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Revision Notes

BY

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To Kill a Mocking Bird

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About the Author...

Deirdre McCarton has taught English, History and Geography to Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students at all levels since 1992.

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Contents

Context.....	1
Plot Overview	2
Contents	3
Characters	4
Jean Louise “Scout” Finch -	4
Atticus Finch.....	5
Jeremy Atticus “Jem” Finch	6
Arthur “Boo” Radley	7
Bob Ewell.....	7
Charles Baker “Dill” Harris.....	7
Miss Maudie Atkinson.....	7
Calpurnia.....	8
Aunt Alexandra.....	8
Mayella Ewell	8
Tom Robinson.....	8
Link Deas.....	8
Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose.....	8
Nathan Radley.....	8
Heck Tate.....	9
Mr. Underwood.....	9
Mr. Dolphus Raymond.....	9
Mr. Walter Cunningham	9
Walter Cunningham.....	9
Themes.....	10
Motifs.....	12
Symbols.....	13
Summary And Analysis	14
Chapter 1	14
Chapters 4–6	19
Chapters 7–8	22
Chapters 9–11	25
Chapter 9–11	28
Chapters 14–15	31
Chapters 16–17	34
Chapters 18–19	36
Chapters 20–22	39
Chapters 23–25	42
Chapters 26–27	45
Chapters 28–31	47
Writing Exam Answers.....	52
Typical Exam Question.....	54
Key points to study:	56
Sample Answer	58

Context

Nelle Harper Lee was born on April 28, 1926, in Monroeville, Alabama, a very small town similar in many ways to Maycomb, the setting of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Like Atticus Finch, the father of Scout, the narrator and protagonist of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee's father was a lawyer. Among Lee's childhood friends was the novelist Truman Capote, from whom she drew inspiration for the character Dill. "People are people anywhere you put them," she declared in a 1961 interview.

Yet the book's setting and characters are not the only aspects of the story shaped by events that occurred during Lee's childhood. In 1931, when Lee was five, nine young black men were accused of raping two white women near Scottsboro, Alabama. After a series of lengthy, highly publicized, and often bitter trials, five of the nine men were sentenced to long prison terms. Many prominent American citizens saw the sentences as false and motivated only by racial prejudice. It was also suspected that the women who had accused the men were lying, and in appeal after appeal, their claims became more dubious. There can be little doubt that the Scottsboro Case, as the trials of the nine men came to be called, served as a seed for the trial that stands at the heart of Lee's novel.

Lee began *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the mid-1950s, after moving to New York to become a writer. She completed the novel in 1957 and published it in 1960, just before the peak of the American civil rights movement.

Plot Overview

Scout Finch lives with her brother, Jem, and their widowed father, Atticus, in the sleepy Alabama town of Maycomb. Maycomb is suffering through the Great Depression, but Atticus is a well known lawyer and the Finch family is reasonably well off in comparison to the rest of society. One summer, Jem and Scout befriend a boy named Dill, who has come to live in their neighbourhood for the summer, and the trio acts out stories together. Eventually, Dill becomes fascinated with the spooky house on their street called the Radley Place. The house is owned by Mr. Nathan Radley, whose brother, Arthur (nicknamed Boo), has lived there for years without venturing outside.

Scout goes to school for the first time that fall and detests it. She and Jem find gifts apparently left for them in a knothole of a tree on the Radley property. Dill returns the following summer, and he, Scout, and Jem begin to act out the story of Boo Radley. Atticus puts a stop to their antics, urging the children to try to see life from another person's perspective before making judgments. But, on Dill's last night in Maycomb for the summer, the three sneak onto the Radley property, where Nathan Radley shoots at them. Jem loses his pants in the ensuing escape. When he returns for them, he finds them mended and hung over the fence. The next winter, Jem and Scout find more presents in the tree, presumably left by the mysterious Boo. Nathan Radley eventually plugs the knothole with cement. Shortly thereafter, a fire breaks out in another neighbor's house, and during the fire someone slips a blanket on Scout's shoulders as she watches the blaze. Convinced that Boo did it, Jem tells Atticus about the mended pants and the presents.

To the anger of Maycomb's racist white community, Atticus agrees to defend a black man named Tom Robinson, who has been accused of raping a white woman. Because of Atticus's decision, Jem and Scout are subjected to abuse from other children, even when they celebrate Christmas at the family compound on Finch's Landing. Calpurnia, the Finches' black cook, takes them to the local black church, where the warm and close-knit community largely embraces the children.

Atticus's sister, Alexandra, comes to live with the Finches the next summer. Dill, who is supposed to live with his "new father" in another town, runs

away and comes to Maycomb. Tom Robinson's trial begins, and when the accused man is placed in the local jail, a mob gathers to lynch him. Atticus faces the mob down the night before the trial. Jem and Scout, who have sneaked out of the house, soon join him. Scout recognizes one of the men, and her polite questioning about his son shames him into dispersing the mob.

