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LITERARY CRITICISM



High School | 2025-26

NOTES

Written by **Jennifer Bussey**,
Luke Hardt, Lisa Holmes, and Joshua Prybylski



LIT CRIT NOTES 2025-2026

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Lit Crit Notes are written by **Jennifer Bussey** and her team of writers. Bussey is a freelance educational writer specializing in literature with almost 25 years' experience and has authored Hexco's Lit Crit products since 1999. She has a B.A. in English Literature and an M.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies. Her team consists of **Luke Hardt, Lisa Holmes, and Joshua Prybylski**. Hardt is a retired Professor of Theater with over 30 years' experience teaching at the college level, including every aspect of drama from understanding plays to performing them. He has directed more than 85 plays in his career. Holmes is an educational writer with over 20 years' experience as a high school English teacher, exploring texts across genres and literary periods with numerous students. In addition, she is an experienced writer of book abstracts, lessons, and tests. Przybylski has over 10 years' experience as a teacher--both in person and online--and as a writer and researcher. His experience with high school students spans an impressive range of abilities, interests, and cultural backgrounds, and his expert grasp of literature make him uniquely skilled in opening up literary texts to students.

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THE BOOK AND THE AUTHOR

To Kill a Mockingbird is largely autobiographical. The core setting, characters, and events can largely be traced back to Lee's childhood. Scout is essentially a self-insert of Harper Lee, Jem is her brother Edwin, and Dill is Truman Capote. The town she grew up in had a lot in common with Maycomb, her father really was a lawyer and legislator, and he really did serve as a defense attorney in a racially motivated case. Two black men, a father and son, were accused of murdering a white storekeeper. Lee's father, like Atticus, lost the case and both father and son were executed. Lee's accounts of the controversy and backlash around the trial come directly from her own childhood experiences. Notably absent from the book are Lee's mother and older siblings. While Scout's mother died when she was very young, Lee's mother lived into the 1950s.

KEY STYLISTIC ELEMENTS

- Episodic narrative. The story is mostly told in chronological order, but takes place over several years, often skipping large stretches of time between chapters and focusing on short, meaningful anecdotes from the narrator's memory.
- A child's point of view. The main character and narrator is Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, who is 5 at the start of the book and 9 by the end of the book. What the reader sees of the action, as well as how it is interpreted, is colored by this. Readers will sometimes have to infer what a more adult perspective would see in key moments.
- Figurative description. The text uses figurative language a great deal. Here are some examples of the author's style with explanations:
 - "But I was worrying another bone." Scout says this during a conversation with Atticus on page 86. The literal meaning of "worrying" here would be "chewing on," but Scout is not literally chewing a bone. Instead, this is a metaphor for "thinking about another topic."
 - "He reminded me of a car stuck in a sand-bed." This is a description of Tim Johnson, the rabid dog that Atticus shoots, on page 106. This is a figurative way of describing how the dog walked.
 - "...until someone investigated and brought forth Eunice Ann saying she didn't want to play Shadrach anymore." This quotation on page 133 is an allusion to the biblical story of Shadrach, who didn't burn when placed in a fire because of his faith.
- Period and place. The characters speak in Southern dialect, use words that were common in the 1930s, and refer to technology, architecture, clothing, food, plants, and media that are specific to the setting. A modern reader may have to look up the meaning of these terms or infer them from context clues.

SETTING

The entire book takes place in and around the town of Maycomb, Alabama. This small, sleepy, close-knit farming community is the home to all of the main characters, and none of the action takes place more than a day's drive away from the town. The events of the story take place during the 1930s over a period of several years.

PLOT SUMMARY

CHAPTER 1

VOCABULARY

Dictum: an authoritative declaration

Taciturn: habitually reserved and uncommunicative

Unsullied: perfectly clean and free of damage or marks

Repertoire: the range of skills in a particular field or occupation, especially music or theater

Vapid: lacking significance or liveliness or spirit or zest

Domicile: A home or residence

EVENTS

This chapter starts with a bit of foreshadowing, and one of the only plot points that is told out of order: We know that Jem will have his arm broken when he's nearly 13 years old. This event happens near the end of the book, and most of the rest of the events can be seen as background leading up to this. Key events of this background include the Ewells, the arrival of Dill, and the children's attempt to make Boo Radley come out.

