

Whole-text activities 1

Characterisation: Scout

Jean Louise ('Scout') Finch is six when the novel opens and eight when it ends. She is the narrator of the story, so everything is seen from her point of view. However, the story is told by Scout as an adult. She is looking back and remembering the events of 1933–35. 'When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back,' she says on the first page, although we never 'meet' the adult Scout. In this way the novel is Scout's memoir.

This technique means that the storyteller uses adult language and interprets as an adult the events that she describes. It is a slightly humorous adult voice that says, for example, 'I mumbled that I was sorry and retired meditating upon my crime. I never deliberately learned to read, but somehow I had been wallowing illicitly in the daily papers' (Chapter 2).

Scout is a sensitive girl. Look at the way she speaks to Mr Cunningham at the jail in Chapter 15 and at how gently she speaks to Boo Radley in Chapter 30. She is also intelligent. 'Scout yonder's been readin' ever since she was born,' Jem tells Dill in Chapter 1. Most of the time she keeps up with Jem, who is four years older than her, and Atticus usually addresses her as if she were almost an adult. 'This case, Tom Robinson's case, is something that goes to the essence of a man's conscience' (Chapter 11). This is why school is such a disappointment to her. She is already ahead of what it can offer and she predicts, probably correctly, that she has 'twelve years of unrelieved boredom' ahead of her.

Scout's affectionate nature is obvious in the way she relates to Atticus and Calpurnia. She adores Jem, who is almost a hero in her eyes. Look at Chapter 6 when Jem returns to collect his trousers from the Radley house and Scout cannot sleep for worrying about him. It is an example of how close she is to him. Scout also accompanies him to Mrs Dubose's house in Chapter 11. She is attached to Dill too: 'With him, life was routine; without him, life was unbearable,' she says in Chapter 12.

Scout is not 'ladylike' and almost always wears dungarees ('britches'). This is partly because her mother died when she was two and her main role models have been Atticus and Jem. Aunt Alexandra — 'Enamoured, upright, uncompromising' (Chapter 12) — is critical of Scout's tomboyishness and Atticus's upbringing of her. This causes tension when Aunt Alexandra first comes to stay, although Scout comes to respect her more as time goes on. Scout is more comfortable with male companions like Atticus, Jem and Dill because they are open with each other. She is uncomfortable with her aunt's friends — 'sipping, whispering, fanning' (Chapter 13) — who call in the afternoons when Scout is usually 'mud-splashed or covered with sand'.

As well as being thoughtful and bright, Scout is also impulsive and has a fiery temper. Look at the way she gets into fights with Walter Cunningham (Chapter 3), and Cecil Jacobs (Chapter 9) — when she forgets Atticus's stern advice about fighting: 'I soon forgot. Cecil Jacobs made me forget.' Cecil Jacobs has been taunting her, saying that 'Scout Finch's daddy defended niggers'. Scout fights her cousin Francis (because he calls her father 'nigger-lover' in Chapter 9) and Jem in Chapter 14. That is why Atticus advises her in Chapter 9 to 'try fighting with your head for a change'. At the end of the novel, the more mature eight-year-old Scout, having learned the lessons

of Tom Robinson’s trial, Bob Ewell’s death and the truth about Boo Radley, is much less likely to get involved in fistfights.

At first, Scout responds to what happens to her purely emotionally. On the first day at school she is sorry for Walter Cunningham. Then she fights him and is rude to him when Jem invites him home for lunch. Scout is reacting with her heart rather than her head. At the end of the novel, she is able to empathise with Boo Radley, Aunt Alexandra and Mayella Ewell. Scout has learned to use her head (‘a good one, even if it does resist learning,’ Atticus tells her teasingly in Chapter 9) to imagine how things seem from other people’s points of view.

Scout has no prejudices, so she contrasts with other characters in the novel such as Bob Ewell, Nathan Ridley, Miss Stephanie Crawford and the Cunninghams. She is a child, with a child’s approach to life and a child’s mind, so she sees things as they really are. To her, Calpurnia, Tom Robinson and the other black people are simply human beings and she makes no distinction: to her there is ‘just one kind of folks. Folks’ (Chapter 23).

