

Portrayal of childhood  
in *Jane Eyre* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*

The following is a list of points that you might consider when comparing the portrayal of childhood in these two novels; it is not a definitive list – it is for exploration and discussion.

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**Time the novels were written:** what were the expectations / understandings of childhood? Did the concept of 'childhood' even exist? If so, was it for all children or just for those of a particular social class or race?

**Country/County/Environment/Setting:** think about differences in conditions, habits, living standards, rural/urban, possibility of freedom.

**Gender of narrator and author:** expectations of gender? Do the protagonists conform or contravene social expectations? What are the consequences? How are these reported?

**Social class:** is this a factor in the childhood and/or upbringing of the two narrators? What effect does it have, either implicitly or explicitly?

**Family relationships:** both narrators are motherless, what effect does this have on their view of the world and those around them? How does it affect their relationships with other females? Do they have another figure who acts as a mother towards them?

**Controlling figure:** Is this Mrs Reed in *Jane Eyre* and Calpurnia in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or is there someone else? What influence do they have over the child narrators?

**Issue of memory/retrospect:** remember both these narrators are reporting what happened to them as children – it's not something that's just occurred; what difference does this make to the narrative?

**Secret/sinister/mysterious person or event:** this can not be Bertha Mason as she features in Jane's adult life but what about Jane's experiences in the red room? Can you draw any comparisons between this and the early comments/situations to do with Boo Radley?

**Benevolent figures:** who is this and what role do they play?

**Knowledge of children/adults:** who seems more knowledgeable in these novels? In what ways and for what purpose?

## Jane Eyre and To Kill a Mockingbird

**Isolation/Siblings and friends:** does Jane have any allies? If so, who are they? Scout's childhood includes not only her brother Jem but also Dill and other children at school.

**Portrayal of servants:** in what way are these described? Is either narrator really aware that they have servants or do they consider them a member of the family? What does this tell us about their understanding of the world?

**Role of religion:** is religion central to the upbringing of either child? How is religion used? Do you get the impression of a sympathetic God and/or a strong moral code which underpins the way the child is brought up or is the picture of a punitive figure who is tyrannical and unforgiving?

**Education/learning:** is school the place where learning takes place for these characters? What does education teach the narrators, if anything?

**Reading:** why is this important in the childhood of the protagonists? What are the characters able to do because they can read? In what ways does reading empower them?

**Expectations of happiness:** do you feel that either character expects to be happy? Is there an assumption that childhood is a happy time? Do the characters fulfill these assumptions?

**Straightforward narrative:** is the age of the child reflected in the way the story of childhood is told?

**Justice:** do you feel that Jane or Scout is treated fairly or unfairly by adults? Is this because they are children? Do the narrators, as adults, understand or draw attention to this?

**Bleak/Idyllic portrayal:** overall, what sort of impression do we get of Jane and Scout's childhood? How is this done?