***To Kill a Mockingbird***

***Chapter 1***

***Brief Summary:***

Scout, the narrator, begins to bring the reader into her childhood world. The main characters in her life include: her father Atticus Finch, her older brother Jem, their housekeeper Calpurnia and a young boy who is visiting a neighbor for the summer who is named Dill.

The Finches call Maycomb, Alabama their home. Through the years, their ancestors made a name for themselves within the small community. For many years, the family lived at Finch's Landing and made money from cotton. Atticus turns his back on that lifestyle and becomes an attorney, while he younger brother became a doctor.

After law school, Atticus returns to Maycomb and sets up his law practice. Scout describes their small town in the thirties. One of her most vivid descriptions is contained early in the book. "A day was twenty-four hours but seemed longer. There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb."

The Radley family who live next door to the Finches are introduced. Mr. Radley is a man with definite views about how things should be handled. This is especially true with his son Arthur, who is known by the name Boo. When Boo got into trouble with some rowdy teenage boys when he was younger, his father takes him home and Boo hasn't been "seen" by his neighbors in about fifteen years. Mr. Radley wouldn't allow his son to be taken to jail or later, to an insane asylum, so he keeps Arthur inside the house.

Neighborhood children make up fantastical stories about Boo and claim to have seen him, in many shapes and sizes. Scout and Jem live next door to the Radleys and spend warm afternoons discussing Boo with their new friend Dill. On one afternoon, Dill decides that they should try to make Boo come out of the house. Jem has a healthy fear of Boo based on years of stories that have been embellished in his young mind.

Dill accuses Jem of being scared which Jem insists is respect, not fear. When Dill realizes he isn't making much headway, he compromises. All he wants Jem to do is touch the house. After some careful "planning," Jem runs up the sidewalk, slaps his hand against the house and the three children run from the house. Were they watched from an upstairs window, or did the wind move the inside shutter?

***Brief Analysis:***

Maycomb, Alabama is a tired town in the financially challenging 1930's. This is felt by the townspeople and recognized by the children. Through Scout's eyes, we see her world. Their neighbors illustrate how people judge others who are different, as illustrated through their conversations about Boo Radley. He did get involved with a rough group and for some reason stabbed his father in the leg, but the town automatically assumes he is responsible for various small crimes throughout the town. There is no evidence to support this, but he seems to be a likely scapegoat.

***Detailed Summary:***

The story begins with an injury: the narrator's brother [Jem](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/jem-jeremy-atticus-finch) got his arm broken when he was thirteen.

Luckily, his bum arm doesn't interfere with Jem's mad football skills, so he doesn't care much.

Years afterward, brother and narrator argue over where the story really starts: the narrator blames it on the Ewell family, while Jem (the older sibling by four years) puts the beginning at the summer they first met [Dill](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/dill-charles-baker-harris).

The flash-forward conversation continues: the narrator says that if you want to get technical about it, everything began with [Andrew Jackson](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/history/jackson-era/people#andrew-jackson), whose actions led their forefather Simon Finch to settle where he did.

The flash-forward becomes a flashback: Simon Finch was a pious and miserly Englishman who left his home country to wander around America, before settling in Alabama with his accumulated wealth, his family, and his slaves.

Sounds like a laugh and a half.

Simon's homestead was called Finch's Landing (natch), and was a mostly self-sufficient estate run by Simon's male descendants, who sold cotton to buy what the farm couldn't produce itself.

The [Civil War](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/history/civil-war) put an end to a lot of that (like the slave-owning), but the tradition of living off the land remained.

Until now. [Atticus](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/atticus-finch), the narrator's father, studied law in Montgomery, while his younger brother went all the way to Boston to become a doctor.

Woohoo, upward mobility!

The only Finch left at the Landing is their sister [Alexandra](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/alexandra-hancock) and her quiet husband.

After becoming a lawyer, Atticus returned to Maycomb, the county seat of Maycomb County, twenty miles from Finch's landing.

Atticus feels at home in [Maycomb](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/analysis/setting), not least because he's related to nearly everyone in the town.

Out of the flashback, into the present-time of the story (which we already know the narrator's actually remembering. Confused? Hop over to "[Point of View/Narrative Voice](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/analysis/narrator-point-of-view)" if you want the 411 on that right now).

The narrator thinks about the Maycomb s/he (we don't know which yet) knew. It's not a happening place. Everyone moves slower than sweat, and there's not much worth hurrying for, let alone much sense of what might be happening outside the county lines.

The narrator lives on the town's main residential drag with her brother Jem, her father Atticus, and their cook Calpurnia, who is a force to be reckoned with.

