***To Kill a Mockingbird***

***Chapter 4***

***Summary:***

* Jean Louise catches Walter Cunningham in the schoolyard and beats him up for being the reason she got in trouble, but Jem stops her.
* She explains to [**Jem**](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/jem-jeremy-atticus-finch) (who calls her Scout, so we will too) what happened.
* Jem invites Walter to come home for lunch with Scout and him.
* At the Finch house, [**Atticus**](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/atticus-finch) talks to Walter about farming, while Jem and Scout listen half-comprehendingly.
* Walter asks for molasses, which he proceeds to pour all over his food.
* Scout is all, "What?," and he stops in embarrassment.
* [**Calpurnia**](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/to-kill-a-mockingbird/calpurnia) calls Scout into the kitchen, where she gives her a lecture on hospitality—Walter's a guest and so he can basically do whatever he wants.
* The kids go back to school, and Scout grumps silently about Calpurnia's lecture.
* She's called back to the here and now by a shriek from Miss Caroline, who's seen a "cootie" (3.37)—probably a louse, which may sound more familiar in the plural, lice—on one of the students.
* Miss Caroline tries to send the student, named Burris Ewell, home to wash his hair (after looking up lice remedies in a reference book), and says he should take a bath (which he apparently really needs, since he looks worse than Pigpen from Peanuts) before coming back to class.
* But Burris tells her that he's not coming back.
* What? Apparently, Burris is one of the Ewells. Ewells come the first day to satisfy the truant officer and then skeddaddle.
* Burris decides he's already done with school for the year even though the first day isn't over yet, and manages to make Miss Caroline cry before he leaves.
* The other students try to cheer Miss Caroline up, and she reads them another boring story.
* Highly dissatisfied with her first day of school, Scout goes home and makes plans to run away.
* Atticus comes home from work, having apparently forgotten about Scout's lunchtime misbehavior, and Calpurnia gets back on Scout's good side with tasty crackling bread.
* After dinner, Atticus invites Scout to come read with him, which brings up unpleasant memories.
* Scout tries to convince Atticus that she doesn't really need to go to school, but he's not buying it.
* She tells him about her first day of school, and Atticus tells her to try to think about things from the other person's perspective—in this case, Miss Caroline, who was only trying to do her best in a strange place, whose ways she doesn't yet understand.
* Scout says that Burris Ewell stays home from school so she should be able to do so too, but apparently what holds true for Ewells doesn't apply to Finches.
* Finally, Atticus proposes a compromise: they'll keep reading at home if she'll keep going to school—but she shouldn't tell Miss Caroline about it.

***Brief Summary:***

Scout is eager for the end of the school year. It means vacation from school and Dill would visit for the summer. Since Jem is still in class, Scout walks home and notices a flicker in the knothole in the tree in front of the Radley's house. She reaches into the knothole and finds two pieces of chewing gum. Checking them, she sees nothing wrong and chews them. When Jem gets home, she tells him about her discovery. He gives Scout a lecture about finding things in strange places and eating it. Scout has been chewing the gum and since she hasn't died and doesn't feel bad, she assumes it's all right.

Scout comes to the realization that her relationship with Calpurnia is changing. They used to argue all the time, but Scout now makes an effort to get along. To her surprise, Calpurnia admits that she has missed Scout while she is at school.

Jem and Scout pass the tree and find a small box in the knothole. When Jem opens the box, there are two Indian head pennies. He knows they are valuable and tries to figure out whose they are. It couldn't belong to any adults because they wouldn't hide things in a knothole. They cannot imagine that it is anyone else's since no one really passes that tree. Their belief is that "finders are keepers until title is proven."

Dill returns to Maycomb and the friends try to find ways to see Boo Radley. Scout grabs an old tire and climbs inside. Jem rolls her down the street and she rolls into the Radley's yard. She gets out of the tire and lay on the cement. Jem calls to her to hurry and get away from the Radley's house. Scout looks at the Radley's front steps and struggles to stand. Jem calls to her, to grab the tire and get out of there. She gets on her feet and runs away from the Radley's.

