

## TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

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**OVERALL OBJECTIVE:** To provide teachers with instructional materials that will enhance their students' understanding of the novel through development of skills in the areas of vocabulary, reading comprehension, literary analysis, writing, and appreciation of Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, via a multi-level instructional approach.

### **SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THIS PACKET: To help students**

1. build vocabularies based on words used in the novel.
2. develop the reading comprehension skills of finding main ideas, determining cause-effect relationships, and reading critically.
3. develop the literary analysis skills of understanding characterization, recognizing figures of speech, identifying elements of theme, and determining the author's tone.
4. practice writing skills of writing from a particular point of view.

### **APPROACHES TO TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD**

In the two decades since its publication, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has established itself as both a popular and a classroom favorite. Many factors contribute to the book's success: its lively young narrator, who has been called the healthiest female protagonist in recent literary history; its piercing yet tender portraits of a small town and its inhabitants; and its honest confrontation of prejudice and injustice in their most dramatic and disturbing forms.

Scout Finch is a narrator who will engage the attention of both male and female readers. Her lively personality and colloquial style are sure to win students' sympathy and make their reading task easier. As a girl, Scout offers a welcome change of pace for students tired of reading about only male protagonists, but her tomboy qualities insure that boys will not reject this as a "girls' book." While Scout's wit and humor make her story easy reading, the problems she encounters in the course of growing up furnish ample material for serious personal reflection and classroom discussion.

Scout's story can be read in conjunction with many tales of growing up, particularly those set in the American South. James Agee's *A Death in the Family* combines a similar portrait of life in a small town and of a family living through a traumatic event. The autobiographies of Maya Angelou and Lillian Hellman, or Ann Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* offer parallels to Scout's experience from both black and white perspectives. Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* suggests another cultural viewpoint on growing up in America, and Carson McCullers' *A Member of the Wedding* treats the same material in a fictional form. *Mockingbird's* use of setting and narration also provides the teacher with an excellent chance to lead students toward *Tom Sawyer*, or *Huckleberry Finn*.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is important in that, despite its autobiographical form, it depicts not only the life of one character, but the whole ambiance of a small

southern town. Its many vivid incidents can each give rise to varied and lively discussion. Students will be eager, for example, to discuss the schoolroom incidents of chapters 3 and 4, comparing them to their own current or remembered experiences. This topic can lead to writing assignments, in either narrative or dramatic form, which will be limited only by the teacher's insecurity. Students may also be assigned Patrick Conroy's *The Water Is Wide* for a sympathetic teacher's view of such a school. In fact, these episodes can be the catalyst for a larger discussion of education, including reading from Nat Hentoff, Sylvia Ashton Warner, James Herndon, or the *Foxfire* book.

The many remarkable characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird* also supply ample material for discussion or for writing assignments. Like Scout, Jem Finch and Dill Harris provide their individual perspectives on what it is to grow up. Students will easily identify with one or more of the characters, and can be led through their reading to explore their own childhood and adolescent experiences. Atticus Finch is a profound study in the qualities of a true hero, and the place of moral values in determining one's life choices. The wealth of minor characters displays a range of adult behavior that will help students consider the actions and motivations of the adults they encounter. For example, the teacher may ask students to talk or write about relatives or neighbors who have affected them as Miss Maudie Atkinson or Aunt Alexandra affected Scout.

The reader of *To Kill a Mockingbird* must infer character from action, a valuable skill in the appreciation of literature and in everyday interactions with other people. Not only in the trial scenes, but throughout the book, the reader is driven to form judgments about people and events on the basis of just the sort of incomplete information we all usually possess in real life. Students may be asked their opinions of Tom Robinson's guilt or Boo Radley's character before they have read the crucial scenes about each character, and may then test their judgments against subsequent events. On the other side, the abrupt modifications we must make in our opinions of Mrs. Dubose and Dolphus Raymond can teach the value of keeping an open mind and the danger of having to make judgments about others with only fragmentary, momentary information.

Naturally, the central plot event of the book, the trial of Tom Robinson, offers numerous teaching opportunities with its form and its content. The story can introduce students to important and disturbing issues of justice and prejudice, which are handled with special effect by showing them through Scout's eyes. Besides its value as a reminder of specific American problems of racism, the novel offers a general insight into the importance of defending one's convictions even in seemingly hopeless circumstances. Here again, the teacher may wish to teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* with texts such as Mark Twain's *Pudd'n'head Wilson*, Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident*, or William Faulkner's *Intruder In the Dust*, all of which raise similar moral problems. (For less able readers, William Armstrong's *Souder* treats a parallel situation from the point of view of the black family involved.) Both in discus-

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