1 List three examples of Scout’s adult voice describing childish activities, attitudes and memories.

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2 On a separate sheet of paper, make a characterisation spider diagram. Write the word ‘Scout’ in the middle and add quotations around the outside to describe her character. Include what she says, does and thinks and what others say about, or to, her. You could start with the following examples:

- ‘My fists were clenched and I was ready to let fly’ (Chapter 9).
- ‘Scout, try not to antagonise Aunty, hear?’ (Chapter 14).
- ‘Hey, Boo’ (Chapter 29).

- 3 You learn about Scout's personality, attitude and character in various ways. Find examples of these to complete the following table. Write several examples in each box. Some examples have been done for you.

Scout's personality	Examples
What she says about herself	'With him [Dill], life was routine; without him, life was unbearable' (Chapter 12)
What she says about others	
What she says she felt	'One's mind works very slowly at times. Stunned, I stood there dumbly' (Chapter 28)
What she says she does	
What she thinks about	
What happens to her	
What she sees happening to others	
What she has learnt in the past	Atticus has told her about the Cunninghams in Chapter 2

4 How does Harper Lee make Scout an interesting and believable character?

On a separate sheet of paper, write a 600-word essay to answer this question. Use the table that you completed for Activity 3 and arrange your essay in seven paragraphs as follows:

- introduction
- Scout's adult sense of humour
- the childish things that she does, such as being rude to Walter Cunningham when he comes to lunch
- her admiration of Jem and her exasperation when he begins to grow away from her
- her closeness to Atticus
- her uncomplicated, childlike appreciation of justice
- conclusion

Role play

- 5 In pairs, act out any of the conversations that Scout has with Atticus and use the actual words spoken as much as you can.

Extension activities

- 6 Read the following reviews of *To Kill a Mockingbird* when it was first published in 1960:
- a 'Miss Lee excels in capturing her childhood and the children she writes about are worth knowing. Scout, brother Jem and their out-of-town friend Dill are tough, imaginative and well informed' (*Times Literary Supplement*).
 - b 'There is a splendid comic scene in which the narrator goes to school for the first time and is taught by a Dewey-trained teacher who spans her because she is too intelligent and not one of "The Group". But the point is made: intelligence and decency are positive values' (Malcolm Bradbury in *Punch*).

In small groups, discuss these reviews. Explain how far you agree or disagree with them. One member of your group should summarise your group's views for the rest of the class.

- 7 On a separate sheet of paper, write your own review of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Whole-text activities 2

Characterisation: Atticus

Atticus Finch, 50, belongs to an old Maycomb family descended from Simon Finch, an early settler. The family owns land at Finch's Landing, but Atticus is the first Finch to become a lawyer. He practises in Maycomb and has been a widower for four years. He is bringing up his children, Jem and Scout, alone but for the assistance of a black housekeeper, Calpurnia.

Atticus is asked by Judge Taylor to take on the Tom Robinson rape case because only Atticus would make a serious attempt to defend a black man. Although Atticus knows that his children will suffer taunts because of it, he believes that he must accept the case. To him, it is a matter of conscience and self-respect. 'If I didn't I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent the county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again,' Atticus tells Scout (Chapter 9), adding that '...every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. This one's mine, I guess'.

Atticus stands for Christian values. He tries to practise forgiveness and tolerance. Look, for example, at the way in which he behaves to Mrs Dubose in Chapter 11, despite her having said some cruel things about him and upset his children. Christianity teaches 'Love thy neighbour as thyself' (Matthew 19:19) and 'turn the other cheek' (Matthew 5:39), which is what Atticus tries to do with everyone. Harper Lee contrasts his attitude with that of the hypocritical Christians in the novel such as the ladies at Aunt Alexandra's Missionary Society meeting in Chapter 24. Mrs Merriweather tells Scout that she lives 'in a Christian home with Christian folks in a Christian town'. Harper Lee is trying to make you smile at the irony of this. The ladies want to help the black people of the distant Mruna tribe to have similar 'advantages' to these. Yet Mrs Merriweather cannot stand a 'sulky ducky' in her kitchen and tells her servant to copy Jesus and complain less. She cannot see that her attitude towards the black community of Maycomb after the trial and the suffering of Helen Robinson is deeply un-Christian.