At the trial itself, the children sit in the "coloured balcony" with the town's black citizens. Atticus provides clear evidence that the accusers, Mayella Ewell and her father, Bob, are lying: in fact, Mayella propositioned Tom Robinson, was caught by her father, and then accused Tom of rape to cover her shame and guilt. Atticus provides impressive evidence that the marks on Mayella's face are from wounds that her father inflicted: upon discovering her with Tom, he called her a whore and beat her. Yet, despite the significant evidence pointing to Tom's innocence, the all-white jury convicts him. The innocent Tom later tries to escape from prison and is shot to death. In the aftermath of the trial, Jem's faith in justice is badly shaken, and he lapses into despondency and doubt.

Despite the verdict, Bob Ewell feels that Atticus and the judge have made a fool out of him, and he vows revenge. He menaces Tom Robinson's widow, tries to break into the judge's house, and finally attacks Jem and Scout as they walk home from a Halloween party. Boo Radley intervenes, however, saving the children and stabbing Ewell fatally during the struggle. Boo carries the wounded Jem back to Atticus's house, where the sheriff, in order to protect Boo, insists that Ewell tripped over a tree root and fell on his own knife. After sitting with Scout for a while, Boo disappears once more into the Radley house.

Later, Scout feels as though she can finally imagine what life is like for Boo. He has become a human being to her at last. With this realization, Scout embraces her father's advice to practice sympathy and understanding and demonstrates that her experiences with hatred and prejudice will not sully her faith in human goodness.

Characters

Jean Louise “Scout” Finch -

Scout is a very unusual little girl, both in her own qualities and in her social position. She is unusually intelligent (she learns to read before beginning school), unusually confident (she fights boys without fear), unusually thoughtful (she worries about the essential goodness and evil of mankind), and unusually good (she always acts with the best intentions). In terms of her social identity, she is unusual for being a tomboy in the polite and proper Southern world of Maycomb.

Analysis of Scout

One quickly realizes when reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* that Scout is who she is because of the way Atticus has raised her. He has nurtured her mind, conscience, and individuality without bogging her down in fussy social hypocrisies and notions of propriety. While most girls in Scout's position would be wearing dresses and learning manners, Scout, thanks to Atticus's hands-off parenting style, wears overalls and learns to climb trees with Jem and Dill. She does not always grasp social niceties (she tells her teacher that one of her fellow students is too poor to pay her back for lunch), and human behaviour often baffles her (as when one of her teachers criticizes Hitler's prejudice against Jews while indulging in her own prejudice against blacks), but Atticus's protection of Scout from hypocrisy and social pressure has rendered her open, forthright, and well meaning.

At the beginning of the novel, Scout is an innocent, good-hearted five-year-old child who has no experience with the evils of the world. As the novel progresses, Scout has her first contact with evil in the form of racial prejudice, and the basic development of her character is governed by the question of whether she will emerge from that contact with her conscience and optimism intact or whether she will be bruised, hurt, or destroyed like Boo Radley and Tom Robinson. Thanks to Atticus's wisdom, Scout learns that though humanity has a great capacity for evil, it also has a great capacity for good, and that the evil can often be mitigated if one approaches others with an outlook of sympathy and understanding. Scout's development into a person capable of assuming that outlook marks the culmination of the novel and indicates that, whatever evil she encounters, she will retain her

conscience without becoming cynical or jaded. Though she is still a child at the end of the book, Scout's perspective on life develops from that of an innocent child into that of a near grown-up.

Atticus Finch

- Scout and Jem's father, a lawyer in Maycomb descended from an old local family. A widower with a dry sense of humor, Atticus has instilled in his children his strong sense of morality and justice. He is one of the few residents of Maycomb committed to racial equality. When he agrees to defend Tom Robinson, a black man charged with raping a white woman, he exposes himself and his family to the anger of the white community. With his strongly held convictions, wisdom, and empathy, Atticus functions as the novel's moral backbone.

Analysis of Atticus

As one of the most prominent citizens in Maycomb during the Great Depression, Atticus is relatively well off in a time of widespread poverty. Because of his penetrating intelligence, calm wisdom, and exemplary behavior, Atticus is respected by everyone, including the very poor. He functions as the moral backbone of Maycomb, a person to whom others turn in times of doubt and trouble, but the conscience that makes him so admirable ultimately causes his falling out with the people of Maycomb. Unable to abide the town's comfortable ingrained racial prejudice, he agrees to defend Tom Robinson, a black man. Atticus's action makes him the object of scorn in Maycomb, but he is simply too impressive a figure to be scorned for long. After the trial, he seems destined to be held in the same high regard as before.

Atticus practices the ethic of sympathy and understanding that he preaches to Scout and Jem and never holds a grudge against the people of Maycomb. Despite their callous indifference to racial inequality, Atticus sees much to admire in them. He recognizes that people have both good and bad qualities, and he is determined to admire the good while understanding and forgiving the bad. Atticus passes this great moral lesson on to Scout—this perspective protects the innocent from being destroyed by contact with evil.

