it), and why do you think the mad dog is "out of season"—why does the author have this happen in February instead of August?
5. What do you think Atticus's broken glasses might symbolize? Why has he never told them that he is such a great shot with a gun, and why doesn't he ever shoot? How do Jem and Scout react to this revelation? What does Jem mean when he says that he wouldn't care if Atticus couldn't do anything?
6. Why does Jem insist on walking past Mrs. Dubose's house every day to greet Atticus, and what does this tell us about him? In light of the mad dog incident, what is the significance of Atticus's saying to Jem "It's your job not to let her make you mad"? How does Atticus act toward Mrs. Dubose, and what does this tell us about his sense of morality?

7. Why do you think Jem finally “goes mad” at Mrs. Dubose’s insults about Atticus? Why do you think he breaks Scout’s baton in half?

8. What explanation does Atticus give Scout about his decision to defend Tom Robinson even though so many people in Maycomb think he’s wrong for doing it? What more does this tell us about his sense of morality? What is his response to people’s use of the term “nigger-lover,” and why do you think Jem and Scout react so strongly to this particular term?

9. Why do you think Scout continues to go with Jem to Mrs. Dubose’s house even though she doesn’t have to? What does this tell us about her?

10. Why is it so important to Atticus for Jem to read for Mrs. Dubose? What things does Jem learn from the experience? What revelation do Jem and Scout learn about Mrs. Dubose after she dies, and what does this explain about why she acted like she did? How does Atticus define courage? Does this relate to anything he’s said to them before? How does Jem react to the camellia after Atticus explains this to him, and why?

Chapters 12-14

1. What do you think might be the author’s reason for dividing the book into separate parts at this point?

2. What signs are there in these chapters that Jem is changing and that his relationship with Scout is changing? What revelations are there about Scout and Dill’s relationship?

3. Give your interpretation of the cartoon of Atticus in the newspaper.

4. Describe Scout and Jem’s attitude toward going to Calpurnia’s church and their reaction to their experience there. What things about the black church do they find interesting and surprising? What things do they learn about Calpurnia, and what does this show about their relationship with her? What does Lula (the unfriendly woman) mean when she says that she “reckons that [Calpurnia] is company at the Finch house during the week”?

5. What do you think the expression “to look out of the corners of one’s eyes [at something]” means? It is used twice in these chapters.

6. Describe Aunt Alexandra—her personality, values, behavior, opinions, and activities. What reasons does she have for living with Atticus’s family? How does Scout react to her coming, and what do Scout and Jem think of her? Where do you think Scout got her ideas, which conflict with Alexandra’s, about who “Fine Folks” are?

7. Why does Atticus behave strangely when discussing the Finch family with Scout and Jem? Why does Scout react so strongly to this? Why do you think Atticus almost slams the door when he leaves the room?

8. How do Atticus and Alexandra each react to Scout’s telling them that she and Jem went to Calpurnia’s church? What difference of opinion do they have about Calpurnia, and what explanation does Atticus give Alexandra? Why is it so disturbing for Scout and Jem to see Atticus quarreling with her?

9. What request does Jem make of Scout, and why? Why does she attack him? How does Atticus react to and handle the situation, what does this show about him, and what do you think is his intention in telling Scout to “mind Jem when he can make you”?

10. What different answers does Dill give to the same question asked by Scout and Jem, and why? How does Jem react to Dill's appearance, and why? What "code" does he break? What does Scout mean when she tells Dill that "when [Atticus] wants you to know something, he tells you...he wouldn't bother you"? Why has Dill run away, and what is different about Scout's relationship with Atticus and Calpurnia and Dill's relationship with his mother and stepfather? Why do you think Dill suddenly suggests that he and Scout "get a baby"?

Chapter 15

1. What is Atticus's "dangerous question," and how is it "dangerous"? What does he mean by asking it in the situation at the beginning of Chapter 15? Why does Jem suddenly scream that the phone is ringing?