Scout reaches Jem and Dill, but Jem complains that she didn't bring the tire with her. She reminds him that he once touched their house, so walking over to retrieve the tire should be easy. He races to grab it and returns to Scout and Dill.

Jem, Scout and Dill invent a new game. They make up plays about the Radley's. Each child plays a different part and Jem usually plays Boo. This goes on for some time, they even "borrow" Cal's scissors. Then one evening, Atticus comes home and asks the children what they are doing. They don't reveal the truth, but Atticus suspects they are imitating the Radleys. Scout keeps a secret of her own, she thinks that she heard laughter coming from the Radley's house when she fell out of the tire.

Boo Radley plays a part in Chapter 4, although we never actually see him. The items in the knothole allude to his presence, but the children don't seem to know for sure. These gifts help change Boo from being the "monster" to being more of a real person to Scout and Jem.

***Brief Analysis:***

The rest of the school year passes grimly for [Scout](https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/character/scout-finch/), who endures a curriculum that moves too slowly and leaves her constantly frustrated in class. After school one day, she passes the Radley Place and sees some tinfoil sticking out of a knothole in one of the Radleys’ oak trees. Scout reaches into the knothole and discovers two pieces of chewing gum. She chews both pieces and tells [Jem](https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/character/jem-finch/) about it. He panics and makes her spit it out. On the last day of school, however, they find two old “Indian-head” pennies hidden in the same knothole where Scout found the gum and decide to keep them.

Summer comes at last, school ends, and Dill returns to Maycomb. He, Scout, and Jem begin their games again. One of the first things they do is roll one another inside an old tire. On Scout’s turn, she rolls in front of the Radley steps, and Jem and Scout panic. However, this incident gives Jem the idea for their next game: they will play “[Boo Radley](https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/character/boo-radley/).” As the summer passes, their game becomes more complicated, until they are acting out an entire Radley family melodrama. Eventually, however, [Atticus](https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/character/atticus-finch/) catches them and asks if their game has anything to do with the Radleys. Jem lies, and Atticus goes back into the house. The kids wonder if it’s safe to play their game anymore.

***Detailed Analysis:***

The author whisks [Scout](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Scout) through much of the school year, which she sums up as no better than Scout's first day. By this time Scout has gained enough confidence to pass the Radley house on her own, even if she feels compelled to run. On one particular day she spies something shiny in the knothole of one of the two oak trees at the edge of the Radley lot. A closer inspection reveals that it's two pieces of gum in foil wrappers.

Scout starts chewing the gum, and [Jem](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Jem) questions where she got it. When he threatens to tell [Calpurnia](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Calpurnia) that she found it by the Radley lot, Scout is forced to spit it out. The gum is the first of many small gifts they'll find in the knothole. On the last day of school they find a small box containing two Indian head pennies. At this point they're still not sure whose hiding spot they've stumbled upon, so they agree to keep the pennies until school starts.

When [Dill](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Dill) returns for the summer, Jem and Scout are so excited they seem to forget about the mysterious knothole. The three of them launch into play, rolling Scout down the street in an old tire. When Jem gives the tire an extra hard push, it shoots down the road and slams into the Radley's porch. Scout abandons the tire, leaving Jem to retrieve it.

Jem comes up with a new idea for a play they can perform called "[Boo Radley](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Boo_Radley)." It consists of reenacting many of the stories they've heard about the Radley family, including the one where Boo stabs his father with scissors. They perfect their play over many days, but they are embarrassed when [Atticus](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Atticus) discovers them during their performance and gives them a stern lecture.

Scout is ready to quit the play even though Jem tells her she's acting like a girl, a taunt that often gets Scout to do exactly what Jem wants. Scout explains that it's not just Atticus's disapproval that makes her want to quit but also what happened the day the tire hit the porch: she had heard someone laughing inside the house.