You may notice there's no mom to be found: she died when the narrator was two, and the narrator doesn't really remember her, though Jem does.

The story really gets underway the summer when the narrator is five going on six and Jem is nine going on ten.

This is the summer Dill arrives in Maycomb.

Their first meeting happens like this: Jem and the narrator are playing in their backyard, hear a noise next door, and go to check it out. They find a small boy, six going on seven but looking younger, who introduces himself as Charles Baker Harris and announces that he can read.

Well, we're off to a good start.

Charles Baker Harris says that people call him Dill, so we will too.

Dill tells the narrator and Jem a bit about himself: he's from Meridian, Mississippi, but he's spending the summer with his aunt, the Finches' next-door neighbor Miss Rachel.

Unlike the rural Finches, he's had access to movie theatres, and so he regales them with the story of Dracula. (Maybe this one?)

The narrator asks Dill about his absent father. Apparently this is a sore subject, so Jem tells his sibling to shut up.

Jem, Dill, and the narrator spend the summer acting out stories from the books they've read, over and over and over.

Sound boring? Eventually, the kids think so too.

Dill comes to the rescue with a new idea: they can try to make [Boo Radley](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/boo-radley) come out.

The Radley Place is the haunted house of the neighborhood, complete with ghost Boo Radley, who got in trouble with the law as a teenager and has been holed up in the house unseen ever since.

The house has quite the reputation with the neighborhood kids, who avoid it at all costs.

Now we hear a story about Boo, courtesy of Jem, courtesy of Miss Stephanie Crawford, the neighborhood busybody: When Boo was 33 years old, he was cutting out newspaper articles for his scrapbook when he suddenly stabbed the scissors into his father's leg, then calmly went back to what he was doing.

After that Boo was locked up by the police briefly, and there was talk of sending him to an insane asylum. In the end, he ended up back in the Radley Place.

When Boo's father died, Boo's older brother [Nathan](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/nathan-radley) moved in to take over. Nothing much changed at the Radley Place.

Rumor has it that Boo gets out at night and stalks around the neighborhood, but none of the kids has ever actually seen him.

Jem makes up horror stories about what Boo's like (think a cross between a vampire and a zombie), but Dill still wants to see him.

Or rather, he wants Jem to go knock on the Radleys' door.

Jem tries to get out of the dare without showing he's scared but then gives in when Dill says he doesn't have to knock, just touch the door.

Jem works up his nerve, dashes up to the house, slaps the door, and runs back at top speed without looking behind him.

After reaching safety on their own porch, the kids look at the [Radley Place](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/analysis/the-radley-place), but all they see is the hint of an inside shutter moving.

***Detailed Analysis:***

The novel opens with the narrator, Jean Louise “Scout” Finch, relating that when her brother Jem was thirteen he broke his arm badly at the elbow. Scout withholds the exact cause of his accident, transitioning instead to her memories of the events leading up to Jem’s injury and their childhood in Maycomb, Alabama in the 1930s. Scout tells the story as an adult, but within the narrative she is a little girl who’s just six years old at the beginning of the novel and eight years old at the end. Scout has been thinking about the story ever since, and even though she and her brother disagree about where exactly the story begins, Scout takes it all the way back to General Andrew Jackson, whose war against the Creek Tribe led Scout’s ancestor, Simon Finch, to sail to Alabama, where he established a homestead, Finch’s Landing, and grew rich on slave labor. The Civil War altered the family’s fortunes, but still left them solidly upper middle class. Atticus became a lawyer, and his brother became a doctor.

Scout introduces us to Maycomb, “a tired old town” where people shuffle around with nothing to do, and to Calpurnia, her family’s servant, an African American woman with a hand as “wide as a bed slat and twice as hard.” Calpurnia is the disciplinarian in their household, the female figure who picks up the slack left behind by Scout’s mother, who died when she was two. Scout doesn’t remember her mother, but Jem does, and this sometimes affects their relationship. In the summer, the Finch children are bounded by Mrs. Dubose’s house two doors to the north and by the Radley house three doors to the south when they’re outside playing. This suits them fine, and they spend most of their days playing together just the two of them, having no friends their age living within that radius. That is, until Dill arrives.