2. What does it mean to get "shinnied up" (see page 148), and what does it have to do with the formation of violent mobs like this lynch mob? What is the "sickeningly comic aspect of an unfunny situation" that Scout makes a comment about? What do the resolution of the lynch mob crisis and the Klan's march against the Levy family, as well as Atticus's own comments at the beginning of Chapter 16, show about the nature of people who join such groups and commit violent acts?

3. What is Scout's interpretation of the situation, and what clues in her words and actions are you basing your judgment on? What difference is there between Jem's defiance of Atticus's command that they go home and Scout's, and how does Scout interpret Jem's refusal? Why do you think Mr. Cunningham at first refuses to acknowledge Scout's greeting, and what about her choice of words causes him to change his mind? What is ironic about the way this potentially violent situation is defused?

Chapter 16

1. How would you describe Atticus's priorities and values vs. Alexandra's? What different attitudes do they have toward Calpurnia? What change has Atticus undergone as a result of his arguments with Alexandra, and what does this show about him?

2. What is ironic about Braxton Underwood's willingness to help Atticus, and why do you think he would do this? In what way might Mr. Cunningham be similar to Mr. Underwood in Atticus's view (see Ch. 15 #2)?

3. How do the white people of Maycomb explain Adolphus Raymond's "strange behavior"? What is the significance of Uncle Jack's comments about the Finch family possibly having "come straight out of Ethiopia," and why is the white racism in Maycomb therefore hypocritical?

4. What do you think Maycomb County's courthouse might symbolize, in light of the description given of its appearance?

5. What revelation is made to Scout about Atticus's reason for defending Tom Robinson? Why do you think Atticus refuses to use this as an excuse, to deflect the criticism being directed at him? How would you explain the town's contradictory attitude toward Atticus's defending Tom Robinson? ("The court appointed Atticus to defend him. Atticus aimed to defend him. That's what they didn't like about it. It was confusing.")

Chapter 17

1. Summarize the line of questioning Atticus directs at Heck Tate and Robert Ewell. What is the goal of his questioning? Describe Atticus's style as a lawyer. What are the reasons for this style?

2. Describe Robert Ewell and his behavior at the trial. What indications are there of his bad character? Why do you think he and other Maycomb County witnesses wear an expression of “haughty suspicion” when being questioned by opposing counsel? What is ironic about his complaint about the African-Americans living near him?

Chapters 18-20

1. Describe Mayella. How does she seem to be different from the other Ewells? What is her life like? (Consider all of the information presented in these chapters.) According to Atticus, why would she lie about what happened?

2. Describe the weaknesses in Mayella’s testimony. Why does Atticus seem to have a bad memory? Why does he ask Mayella if she has any friends? Why does Mayella lie about Tom’s having done chores for her before?

3. Describe Tom. What kind of person does he seem to be, and what evidence do you see of this? Why was the situation that Mayella put him in so difficult to handle?

4. What racist comments does Scout make both aloud and as the narrator? (See pages 195 and 201.) Although she does not hate African-Americans, these ideas would be (rightly) considered offensive in today’s society. Why do you think she has such ideas—would Atticus make the same comments?

5. What is the significance of Tom’s revelation about Mayella’s comment that she worked for a year to save seven nickels for her siblings to buy ice cream in town?

6. Why does Dill start crying during the trial, and what does this show about him? Why do you think Mr. Gilmer “wasn’t half trying” when questioning Tom (according to Scout)?

7. Describe the style and goals of Mr. Gilmer’s cross-examination of Tom. Why does Tom always say that Mayella was just “mistaken in her mind”? Why do the white spectators in the courtroom dislike Tom’s comment that he felt sorry for Mayella?

8. Describe Dolphus. Why does he pretend to be drinking alcohol whenever he’s in public? Why does he reveal the truth to Dill (and Scout)?

9. Why do you think Atticus feels that cheating a black man is ten times worse than cheating a white man?

10. Why do you think Atticus relaxes during his closing statement and speaks more informally to the jury? What “evil assumption” does he say gives the Ewells a good chance of winning the case? How is it significant that the jury took several hours to return a verdict?