It becomes obvious that [Scout](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Scout)'s intellect and curiosity aren't mixing well with the rigid Maycomb school system. Like Maycomb's residents, the school wants conformity. A free thinker, Scout feels oppressed by the school, although the author suggests that with her support system of [Atticus](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Atticus), [Calpurnia](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Calpurnia), and [Jem](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Jem), she'll be fine.

A mystery enters the lives of Scout and Jem with the arrival of gifts in the oak tree. They puzzle over who the mysterious gift giver might be, but spend no time questioning the gift giver's motives.

[Lee](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/author/) uses most of the chapter to celebrate [Dill](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/To-Kill-a-Mockingbird/character-analysis/#Dill)'s return to Maycomb. With Dill present it is certain there will be more focus on his obsession: luring Boo outside.

***Critical Study:***

Unsurprisingly, Scout finds the Dewey Decimal System boring and finds school to be a waste of time. One day, while running past the Radley house on her way home, she spots a bit of tinfoil in the knothole of an oak tree on the Radley lot. Inside, Scout finds two pieces of chewing gum. It’s unclear at first who leaves her this gift. Jem doesn’t believe she found it and makes her spit it out when he gets home from school, but later, when they find more tinfoil with a pair of Indian head pennies, he becomes curious. He knows there aren’t many people who go by there (Cecil Jacobs walks a mile out of his way to avoid the Radley house), which makes it especially strange.

Two days after Jem and Scout find the Indian heads, Dill arrives from Meridian. He tells them a bunch of tall tales about seeing conjoined twins and riding with the train engineer, then pretends to predict the future. Jem scorns these superstitions, explaining to Dill about Hot Steams, which are spirits that can’t get to Heaven and hang around on Earth, trying to suck the life out of people who pass through them. Tired of talking and playacting, they decide to roll around in a spare tire, which leads to Scout accidentally rolling too fast onto the Radley property. When Scout recovers she runs out of the yard, leaving the tire for Jem to retrieve.

After this, the children act out a play, One Man’s Family, based on the rumors about the Radleys (in particular, Boo’s attack on Mr. Radley). Whenever Nathan Radley walks by, they pause in the middle of a scene so he won’t know what they’re doing. Atticus figures it out, though, and this is Scout’s second reason for wanting to quit the game—the first, she says, is the fact that when she rolled onto the Radley property, she heard someone inside the house laughing. She assumes this is Boo.

**Alliteration**

One example of this would be "we polished and perfected it" (referring to the Boo Radley play).

**Allusions**

*Time***Magazine.**A popular magazine first published in March, 1923. It’s among the most influential magazines in the United States, and the fact that Scout reads it is further proof of her intelligence and her very advanced reading level.

**Metaphor.**A good example of this would be Scout inching "sluggishly along the treadmill of the Maycomb County school system," where school is compared to a treadmill that runs endlessly and gets you nowhere. This is very telling and reveals Scout's true feelings about school.

**Simile.**One example of this would be Scout popping out of the tire "like a cork onto the pavement."

**Themes**

**Games.**“Summer was Dill,” Scout says, meaning that when he arrives, their lives are enriched, and they play bigger, more elaborate games, like the play they act out in this chapter. This play marks the beginning of a major shift in the character of their games, which become less innocent and more dangerous in the proceeding chapters.

**Lies.**Characteristically, Dill’s first words in this chapter are lies, which he insists on telling despite the fact that nobody believes them. Dill’s lies are, however, innocuous, and cover up his insecurities, so that one can hardly fault him for having a little fun. Other characters don’t have such innocent intentions, though, and we’ll see the damage that lies can do during Tom Robinson’s trial.

**Superstition.**Like a hain’t, a Hot Steam is a spirit, like a ghost, who can’t get to Heaven. A Hot Steam is more malevolent than a regular hain’t, however, and hangs around Earth, trying to squeeze the life out of people who walk through their namesake hot places. That most of the biggest superstitions in this novel have to do in some way with death represents the fear that an untimely death produces in the main characters.