Charles Baker “Dill” Harris is from Meridian, Mississippi, and is visiting his Aunt Rachel for the summer. His arrival sparks renewed fascination with the Radley house and the stories circulating about it around Maycomb. According to one of them, Boo Radley, Mr. Radley’s son, was caught making trouble one night with his friends the Cunninghams when they locked Maycomb’s beadle in the courthouse outhouse. As punishment, Boo’s friends were sent to the state industrial school. Boo himself stayed home and hasn’t been seen since. Jem says that when Boo was thirty-three he plunged a pair of scissors into his father’s leg one day for no good reason. Mr. Radley had simply been walking by, and Boo stabbed him. When the police came, he was just sitting there, working on his scrapbook as if nothing had happened. This story scares the kids and makes them reluctant to pass the Radley house. Even after Mr. Radley dies and is replaced by Boo’s older brother, Mr. Nathan Radley, the kids fear the house enough to feel the need to run past it as fast as possible.

In fact, the kids are scared enough that when Dill dares Jem to touch the house, at first he doesn’t want to do it. Dill has to goad him into it, and even then, Jem does it at top speed, running up and slapping the side of the Radley house before sprinting back to his own porch. The kids think they see a shutter move inside the Radley house, but then everything goes still.

***Alliteration***

One example of this is "the grass grew on the sidewalks, the courthouse sagged in the square."

***Allusions***

Andrew Jackson (1767 - 1845).  A prominent American general and statesman and the 7th President of the United States. In 1802 Jackson was elected the major general of the Tennessee militia, which he later led during the War of 1812. His service in the war brought him national fame and led to his presidential campaign in 1824, which he lost to John Quincy Adams in what’s known as the “corrupt bargain.”

***Critical Study:***

*To Kill a Mockingbird* opens with [Scout](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Scout) recalling the events leading up to when her brother, [Jem](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Jem), broke his arm when he was almost 13.

Scout provides readers with the backstory of her family, a long line of southerners that dates back to a fur trader named Simon Finch from Cornwall, England. After crossing the Atlantic Finch eventually made his way up the Alabama River and homesteaded Finch's Landing some 40 miles above Saint Stephens, Alabama. This is where her father, [Atticus](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Atticus), and his two siblings grew up.

Scout brings us into present-day Maycomb, Alabama, the small town she lives in with her widowed father, 10-year-old brother Jem, and [Calpurnia](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Calpurnia), the family cook. It's summertime in Maycomb, and since there isn't much to do six-year-old Scout and Jem put on plays and run around near their house. Calpurnia, a strict disciplinarian, has set boundaries for how far they can roam from the house. This introduces the geography of their neighborhood—specifically the Radley Place.

The Radleys are a reclusive family who live three doors down from the Finch home. Many years ago the younger boy, Arthur (Boo), fell in with the wrong crowd while in his teens. On one particularly wild evening he and the other boys got in enough trouble to be sentenced to a state school. Mr. Radley asked the judge if Boo could be released into his custody, promising the boy would cause no further trouble. When Mr. Radley left the courthouse with Boo in tow, it was the last anyone saw of Boo for 15 years.

What happened next became the story out of which neighborhood legends grew. While under house arrest, Boo, who had been working on a scrapbook, attacked his father, stabbing him in the leg with scissors. Mrs. Radley ran from the house screaming that Boo was trying to kill them. The police were called, and Arthur, who was found in the living room still working on his scrapbook, was locked in the courthouse basement. Eventually Arthur was transitioned back home, where he'd been imprisoned ever since.

When old Mr. Radley died the older son, Nathan, returned from Florida and picked up where his father left off, keeping Boo locked in the house. Over the years stories surrounding Boo and the Radley family grew more ridiculous, but Maycomb residents were scared of the Radleys nonetheless. People wouldn't walk past the home at night when Boo was said to roam; stealthy crimes around town were attributed to him; plants that died in a cold snap were said to have been breathed on by Boo; pecans that fell from the Radley trees were thought to be poisonous.

The focus on [Boo Radley](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Boo_Radley) becomes suddenly more intense when Jem and Scout meet Charles Baker Harris, or "[Dill](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Dill)," when he comes to stay next door with his aunt, Rachel Haverford. Dill, who strikes up an instant friendship with Jem and Scout, is fascinated by the stories, and he makes plans to lure Boo out of the house.

[Chapter 1](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/chapter-1-summary/) begins building the framework of the story by introducing not only several characters and settings but also the themes of class, race, and equality versus inequality. As readers will learn later, class distinctions mean a great deal to Aunt Alexandra but are of little importance to [Atticus](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Atticus), [Scout](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Scout), and [Jem](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Jem) Finch. The Finch family's position in society, based on ancestor Simon Finch's establishment of Finch's Landing, has its roots in slavery. Simon Finch has ignored his religious teaching and purchased slaves—whose labor built his homestead.

