

# Before You Read

## *To Kill a Mockingbird*, One through Eleven

### FOCUS ACTIVITY

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What do you think characterizes a person who has courage? What kinds of situations might call for courage?

#### Web It

Create a concept web for the word *courage*. Draw lines extending from the word, then on each line, list qualities that you associate with someone who shows courage. Discuss real-life situations you know of in which people have acted courageously.

#### Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what Scout and Jem learn about the meaning of courage.

### BACKGROUND

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#### Time and Place

The town of Maycomb, Alabama, the setting for the novel, is typical of southern towns in the 1930s. Its society reflects the strong class distinctions that were present in the Old South before the Civil War. Whites and blacks did not socialize, but there were different levels within black and white society. At the top, for example, were large landowners or educated professionals. The Finch family, for example, has connections to the land that go back more than a hundred years. Then there are middle-class citizens, such as Sheriff Tate and Mr. Underwood, the editor of the newspaper. Poor whites are represented by Scout's classmate Walter Cunningham and the Ewell family. Equally poor is Tom Robinson, the farm worker who goes on trial. Yet another level of black society is represented by Calpurnia, the Finches' maid, who has more formal education than many others. As you read, notice the social status of the characters. In particular, think about whether Atticus Finch exhibits attitudes that are typical or atypical of members of his social class as they are portrayed in the novel.

#### First-Person Point of View

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is told from a **first-person point of view**—that is, the narrator uses “I” and “me” to describe events in the novel. Although the narrator is an adult Scout Finch looking back at her childhood, the perspective is limited to what she saw and felt at that time. Scout the 6-year-old often does not understand the full meaning of what she observes, and her childlike perceptions are frequently a source of humor, as when she says of her father, “Atticus was feeble. He was nearly fifty.” Yet even in this instance, the narrator does not confine her vocabulary to that of a child. Here is another example of how the narrator recalls childhood events with an adult vocabulary: “I wasn’t sure what Jem resented most, but I took umbrage at Mrs. Dubose’s assessment of the family’s mental hygiene.”

### VOCABULARY PREVIEW

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**cantankerous** [kan tang'ker əs] *adj.* irritable; difficult to deal with

**compel** [kəm pel'] *v.* to force; to require

**conscience** [kən'shəns] *n.* inner sense of right and wrong

**feeble** [fē'bəl] *adj.* lacking strength

**harbor** [här'bər] *v.* to hold in the mind

**irk** [urk] *v.* to annoy

**perplexed** [per plekst'] *adj.* puzzled; confused

**tranquil** [trang'kwəl] *adj.* peaceful; at ease