[Previous](https://www.enotes.com/topics/to-kill-a-mockingbird/chapter-summaries/chapter-3-summary-analysis)

***Significance:***School continues; the year goes by. Scout doubts that the new educational system is really doing her any good - she finds school boring and wishes the teacher would allow her to read and write, rather than ask the children to do silly activities geared toward "Group Dynamics" and "Good Citizenship." One afternoon, as she runs past the Radley house, she notices something in the knot-hole of one of the oak trees in the front yard. She investigates further and finds two pieces of chewing gum. Scout is careful, but eventually decides to chew them. Upon learning she is chewing found gum, Jem makes her spit it out. Later, toward the end of the school year, Jem and Scout find two polished Indian-head pennies, good luck tokens, inside the same knothole. The children don't know if the knothole is someone's hiding place or if the pennies are a gift, but decide to take them and keep them safely at the bottom of Jem's trunk.

Dill comes to Maycomb for the summer again, full of stories about train rides and his father, whom he claims to have finally seen. The three try to start a few games, but quickly get bored. Jem rolls Scout inside an old tire, but he pushes so hard that it ends up in the Radley's yard. Terrified, Scout runs back home, but leaves the tire behind. Jem has to run into the yard and retrieve the tire. Dill thinks Boo Radley died and Jem says they stuffed his body up the chimney. Scout thinks maybe he's still alive. They invent a new game about Boo Radley. Jem plays Boo, Dill plays Mr. Radley, and Scout plays Mrs. Radley. They polish it up over the summer into a little dramatic reenactment of all the gossip they've heard about Boo and his family, including a scene using Calpurnia's scissors as a prop. One day Atticus catches them playing the game and asks them if it has anything to do with the Radley family. They deny it, and Atticus replies, "I hope it doesn't." Atticus's sternness forces them to stop playing, and Scout is relieved because she's worried for another reason: she thought she heard the sound of someone laughing inside the Radley house when her tire rolled into their yard.

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

***Summary Part 1:***

The rest of [Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jean-louise-finch-scout)’s school year proceeds much like her first day. She can’t help but think she’s missing something, since [Atticus](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/atticus-finch) was educated at home, not with the Dewey Decimal System, and he’s been elected to the state legislature unopposed for years. Scout gets out of school 30 minutes before [Jem](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jeremy-atticus-finch-jem), so she races past the Radley Place. One afternoon, something catches her eye and she returns to one of the big oak trees in the Radley yard. In a knothole, she finds two pieces of chewing gum in tinfoil, which, after checking to make sure they’re not poisonous, she shoves in her mouth. Jem is aghast when he finds her and makes Scout gargle.

***Analysis Part 1:***

Again, the fact that Scout can identify that her formal education seems less useful in light of what Atticus has been able to accomplish through a home education speaks to both her precocious nature and the uselessness of the school system as she experiences it. Choosing to chew this gum despite the rumor that everything on the Radley property is poison suggests that a small kindness like leaving the gum can be enough to help a person like Scout overcome their prejudices and fears.

***Summary Part 2:***

On the last day of school, [Jem](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jeremy-atticus-finch-jem) and [Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jean-louise-finch-scout) get out early. They discuss [Dill](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/charles-baker-harris-dill)’s impending arrival and as they pass the Radley Place, Scout points to the knothole. There’s more tinfoil in it, and this time, Jem pulls out a shiny package. At home, Jem finds a ring box containing two polished Indian head pennies. They deliberate over whether to keep them and wonder if [Cecil Jacobs](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters) might be hiding things in the knothole, but they reason that Cecil goes an extra mile per day to avoid the Radley Place and mean [Mrs. Dubose](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/mrs-henry-lafayette-dubose). They decide to keep them until school starts again in case they belong to a classmate. Scout points out that nobody would want to save chewing gum, but Jem insists that the pennies are important to someone since Indian head pennies are magic.