So far Scout is untouched by concerns of race, class, and other more adult concepts. She, Jem, and [Dill](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Dill) spend the summer playing and, if they think of any moral concepts, they tend to think in terms of good and evil. According to local gossip [Boo Radley](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Boo_Radley) is evil, and their curiosity is fired up to see what evil looks like. This view of Boo Radley—someone the town sees as different*—*is an introduction to the theme of equality versus inequality. Because the people of Maycomb perceive Boo as different from themselves, they make an automatic judgment about him.

***Critical Analysis:***

Scout, the narrator, remembers the summer that her brother Jem broke his arm, and she looks back over the years to recall the incidents that led to that climactic event. Scout provides a brief introduction to the town of Maycomb, Alabama and its inhabitants, including her widowed father Atticus Finch, attorney and state legislator; Calpurnia, their "Negro" cook and housekeeper; and various neighbors.

The story starts with the first summer that Scout and Jem meet Dill, a little boy from Meridian, Mississippi who spends the summers with his aunt, the Finchs' next-door neighbor Miss Rachel Haverford.

From the children's point-of-view, their most compelling neighbor is Boo Radley, a recluse whom none of them has ever seen. Dill's fascination, in particular, leads to all sorts of games and plans to try and get Boo to come outside. Their attempts culminate in a dare to Jem, which he grudgingly takes. Jem runs into the Radleys' yard and touches the outside of the house.

This chapter sets the tone and basis for everything else that happens in the novel. Scout depicts her world as a place of absolutes. This strong foundation provides an important starting point for the story. Subsequent situations and circumstances chip away at all that the children know to be true as maturity confronts them. This maturity is foreshadowed by Jem's broken arm and the fact that the story is told in retrospect.

Novels that deal with the formation of a maturing character are called bildungsroman or coming-of-age stories. Scout as narrator is key to the novel's success. The reader has the advantage of a storyteller who can look back at a situation and see herself exactly as she was. Scout tells the story from an adult point-of-view but with a child's eye and voice, which gives the story a good deal of humor and wit. Scout's distance from the story also gives her some objectivity, although she admits that even in her objectivity, some events are questionable: "I maintain that the Ewells started it all, but Jem . . . said it started long before that."

The sense of place established in this chapter is integral to the rest of the story. Through Scout, Lee gives the reader a feel for the small Southern town of Maycomb, Alabama, which is loosely based on Lee's hometown of Monroeville, Alabama. In this town, the rules of society are clearly set. One's social survival depends on how well he or she follows the rules. Scout, Jem, and Dill come to question these conventions as the story progresses.

Where a person comes from — his ancestry — is important, and like many small towns, Maycomb's citizens are suspicious of outsiders. Dill is a crucial character in the story because he is both an insider and an outsider. He hails from a different state, but because he is a child and because "His family was from Maycomb originally," he is accepted readily. Throughout the story, Dill acts as an observant conscience for the town. The first example of Dill as conscience comes when he and Jem disagree about the method for making a turtle come out of its shell.

A hefty portion of the story focuses on prejudice and the relationships between African Americans and whites in the Southern United States in general, and Maycomb, specifically. This chapter makes clear that Maycomb has very different rules for blacks and whites in the town, as evidenced by the children's surprise when Calpurnia speaks ill of Boo Radley's father because "Calpurnia rarely commented on the ways of white people."

Superstition is brought to light in the children's perception of Boo Radley. Much like a mystery novel, the first chapter gives readers the idea that things may not be what they seem on the surface, as when Scout's father, Atticus, says "there were other ways of making people into ghosts."

Scout gives readers their first insights into Atticus Finch in this chapter, as well. A patient and loving, if somewhat unusual, father, Atticus acts as the voice of reason for his children, and later the entire town. The fact that he has a "profound distaste for criminal law" foreshadows the emotions he has surrounding Tom Robinson's trial later in the story.

Another major theme in the novel that is introduced in this chapter is that of defining bravery. For the children at this point in the story, bravery means nothing more than accepting a dare to touch the Radley house.

Glossary

**"swept yard"**In some areas of the South, a swept yard was a sign of a well-kept home. A swept yard was typically kept neat and clean using straw sagebrush brooms.

**flivver**[Old Slang] a small, cheap automobile, esp. an old one.

**beadle**[Obs.] a messenger of a law court.

**neighborhood scold**a person, esp. a woman, who habitually uses abusive language.

**Cannas**any of a genus (Canna) broad-leaved tropical plants, often grown for ornament because of the striking foliage and brilliant flowers.