The narrative then reviews the origins of the Finch family in the area, which go back as far as the beginning of white settlement. The ancestral family home, Finch's Landing, is still in the family, but the main characters live in the town of Maycomb and only visit Finch's Landing occasionally. Atticus Finch, father to Scout and Jem, works as an attorney in town and also serves in the state legislature. The Finch family in Maycomb has one black servant named Calpurnia who handles domestic work like cooking, cleaning, and some elements of childcare. Scout and Jem's mother died several years before the story begins.

The narrator describes the town of Maycomb, emphasizing that it's slow, quiet, old, close-knit, and run-down. Everyone knows everyone, and most people are related to each other by some degree. We also learn that the main characters live just next door to the Radley family, who are somewhat mysterious and keep to themselves. We also learn that Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose lives next door on the other side.

We are introduced to Dill (aka Charles Baker Harris) who is from nearby Meridian, Mississippi, and stays with his relative Miss Rachel in the summer months. When Scout and Jem first meet him, he is six, Scout is five, and Jem is ten. Dill is highly imaginative and loves to tell stories, some of which are even true. He can already read, he knows books and movies quite well, and he makes up wild stories about his family origins and especially about his father.

The three children get to know each other over the summer, and Dill in particular is fascinated with the Radley place. Most people in town know at least some superstitious rumors about the Radleys, and the children blame them for everything from plants killed in cold snaps to scary presences outside windows at night. We learn something of the family's history, including the fact that Arthur "Boo" Radley was involved with a local gang in his youth and mostly kept to himself inside the house after that. He is also rumored to have attacked his family members with a pair of scissors at one point. The children eventually decide to try to make Boo Radley come out of his house. After much debate and encouragement, Jem finally agrees to run up to the Radley house and touch it. The chapter ends with a tiny hint of motion in one of the windows of the Radley house, suggesting that someone—or something—saw what the kids did.

CHAPTER 8

VOCABULARY

Unfathomable: unable to be understood

Accosted: approached aggressively for an argument or fight

Perpetrated: committed

Perplexity: the state of being confused

EVENTS

It is wintertime in this chapter, and Maycomb is experiencing a surprisingly cold one. Old Mrs. Radley dies, which raises the topic of the Radley family again. The children suspect that Atticus knows more than he's telling about the night of the missing pants, but they can't prove anything. Several weeks later, it snows in Maycomb for the first time since the 19th century. School is cancelled, and the children do their best with the limited snowfall to make a snowman. They eventually make the core of the snowman out of mud before caking him with snow to make him look white. They make a terrible mess of both their yard and Miss Maudie's yard, and they also dress the snowman to resemble Mr. Avery, a detail Atticus forces them to change.

That night, the temperature continues to drop, and everyone in Maycomb keeps their doors closed and their fireplaces roaring against the unseasonable weather. One of those roaring fires in Miss Maudie's house gets out of hand, and her home eventually burns down. Scout is awakened in the middle of the night when the house fire starts and spends most of the night standing and watching as the townsfolk pull furniture out of the house and wait for the fire engine to arrive. The first engine to arrive fails to get the fire under control because the fire hydrant has frozen, but other engines arrive from nearby towns and eventually keep the fire from destroying other houses. As Scout watches all of this happen in the bitter cold, she doesn't notice someone slip a blanket over her shoulders. She later learns to her shock and wonder that Boo Radley was the one who gave her the blanket.

CHAPTER 9

VOCABULARY

Inordinately: beyond what is considered reasonable

Ingenuous: innocent; unaware of how the world works

Inevitable: unavoidable

EVENTS

This chapter begins with Scout getting into a fight at school. A classmate, Cecil Jacobs, makes fun of Scout because her father "defends n****rs," something that Scout doesn't entirely understand. That evening, she asks Atticus, and he explains that he's going to be acting as defense attorney for Tom Robinson. He is a black man and neighbor of Calpurnia's and attends the same church. While Atticus doesn't fully explain why people don't want him defending Tom Robinson, he does make it clear that he expects to lose the case, and that doing his best to defend Robinson is a matter of self-respect. "...if I didn't, I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent this county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again." Atticus makes Scout promise not to get into any fights about this issue, and she is at least temporarily true to her word, walking away rather than throwing a punch at Cecil Jacobs the next day, even when he calls her a coward.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, SELECTED SONNETS

POET PROFILE

William Shakespeare was born sometime in April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. His birthday is thought to be April 23rd, but the earliest confirmed date known for his life is his baptism on April 26th, 1564. The uncertainty around his birth is just the first example of many things we don't know about his life. He was one of eight children of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. Their family was prosperous and well-to-do by local standards. John worked as a glove-maker and also served in local government, and was likely wealthy enough to send his children, including William, to grammar school in the area. Grammar school was a relatively new development in Shakespeare's day. Education beyond the very basics was generally reserved for the nobility or the clergy, and many of Shakespeare's contemporaries when he started his literary career in London would look down on him for his comparatively common background.