Atticus is a thoughtful father who always makes time to talk to his children: 'he played with us, read to us, and treated us with courteous detachment', Scout says in Chapter 1. His parenting skills are contrasted in the novel with those of Mr Radley, Bob Ewell and Dill's parents. Whenever Scout is miserable or puzzled, she turns to Atticus and he is always available. In Chapter 11, for example, Scout is annoyed with Atticus for sending Jem to apologise to Mrs Dubose, but she ends up in his arms being reassured. The way he tucks her comfortably into bed at the end of the novel is another example.

Atticus disciplines his children firmly when he thinks that it is necessary. He stops them playing 'One Man's Family' in Chapter 4 and insists that they leave the court to have supper at home with Calpurnia in Chapter 21. Always polite, Atticus gently corrects Scout in Chapter 30 for her over-familiarity in addressing Boo Radley as 'Boo' instead of the more polite 'Mr Arthur'.

Atticus does make mistakes as a father. He underestimates the seriousness of Bob Ewell’s threats after the trial and exposes his children to serious risk as a result. ‘We don’t have anything to fear from Bob Ewell, he got it all out of his system that morning,’ he tells Jem and Scout after Ewell has spat at him in the post office (Chapter 23). In Chapter 28, Jem and Scout are attacked by Bob Ewell. Jem’s arm is badly broken and Scout is saved from injury or death only by her bulky, wire-framed pageant costume. In this case, Aunt Alexandra is more perceptive than her brother when in Chapter 23 she says of Bob Ewell that ‘His kind’d do anything to pay off a grudge’ and warns Atticus to expect ‘something furtive’.

Atticus, who has the respect of decent citizens such as Miss Maudie, Heck Tate, Judge Taylor, Calpurnia and Reverend Sykes, is ‘civilised in his heart’ (Chapter 10). He is presented as the embodiment of everything that Harper Lee respects in a lawyer, citizen, Christian and father. Atticus is the moral centre of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

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- 1 Atticus is a polite man. List examples of his courtesy. As a starting point, look at Chapter 18 for the way in which he speaks to Mayella Ewell in court and her responses to his questions.

- 2 Harper Lee has created the character of Atticus for a reason. In small groups, discuss what ‘messages’ she is trying to convey through his character. For example, is she arguing for racial tolerance or commenting on the education of young children? This is a big question and there are many possible answers. One of your group should report your group’s views to the rest of the class.

3 Read the following points of view:

- Atticus educates his children by showing them all aspects of life and refusing to cushion them from unpleasantness. He is a fine and fearless father.
- Atticus agrees to take on the Tom Robinson case knowing that comments from others will be distressing for his children. He also carelessly exposes them to unnecessary risk. He has serious shortcomings as a father.

In pairs, discuss Atticus’s abilities as a father. Take one of the above viewpoints each and argue in favour of it regardless of what you really think. Make sure that you can back up every point that you make with evidence from the novel.

4 The adjectives in the following table could be used to describe Atticus at different points in the novel. On your own, in pairs or in small groups, complete the table by writing at least one piece of evidence to support each adjective. The first one has been done for you.

Adjective	Evidence
Compassionate	He treats Mrs Dubose well despite her rudeness to him and his children: “Good evening, Mrs Dubose! You look like a picture this evening” (Chapter 11). He is compassionate towards Mayella Ewell during the trial: “Do you want to tell us what happened?” But she did not hear the compassion in his invitation’ (Chapter 18). He is aware of Helen Robinson’s needs: “Cal,” Atticus said, “I want you to go with me out to Helen Robinson’s house” (Chapter 24).
Kind	
Thoughtful	
Scholarly	
Wise	

Adjective	Evidence
Trusting	
Troubled	
Amused	
Disappointed	
Hopeful	
Stern	
Perceptive	

Adjective	Evidence
Conscientious	

Extension activity

- 5 In pairs, find six examples in the novel of when Atticus displays real Christian qualities. Look for instances of forgiveness, tolerance, refusal to take offence, seeing all points of view and determination to help others (some examples will be more important than others). Look at both what he says and what he does. Display these attitudes on a chart or diagram such as a mind-map or timeline.