The Gray Ghost One in a series of pulp fiction novels written in 1926 by Robert Schulkers. These humorous mystery stories were narrated by Seckatary Hawkins, the "seckatary" of a boys' club.

**Tom Swift**boys' pulp fiction serial featuring famed, fictitious inventor and adventurer, Tom Swift.

***Critical Exploration:***

The story is narrated by a young girl named Jean Louise Finch, who is almost always called by her nickname, Scout. Scout starts to explain the circumstances that led to the broken arm that her older brother, Jem, sustained many years earlier; she begins by recounting her family history. The first of her ancestors to come to America was a fur-trader and apothecary named Simon Finch, who fled England to escape religious persecution and established a successful farm on the banks of the Alabama River. The farm, called Finch’s Landing, supported the family for many years. The first Finches to make a living away from the farm were Scout’s father, Atticus Finch, who became a lawyer in the nearby town of Maycomb, and his brother, Jack Finch, who went to medical school in Boston. Their sister, Alexandra Finch, stayed to run the Landing.

A successful lawyer, Atticus makes a solid living in Maycomb, a tired, poor, old town in the grips of the Great Depression. He lives with Jem and Scout on Maycomb’s main residential street. Their cook, an old black woman named Calpurnia, helps to raise the children and keep the house. Atticus’s wife died when Scout was two, so she does not remember her mother well. But Jem, four years older than Scout, has memories of their mother that sometimes make him unhappy.

In the summer of 1933, when Jem is nearly ten and Scout almost six, a peculiar boy named Charles Baker Harris moves in next door. The boy, who calls himself Dill, stays for the summer with his aunt, Miss Rachel Haverford, who owns the house next to the Finches’. Dill doesn’t like to discuss his father’s absence from his life, but he is otherwise a talkative and extremely intelligent boy who quickly becomes the Finch children’s chief playmate. All summer, the three act out various stories that they have read. When they grow bored of this activity, Dill suggests that they attempt to lure Boo Radley, a mysterious neighbor, out of his house.

Arthur “Boo” Radley lives in the run-down Radley Place, and no one has seen him outside it in years. Scout recounts how, as a boy, Boo got in trouble with the law and his father imprisoned him in the house as punishment. He was not heard from until fifteen years later, when he stabbed his father with a pair of scissors. Although people suggested that Boo was crazy, old Mr. Radley refused to have his son committed to an asylum. When the old man died, Boo’s brother, Nathan, came to live in the house with Boo. Nevertheless, Boo continued to stay inside.

Dill is fascinated by Boo and tries to convince the Finch children to help him lure this phantom of Maycomb outside. Eventually, he dares Jem to run over and touch the house. Jem does so, sprinting back hastily; there is no sign of movement at the Radley Place, although Scout thinks that she sees a shutter move slightly, as if someone were peeking out.

The story that constitutes almost the entirety of To Kill a Mockingbird is set in the time between Scout Finch’s fifth and ninth birthdays, but Scout presumably commences the first-person narrative that opens the novel much later in her life. As a result, the narrative voice fluctuates between the child’s point of view, chronicling the events as they happen, and the adult voice, looking back on her childhood many years later. The child’s naïve voice dominates the central plot, allowing the reader to make connections and understand events in a way that the young Scout does not. At the same time, the narrative often digresses into anecdotes or descriptions presented retrospectively, like Scout’s depiction of Maycomb in the first chapter: “Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. . . . Somehow, it was hotter then . . . [p]eople moved slowly then.” Here, Lee’s language indicates an adult’s recollection rather than a girl’s experience.

Structurally, To Kill a Mockingbird is circular: the story begins where it ends. The first line of the novel introduces Jem’s broken arm, and the novel then flashes back to cover the events leading up to his accident. The narrator uses this device to provide background for the Finch family, introducing the legendary Simon Finch and his three descendants. But at this stage of the novel, the family history is treated as background information, of secondary importance to the private world of the young Finch children. In this way, the first chapter provides only a brief sketch of Atticus, whose importance increases as the novel progresses. Jem and Scout are the center of the story, filling it with their world of imagination and superstition, centered on town myths such as the curious history of Boo Radley and imaginative diversions such as acting out stories from books.

Dill dominates this early part of the novel: he is only a summer visitor, with no connection to Maycomb’s adult world. As this adult world asserts itself later in the novel, Dill fades from the story. For now, however, the novel appropriates Dill’s childhood perspective and only hints at the darker, more adult problems that will intrude on Jem and Scout. One of the central themes of To Kill a Mockingbird is the process of growing up and developing a more mature perspective on life. Correspondingly, the narrative gradually comes to mirror a loss of innocence, as the carefree childhood of this first chapter is slowly replaced by a darker, more dangerous, and more cynical adult story in which the children are only minor participants.

