*To Kill a Mockingbird*

[*To Kill a Mockingbird*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0056592/); Universal Pictures, 1962; Directed by Robert Mulligan; Starring Gregory Peck, Mary Badham, & Phillip Alford; Not Rated; [Watch the trailer](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KR7loA_oziY).

Summary:

The 1962 film *To Kill a Mockingbird* is based on the novel written by Harper Lee, published in 1960. Scout Finch lives in a small town in Alabama in 1932, during the Great Depression, before desegregation, before civil rights. Scout is six years old and her brother Jem (yes, J-E-M) is ten. Their father, Atticus, is a widower and lawyer who decides to defend an innocent black man, Tom Robinson, accused of raping a white woman. What unfolds is a story of the precocious tomboy Scout as she tries to understand social hierarchies, prejudice, and ignorance. The climax is Tom’s trial, but there are still fires, mad dogs, murders, and haunted houses, all from the perspective of a child. Amidst the turmoil, Atticus works to teach his children that “you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view… Until you climb inside his skin and walk around in it.” Harper Lee’s novel received the Pulitzer Prize, and Gregory Peck’s portrayal of Atticus in the film won him an Academy Award.

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Mockingbirds. “It’s a sin to kill a mockingbird,” Atticus says. Mockingbirds represent innocence, and several characters are threatened with its loss: Jem, Scout, Tom, and Boo.
* Justice. The film shows that the law might not necessarily grant justice, that total justice is always fleeting in a world where evil abides.
* Ignorance vs. Empathy. The Ewells represent absolute ignorance while the Finches perhaps try the hardest to be empathetic. Scout and Jem especially move in an arc from childhood innocence (or ignorance) to a more empathetic understanding of their world.
* Human Nature. In each scene Scout is confronted with good encountering evil. She and Jem often have quite different reactions to the notion that in society, and in people, good and evil coexist.

Discussion Questions:

1. Most of the violence is off-screen; there is no romance; and there is no classic villain. What then explains the near universal appeal of this story?
2. How would you categorize this film? Courtroom drama? Mystery? Coming-of-age story?
3. Critics often say this is a classic movie where each element—acting, directing, scriptwriting, etc.—is near perfect. Do you agree? Can you name others?
4. Was the film a successful adaptation of the novel? Why or why not?
5. How are Scout and Jem in some ways just as prejudiced as Bob Ewell?
6. What does the episode with Mrs. Dubose teach Scout about courage?
7. Assess Atticus’ parenting style. Summarize some of his most important lessons.
8. Does Scout move from innocence to adulthood? Would you use other words to describe her transition? What about Jem’s?
9. Does the film, according to Roger Ebert, portray “the liberal pieties of a more innocent time”?