The next fact we know for certain about Shakespeare's life is that he married Anne Hathaway in 1582 when he was 18 and she was 26. It was a hasty marriage, presumably because Anne was already pregnant with their first child, Susanna, who was born six months after the ceremony. The couple would have two more children, twins Judith and Hamnet, born in 1585. Hamnet would later die at age 11.

There are no surviving sources that document what Shakespeare was doing between 1585 and 1592. We know that he and his family moved to London at some point in this time period, and that he was a known figure in London's literary scene by 1592, but beyond that, we can only speculate. Sometime in the early 1590s, he wrote the earliest of his plays, although there is debate about which one came first. The three top contenders are *Henry VI* (all three parts of it), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *Titus Andronicus*.

Shakespeare started publishing poetry in 1593 with "Venus and Adonis" and soon followed it up with "The Rape of Lucrece." We know that Shakespeare found a noble patron, or sponsor, of his works by this point, since he dedicated both of these poems to Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton. This meant a big step in his career since he now had the funding and access, he needed to get his poems published and his plays performed. His career hit a bump in 1596 when the Black Death returned to London, and the theaters were all closed down. He dedicated himself to poetry during this period and wrote the bulk of his sonnets starting this year, although they wouldn't be published until 1609.

After the worst of the plague was over, Shakespeare (along with several other actors) started a theater company called The Lord Chamberlain's Men. While they were sponsored by the eponymous Lord Chamberlain, Shakespeare also had partial ownership of the company, and this was when he started becoming wealthy from his works. He would be the main writer, or dramatist, for the company for almost twenty years and put on roughly two plays per year. The company did so well that they were able to upgrade their sponsorship and become the King's Men, sponsored by King James I, and build two theaters: The Globe and Blackfriars.

Shakespeare became successful enough from his work in London that he was able to buy New Place, the largest house back in his hometown of Stratford-upon-Avon, in 1597. While he would continue to live and work primarily in London, he slowly spent more and more time back in Stratford until his death in 1616 at the age of 52. He died on April 23, which many people believe may have been his birthday as well, and he is buried at Holy Trinity church in Stratford-Upon-Avon. He started rising to his current position as perhaps the most famous author in the English language in 1623 when the scripts of his plays were first published in 1623 in an edition known as the "First Folio."

SELECTIONS

SONNET 1 "[FROM FAIREST OF CREATURES WE DESIRE IN INCREASE]"

LITERARY DEVICES:

- Metaphor (Lines 1, 6, 9)
- Anastrophe (Line 3)
- Internal Rhyme (Line 4)
- Assonance (Lines 5-6, 12)
- Paradox (Line 7)
- Alliteration (Lines 8, 11)
- Personification (Line 10)

VOCABULARY:

A churl is someone who is rude. Niggarding is being miserly and holding onto something instead of spending or enjoying it.

THIS POEM IS ABOUT:

In the first quatrain, the speaker acknowledges that people want more of what is beautiful. We want lovely things to be multiplied, as when someone who has had children dies, and their children carry on their beauty. This points to the idea that beauty extends beyond mortality and extends on for generations, in essence keeping the memory of that beauty alive. In the second quatrain, Shakespeare chides the subject of his poem for being so taken by his own beauty that he keeps it to himself, neither sharing it nor having his own children. The famine and abundance are from the same source; the person's beauty in isolation becomes a famine because it is doomed to destruction even though it holds within it the potential to create bounty by being shared with the world and carried on through children.

The third quatrain reinforces the urgency of the young man's misguided appreciation of his own beauty. Yes, he is now in the prime of his youth and beauty, and within him is the possibility of passing that onto the next generation. Instead, his vanity prevents him from sharing himself with other people (a wife and children). In the concluding couplet, Shakespeare makes a final plea to the young man to take pity on the world and have a child who will carry on after he is in the grave.

Note: The first 17 sonnets are sometimes referred to as "the procreation sonnets" because of the message to a young man to defy aging and time by having children. Remember, the first 126 sonnets are called the Fair Youth Sequence because they address a young man who is important and beloved to the speaker. The exact identity of the young man (if it was a real person) is unknown, and the exact relationship (platonic, family, patronage, dear friend) is also somewhat unclear.

THEMES INCLUDE:

Beauty, legacy, having children, vanity, selfishness