Boo Radley becomes the focus of the children’s curiosity in Chapter 1. As befits the perspective of childhood innocence, the recluse is given no identity apart from the youthful superstitions that surround him: Scout describes him as a “malevolent phantom” over six feet tall who eats squirrels and cats. Of course, the reader realizes that there must be more to Boo’s story than these superstitions imply. Eventually, Boo will be transformed from a nightmare villain into a human being, and the children’s understanding of him will reflect their own journey toward adulthood.

***Important Quotations Explained:***

***Quotation 1:***

Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop . . . [s]omehow it was hotter then . . . bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade of the live oaks on the square. Men’s stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon, after their three-o’clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum. . . . There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County. But it was a time of vague optimism for some of the people: Maycomb County had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself.

***Explanation:***

This quotation, from Chapter 1, is Scout’s introductory description of Maycomb. Scout emphasizes the slow pace, Alabama heat, and old-fashioned values of the town, in which men wear shirt collars, ladies use talcum powder, and the streets are not paved, turning to “red slop” in the rain. This description situates Maycomb in the reader’s mind as a sleepy Southern town; Scout even calls it “tired.” It also situates Scout with respect to the narrative: she writes of the time when she “first knew” Maycomb, indicating that she embarks upon this recollection of her childhood much later in life, as an adult. The description also provides important clues about the story’s chronological setting: in addition to now-outdated elements such as mule-driven Hoover carts and dirt roads, it also makes reference to the widespread poverty of the town, implying that Maycomb is in the midst of the Great Depression.

“We have nothing to fear but fear itself” is the most famous line from Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s first inaugural speech, made after the 1932 presidential election. From this clue, it is reasonable to infer that the action of the story opens in the summer of 1933, an assumption that subsequent historical clues support. The defeat of the National Recovery Act in the Supreme Court in 1935, for instance, is mentioned in Chapter 27 of the novel, when Scout is eight—about two years older than at the start of the novel.

***Quotation 2:***

Jeremy Atticus Finch (Jem)

Jem wanted Dill to know once and for all that he wasn't scared of anything: "It's just that I can't think of a way to make him come out without him gettin' us." Besides, Jem had his little sister to think of.

When he said that, I knew he was afraid. (1.72-75)

***Explanation:***

For Jem, fear is something to be ashamed of. Maybe this is why kids are obsessed with Boo: acting like they're not scared of him is a way for them to show off to each other.

***Compendium:***

The chapter opens with the introduction of the narrator, Scout (Jean Louise) Finch, her older brother Jem (Jeremy), and their friend and neighbor, Dill (Charles Baker Harris). Next, Lee provides an overview of Finch family history. Their ancestor, a Methodist named Simon Finch, fled British persecution and eventually settled in Alabama, where he trapped animals for fur and practiced medicine. Having bought several slaves, he established a largely self-sufficient homestead and farm, Finch's Landing, near Saint Stephens. The family lost its wealth in the Civil War.

Scout's father, [Atticus Finch](https://www.gradesaver.com/to-kill-a-mockingbird/study-guide/character-list#atticus-finch), studied law in Montgomery while supporting his brother, John "Jack" Hale Finch, who was in medical school in Boston. Their sister Alexandra remained at Finch's Landing. Atticus began his law practice in Maycomb, the county seat of Maycomb County, where his "office in the courthouse contained little more than a hat rack, a spittoon, a checkerboard, and an unsullied Code of Alabama." His first case entailed defending two men who refused to plead guilty for second-degree murder. They instead pled not guilty for first-degree murder, and were hanged, marking "probably the beginning of my father's profound distaste for criminal law."

Scout then describes Depression-era Maycomb, "an old tired town when I first knew it", summer heat and slow pace of life. She notes, "There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County". Scout describes as her father as entirely "satisfactory," and her family's black cook, [Calpurnia](https://www.gradesaver.com/to-kill-a-mockingbird/study-guide/character-list#calpurnia), as strict and "tyrannical." Scout and Jem's mother died of a heart attack when Scout was two and she has no memories of her. However, Jem can remember his mother and Scout notices that he is occasionally nostalgic about her. The novel takes begins during the summer. Scout is almost six, and Jem is almost ten.