***Analysis Part 2:***

Jem and Scout’s genuine attempts to ensure that they’re not stealing from one of their classmates illustrates how kind they are and how important it is to them to do the right thing, even if they might lose out on something exciting like pennies or gum. Their aside about Cecil Jacobs’s long walk to school, meanwhile, indicates that the fear of the Radleys extends throughout the community and suggests that the “evil” in Maycomb is easy to identify and avoid, if one is willing to literally go the extra mile.

***Summary Part 3:***

[Dill](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/charles-baker-harris-dill) arrives two days later on the train. He announces that he rode the train, helped the engineer, and that he met his father over the school year. The children squabble over what to play and Dill sniffs, declaring he can smell death at the Radley Place. They argue over whether Hot Steams are real and [Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jean-louise-finch-scout) insults [Jem](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jeremy-atticus-finch-jem)’s courage. Scout suggests they roll in the tire, which Jem and Dill agree to. Scout goes first and folds herself into the tire. She only realizes once Jem pushes her with all his might that Jem was offended by her insult. As the tire rolls, Scout feels like she’s suffocating. She crashes and finds herself on her back in the Radley front yard. Jem screams at her to run.

***Analysis Part 3:***

“Hot Steams” are ghosts or spirits with unfinished business on Earth, which makes it clear that the children’s superstitious beliefs don’t just involve their reclusive neighbors: they’re part of a much larger belief system. Because of this, however, note that the Radley Place becomes not just another house on the street, but something fundamentally different in the children’s eyes—and because of this, it’s terrifying.

***Summary Part 4:***

[Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jean-louise-finch-scout) runs on wobbly legs back to [Jem](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jeremy-atticus-finch-jem) and [Dill](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/charles-baker-harris-dill) and then argues with Jem about who should get the tire. Jem is furious, but he dashes in to get the tire and insults Scout for acting too much like a girl. [Calpurnia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/calpurnia) calls them in for lemonade and as they sit on the porch, Jem announces expansively that they can play [Boo Radley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/arthur-radley-boo). Scout knows this is supposed to make him look fearless and her look scared. He doles out parts (Scout is Mrs. Radley, Dill is old [Mr. Radley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/mr-radley), and Jem is Boo) and chastises Scout for being scared of Boo, whom he insists is dead. Their game evolves over the summer and though Jem and Dill love it, Scout plays anxiously.

***Analysis Part 4:***

Insulting Scout about being too girly shows that in addition to the class warfare at work in Maycomb, Scout also experiences sexism, even from those closest to her. This betrays Jem’s prejudice, as he’s clearly suggesting that feminine attributes—or in this case, fear, which everyone, regardless of gender, experiences—are less desirable than those he believes come along with masculinity. This is another attempt to get Scout to conform as well.

***Summary Part 5:***The play draws from neighborhood gossip. [Dill](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/charles-baker-harris-dill) plays villains, and for once [Scout](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jean-louise-finch-scout) gets a good part when she plays the judge. [Jem](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/jeremy-atticus-finch-jem) steals [Calpurnia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/calpurnia)’s scissors daily so he can mime stabbing Dill in the leg, and the children stand silent when [Nathan Radley](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/nathan-radley) passes or when they catch neighbors watching. One day, they don’t notice [Atticus](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/characters/atticus-finch) watching. Jem evasively insists that they’re not playing anything. Atticus shrewdly takes the scissors and asks if their game has to do with the Radleys. Jem insists it doesn’t, and Atticus tells them it shouldn’t as he enters the house. Scout hisses that Atticus knows, but Jem accuses her of being a girl and imagining things. She doesn’t tell him that she’s anxious because on the day she rolled into the Radley yard, she heard someone laughing.

***Analysis Part 5:***As far as Atticus is concerned, the children are being extremely rude to their neighbors by acting out this family drama on the lawn. This suggests that in Atticus’s mind, the Radleys aren’t scary or untouchable. Rather, they’re neighbors who deserve respect and kindness, even if they’re different and don’t interact with the Finches the same way other people do. While it’s likely that Scout interpreted the laughter she heard in the Radley house as sinister, a more generous reading suggests that whoever laughed simply found the children’s antics funny and means them no harm.