Ironically, though Atticus is a heroic figure in the novel and a respected man in Maycomb, neither Jem nor Scout consciously idolizes him at the beginning of the novel. Both are embarrassed that he is older than other

fathers and that he doesn't hunt or fish. But Atticus's wise parenting, which he sums up in Chapter 30 by saying, "Before Jem looks at anyone else he looks at me, and I've tried to live so I can look squarely back at him," ultimately wins their respect. By the end of the novel, Jem, in particular, is fiercely devoted to Atticus (Scout, still a little girl, loves him uncritically). Though his children's attitude toward him evolves, Atticus is characterized throughout the book by his absolute consistency. He stands rigidly committed to justice and thoughtfully willing to view matters from the perspectives of others. He does not develop in the novel but retains these qualities in equal measure, making him the novel's moral guide and voice of conscience.

Jeremy Atticus "Jem" Finch

- Scout's brother and constant playmate at the beginning of the story. Jem is something of a typical American boy, refusing to back down from dares and fantasizing about playing football. Four years older than Scout, he gradually separates himself from her games, but he remains her close companion and protector throughout the novel. Jem moves into adolescence during the story, and his ideals are shaken badly by the evil and injustice that he perceives during the trial of Tom Robinson.

Analysis of Jem

If Scout is an innocent girl who is exposed to evil at an early age and forced to develop an adult moral outlook, Jem finds himself in an even more turbulent situation. His shattering experience at Tom Robinson's trial occurs just as he is entering puberty, a time when life is complicated and traumatic enough. His disillusionment upon seeing that justice does not always prevail leaves him vulnerable and confused at a critical, formative point in his life. Nevertheless, he admirably upholds the commitment to justice that Atticus instilled in him and maintains it with deep conviction throughout the novel.

Unlike the jaded Mr. Raymond, Jem is not without hope: Atticus tells Scout that Jem simply needs time to process what he has learned. The strong presence of Atticus in Jem's life seems to promise that he will recover his equilibrium. Later in his life, Jem is able to see that Boo Radley's unexpected aid indicates there is good in people. Even before the end of the novel, Jem shows signs of having learned a positive lesson from the trial; for instance, at the beginning of Chapter 25, he refuses to allow Scout to squash a roly-poly bug because it has done nothing to harm her. After seeing the

unfair destruction of Tom Robinson, Jem now wants to protect the fragile and harmless.

The idea that Jem resolves his cynicism and moves toward a happier life is supported by the beginning of the novel, in which a grown-up Scout remembers talking to Jem about the events that make up the novel's plot. Scout says that Jem pinpointed the children's initial interest in Boo Radley at the beginning of the story, strongly implying that he understood what Boo represented to them and, like Scout, managed to shed his innocence without losing his hope.

Arthur "Boo" Radley

- A recluse who never sets foot outside his house, Boo dominates the imaginations of Jem, Scout, and Dill. He is a powerful symbol of goodness swathed in an initial shroud of creepiness, leaving little presents for Scout and Jem and emerging at an opportune moment to save the children. An intelligent child emotionally damaged by his cruel father, Boo provides an example of the threat that evil poses to innocence and goodness. He is one of the novel's "mockingbirds," a good person injured by the evil of mankind.

Bob Ewell

- A drunken, mostly unemployed member of Maycomb's poorest family. In his knowingly wrongful accusation that Tom Robinson raped his daughter, Ewell represents the dark side of the South: ignorance, poverty, squalor, and hate-filled racial prejudice.

Charles Baker "Dill" Harris

- Jem and Scout's summer neighbour and friend. Dill is a diminutive, confident boy with an active imagination. He becomes fascinated with Boo Radley and represents the perspective of childhood innocence throughout the novel.

Miss Maudie Atkinson

- The Finches' neighbor, a sharp-tongued widow, and an old friend of the family. Miss Maudie is almost the same age as Atticus's younger brother, Jack. She shares Atticus's passion for justice and is the children's best friend among Maycomb's adults.

Calpurnia

- The Finches' black cook. Calpurnia is a stern disciplinarian and the children's bridge between the white world and her own black community.

Aunt Alexandra

- Atticus's sister, a strong-willed woman with a fierce devotion to her family. Alexandra is the perfect Southern lady, and her commitment to propriety and tradition often leads her to clash with Scout.

Mayella Ewell

- Bob Ewell's abused, lonely, unhappy daughter. Though one can pity Mayella because of her overbearing father, one cannot pardon her for her shameful indictment of Tom Robinson.

Tom Robinson

- The black field hand accused of rape. Tom is one of the novel's "mockingbirds," an important symbol of innocence destroyed by evil.

Link Deas

- Tom Robinson's employer. In his willingness to look past race and praise the integrity of Tom's character, Deas epitomizes the opposite of prejudice.

Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose

- An elderly, ill-tempered, racist woman who lives near the Finches. Although Tom believes that Mrs. Dubose is a thoroughly bad woman, Atticus admires her for the courage with which she battles her morphine addiction.

Nathan Radley

- Boo Radley's older brother. Scout thinks that Nathan is similar to the deceased Mr. Radley, Boo and Nathan's father. Nathan cruelly cuts off an important element of Boo's relationship with Jem and Scout when he plugs up the knothole in which Boo leaves presents for the children.