Once this background picture is complete, the real narrative begins with the first meeting of Scout, Jem, and "Dill", a feisty, imaginative boy who is nearly seven but very small for his age Dill defends his height saying, "I'm little but I'm old". From Meridian, Mississippi, Dill will be spending the summer at the nearby house of Miss Rachel Haverford, his aunt. He impresses the Finch children with his dramatic recounting of the movie Dracula, which wins him their respect and friendship. The three engage in summertime play activities of improving the Finch tree and acting out the plots of several of their favorite books. Scout notes that Dill proves to be, "a pocket Merlin, whose head teemed with eccentric plans, strange longings, and quaint fancies."

By late summer, having exhausted these pursuits, the children turn their thoughts to the mysterious Radley place, down the block from the Finch house. The Radley house is said to contain a "malevolent phantom" by the name of [Boo Radley](https://www.gradesaver.com/to-kill-a-mockingbird/study-guide/character-list#boo-radley). Though the children have never seen him, rumors abound that he is over six feet tall, has rotten yellow teeth, popping eyes and a drool, and eats raw animals. Whenever strange things happen in the neighborhood, Boo is often blamed. Boo's story is an extension of the strange Radley family, who have always disregarded local custom by "keeping to themselves." Prior to his death, Mr. Radley, Boo's father, had only been seen on his daily trip to collect groceries from 11:30am-12pm, and the family worshipped together in their own home on Sundays. Their youngest son, Arthur, who the children call Boo, apparently mixed with "the wrong crowd," a gang of boys who were finally arrested and brought to court after driving an old car through the town square and locking Maycomb's beadle in an outhouse. Though the other boys were sent to industrial school for punishment, and ironically received excellent educations, Arthur Radley's family preferred to keep him hidden inside the home. After fifteen years living at home, the thirty-three-year-old Boo is rumored to have stabbed his father in the leg with a pair of scissors and then quietly continued about his business of cutting out newspaper articles. Refusing to permit his son to be deemed insane or charged with criminal behavior, Mr. Radley allowed Boo to be locked up in the courthouse basement: "the sheriff hadn't the heart to put him in jail alongside Negroes". Boo was eventually brought back to the Radley home. After Mr. Radley's death, his older brother Nathan arrived to continue to watch over Boo and keep him inside and out of sight.

Dill develops an insatiable curiosity about Boo, and wants to lay eyes on this strange "phantom," who is said to walk about at night looking in windows. Dill dares Jem to go inside the boundary of the Radleys' front gate. After three days of hedging, Jem's fear of Boo succumbs to his sense of honor when Dill revises his terms, daring Jem to only touch the house. Jem finally agrees to do this. He runs, touches the house, and the three scramble back to the Finches' porch, where looking down the street to the Radley house "we thought we saw an inside of a shutter move. Flick - and the house was still."

***Summary and Analysis Part by Part***

***Summary Part 1:***

[Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jean-louise-finch-scout) explains that when her brother, [Jem](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jeremy-atticus-finch-jem), was 13, he broke his arm. Many years later, they argue about when everything that led to the accident truly began. Jem maintains that it began the year [Dill](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/charles-baker-harris-dill) arrived, while Scout insists that they take a broader view. She gives a brief account of her family’s history—her ancestor [Simon Finch](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters) who left England to escape religious persecution and established a modest plantation called Finch’s Landing. The Finches remained on that land until Scout’s father, [Atticus](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/atticus-finch), and his brother left to study law and medicine, respectively. Atticus set up shop in Maycomb, 20 miles away from Finch’s Landing, and is related to nearly everyone in the county. When the story begins, Maycomb is a tired and poor old town, and Scout’s family lives on the main residential street.

***Analysis Part 1:***

The opening of the novel effectively establishes a foundation for many of its themes. That Simon Finch had to leave England to escape religious persecution points to the existence of prejudice. But that Simon finds success and establishes a "plantation," which implies that he and his descendants owned slaves, points to the complications of good and evil: Simon who suffered prejudice goes on to build his fortune by practicing his own prejudice upon others. (That Atticus left the plantation to make his living also implies that Atticus' views about race and slavery differ from those of his ancestors.) Meanwhile, the fact that Atticus—and by extension, Jem and Scout—are related to most people in the county speaks to the nature of small-town Southern life: Maycomb is a close-knit and insular community. Scout's description of the town as old and tired further establishes the setting in which the story takes place—the Great Depression. Scout's language to describe the town also accomplishes something else, as well. A child is unlikely to either perceive or describe her hometown as being "tired." Scout's language, then, makes clear that Scout functions in the novel in two ways: as the child who is its main character, but also as the grown up narrator looking back on her younger self with more knowledge, more wisdom. Even though the adult narrator spends much of the book speaking through the voice of her younger self and describing the world through her younger self's eyes, by establishing both the child and adult Scout as presences right from the beginning, the opening of the novel introduces the idea that this will be a novel about young Scout's growing into her older self.