Chapter 21

1. Why does Atticus decide to let the children come back after supper to hear the verdict? (See Chapter 22 as well.) Why doesn’t he respond to Jem’s question? (“You think they’ll acquit him that fast?”)

2. What is Jem referring to when he tells Scout that “there are things you don’t understand” about why it has taken so long for the jury to reach a verdict? How is it ironic that Jem would say this to her?

3. What does Scout notice about the jury members as they come back into the courtroom? Why do the next events have a dreamlike quality to her? In what way is watching the jury like watching Atticus prepare to shoot the dog with no bullets in his gun?

Chapter 22

1. How is the mood of the white section of the crowd described after the verdict? What does this suggest may be one factor in the jury's decision? How does Jem react, and why?
2. What surprise does Atticus discover the morning after the trial, and what is its significance? How does he react to it?
3. What is Miss Rachel's reaction to the outcome of the trial? What is the "stone wall" that Atticus is butting his head against? What does Dill mean when he says "I'da got her told," and why does he say it?
4. Why does Alexandra tell Dill he's being "cynical," and what does this show about her attitude toward unpleasant truths? How are the kids different from most of the adults in Maycomb? What revelation have they had, and what are they feeling?
5. What does Miss Maudie mean when she says that the people of Maycomb are "so rarely called on to be Christians," and what is she implying about their behavior? What does she reveal to the kids that shows that things might not be quite as bad as they think? How do you think Jem might finish the sentence "Soon's I get grown—"? Why does Dill want to be a clown, and what is special about his clown?

Chapter 23

1. How does Atticus react to Robert Ewell's insults and threats? What explanation does he give for his reaction? Why doesn't he want to keep a gun as protection?
2. How do these kids represent more than the "shadow of a beginning" that Atticus sees in the jury's long deliberation?
3. What does Atticus reveal about who argued strongly for Tom Robinson's acquittal? Why did he feel this way—is it really a significant sign of change?
4. What does Alexandra say that makes Scout so angry? What do Scout and Jem discuss, and what different conclusions do they come to? What new understanding of Boo Radley does Jem gain?

Chapter 24

1. What is ironic about Scout's comment that "Today Alexandra and her missionary circle were fighting the good fight all over the house"? What attitude does the missionary circle have toward other cultures? How does Scout feel about "ladies in bunches," and why? What comments about or descriptions of the ladies express these feelings, and how would you describe the tone of these comments? Why do the ladies laugh at Scout, and how does Maudie help Scout deal with them?
2. Who does Mrs. Merriweather say "we" should forgive, who are the ladies "try[ing] till [they] drop to make Christians out of," and why is "no lady safe in her bed these nights," according to Mrs. Farrow? What is ironic about these comments? To whom is Mrs. Merriweather referring when she says that there are some "good but misguided people in this town," and why are they misguided, according to her? What is Maudie's reaction to her comments, and what does this show about her? Although Scout can't see Mrs. Farrow, what can we infer about Mrs. Farrow's reaction? Why does Alexandra give her a look of gratitude, and what does this show about her? Why do you think Maudie and Alexandra have never been close?
3. What does Scout think is the basic difference between men and women, and why does she prefer to be around men? How does her attitude toward being a "lady" change in this chapter, and why do you think she has this change of heart? (Refer to the end of the chapter in particular.)

4. What does Mrs. Merriweather say about the difference between Northerners and Southerners, and how are her comments ironic?

5. What is the significance of Scout's comment that "on Missionary Society days [Atticus] usually stayed down town until black dark"? What did Atticus say to Tom to keep up his spirits, and why did this attempt fail—why did Tom decide to try to escape from prison? Was he stupid and rash to do this, as the whites of Maycomb suggest? What is Alexandra referring to when she says, "This is the last straw, Atticus," and how does Atticus mistakenly interpret this comment? (Why is she so distraught by the news of Tom's death?) What element of the definition of "background" do Maudie's comments reveal?

Chapter 25

1. What does the incident with the roly-poly show about Jem and the changes he is going through? How does Scout react to Jem's comments?