***Summary Part 2:***

[Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jean-louise-finch-scout) and [Jem](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jeremy-atticus-finch-jem) love [Atticus](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/atticus-finch), but their cook, [Calpurnia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/calpurnia), is a mystery. Since Scout’s mother died when Scout was two, Calpurnia raises Scout and Jem and Scout finds her tyrannical. When Scout is six and Jem is 10, they spend their summer playing on their block and, one morning, they find a boy sitting in [Miss Rachel](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/miss-rachel-haverford)’s collard patch. He introduces himself as Charles Baker Harris, or [Dill](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/charles-baker-harris-dill), and announces that he’s almost seven and can read. Dill is from Mississippi and is spending the summer with his aunt, Miss Rachel. He explains that he saw the film [Dracula](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/dracula), which endears him to Scout and Jem. After this, they spend the summer in their tree house and performing their various dramas based off of their favorite books. By August, though, they’re bored, and Dill turns his attention to the Radley Place.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Scout likely finds Calpurnia tyrannical and one-dimensional because she’s so young and can’t yet understand Calpurnia as a complex individual. Dill and his imagination begin to situate these kinds of fantasy games as a hallmark of childhood in Mockingbird, while the fact that their games are based off of books indicates that all three children are literate. While this might not seem important to the children themselves, it does point to their financial situation and Atticus’s professional job, as they have enough money to live in a home that encourages education.

***Summary Part 3:***

The Radley Place is a low house in disrepair two doors down. A phantom lives inside and commits petty crimes, and children believe everything on the property is poisoned. The Radleys keep to themselves, something unheard of in Maycomb. According to legend, the youngest son, Arthur “[Boo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/arthur-radley-boo)” Radley, joined a gang in his teens, participated in tormenting a parish official, and rather than allow his son to attend the industrial school, [Mr. Radley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/mr-radley) kept Boo at home from then on. Then—according to the neighborhood scold, [Miss Stephanie Crawford](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/miss-stephanie-crawford)—when [Jem](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jeremy-atticus-finch-jem) was little, Boo stabbed his father with scissors. Jem figures that these days, Boo lives chained to his bed. Mr. Radley died soon after and [Calpurnia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/calpurnia) whispered that he was mean, which surprised Jem and Scout—she never speaks ill of white people. [Nathan Radley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/nathan-radley) returned to the house to imprison his brother. All of this fascinates [Dill](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/charles-baker-harris-dill).

***Analysis Part 3:***

The beliefs that a phantom lives in the house and that everything is poisoned is clearly the work of young imaginations. But note where those rumors likely stem from: the Radley family is considered strange and even evil because they don’t socialize like most people in Maycomb. The particulars of Boo being kept at home, coupled with Calpurnia’s posthumous assessment of Mr. Radley’s character, suggests that the reason for their seclusion may have been abuse, but this seems to be beyond the children’s understanding.

***Summary Part 4:***

[Jem](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jeremy-atticus-finch-jem) entertains [Dill](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/charles-baker-harris-dill) by describing what [Boo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/arthur-radley-boo) looks like: tall and scarred with yellow teeth and fed on a diet of raw cats and squirrels. Dill decides he’d like to get a look, so he dares Jem to touch the house by goading and insulting him. Jem takes his time but races to the house, slaps the siding, and then races back to the safety of his own porch with Dill and [Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jean-louise-finch-scout) behind him. The children notice a small movement in the window.

***Analysis Part 4:***

Jem’s very real anxiety about touching Radley Place makes the case that as people ostracize others for being different and as rumors circulate, this inevitably turns into not an understanding of difference, but a genuine fear of people who are different. That this shows up in a child rather than an adult, however, does offer hope that Jem will be able to question this later.

***Notes:***Part One begins with Scout reminiscing about beginnings before moving into a discussion of the Finch family history and Atticus’s deviation from the patterns of his ancestors. Atticus’s history is explicated in some detail, although not comprehensive, as is that of Maycomb. The arrival of Dill is noted and its circumstances related. A summer passes for Scout, Jem and Dill during which they play together and become friends; the allure of the Radley Place is noted, and the conventional wisdom about it related. Various familial entanglements and predilections are noted. Jem accepts a dare to breach the Radley premises and does so only after much waffling; there is minimal reaction from the house.