2. How do the white residents of Maycomb react to the news of Tom's death? How would you respond to their comments? Discuss Mr. Underwood's reaction as expressed in his newspaper editorial—in what way is his view enlightened, and in what way might it not be? What important point does he make about the significance of Tom's trial and the critical flaw in the justice system?

Chapter 26

1. How has Scout's attitude toward Boo Radley and toward their former treatment of him changed? What does she recall that alleviates her feelings of guilt? What related revelation does Atticus give them?

2. What is ironic about Atticus's reelection?

3. What does Scout's comment that when a student gives a presentation, "being singled out [makes] him more than ever anxious to return to the Group" reveal about Maycomb's education system? How does Scout react to Miss Gates's discussion of Hitler's persecution of Jews—what is the irony of her contrast of America's democracy with Germany's dictatorship? What do her and some of her students' comments show about people? Why does Jem get so upset when Scout mentions the courthouse to him?

Chapter 27

1. What three incidents involving Robert Ewell occur, and what do you think is the significance of these events? What explanation does Atticus give for Ewell's behavior, and specifically how does he explain Ewell's grudge against Judge Taylor? How does Link Deas show himself to be one of Maycomb's white people "with background"?

2. How has Halloween changed in Maycomb, and why? What does Miss Tutti's guess about the identity of the thieves show about her?

3. What subtle foreshadowing occurs at the end of the chapter?

Chapter 28

1. Who are the "usual outcasts and shut-ins" who don't attend the Halloween festivities? Which other people do you suspect might be absent, even though according to Scout "the whole town [is] there"? What happens that makes Judge Taylor laugh so hard, and why is it so funny? What does Mrs. Merriweather's reaction to this show about her?

2. Why do Jem and Scout assume that Cecil Jacobs is following them on their way home? What does Scout's thought "I wondered how long [Jem] would try to keep the Cecil myth going" reveal about her? Describe the attack based on Scout's narration.

Chapter 29

1. What does Heck Tate mean when he says that "if we followed our feelings all the time we'd be like cats chasin' our tails"? What is ironic about his comment "he had guts enough to pester a poor colored woman, he had guts enough to pester Judge Taylor when he thought the house was empty"?

2. What clues are there that the man who saves them is Boo Radley? (See also Chapter 28.) How does he react to Scout's scrutiny, and why? How does Scout react to her discovery of his identity—can you guess what she is feeling?

Chapter 30

1. At the beginning of the chapter, why does Scout run to Jem, and why is she embarrassed? Who does Scout realize has probably seen Boo before, and why? Why does Atticus decide that they should go out to the porch?

2. What do Atticus and Heck Tate argue about, and how is it a "contest," as Scout puts it? What reasons does each one have, and what does their argument and their decision show about them? What does Atticus finally realize that makes him change his mind, and how does he come to this realization? (It has to do with Heck's statement that he "took it off a drunk man.") How is Robert Ewell's death a kind of "poetic justice"? ("Let the dead bury the dead.") Why is it so important to Atticus that Scout understand their decision? How does she respond, and what does she mean?

Chapter 31

1. Why does Boo touch Jem's hair? What do you think the Finch children represent to Boo—why are they so important to him?

2. What is ironic about Scout's leading Boo home, and why does she decide to walk arm-in-arm with him instead of leading him by the hand? What saddens Scout about saying goodbye to him? What does her standing on the Radley's front porch and looking at the neighborhood symbolize, and what do you think she realizes?

3. What is ironic about Scout's comment that "He gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives," and what effect does stating it this way have? What similar irony is there in her statement that "there wasn't much left for us to learn, except possibly algebra"?

4. How is Atticus being "shrewd" in agreeing to let Scout stay up so late? What is ironic about her statement that "nothin's real scary except in books," and what do you think she means by this? Who does Stoner's Boy represent? What does Atticus mean when he says that "most people are [good], Scout, when you finally see them"—what do you think makes him so optimistic after the disturbing events that take place in the novel?