**Chapters 7–8**

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**Summary: Chapter 7**

A few days later, after school has begun for the year, [Jem](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/character/jem-finch/) tells [Scout](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/character/scout-finch/)that he found the pants mysteriously mended and hung neatly over the fence. When they come home from school that day, they find another present hidden in the knothole: a ball of gray twine. They leave it there for a few days, but no one takes it, so they claim it for their own.

Unsurprisingly, Scout is as unhappy in second grade as she was in first, but Jem promises her that school gets better the farther along one goes. Late that fall, another present appears in the knothole—two figures carved in soap to resemble Scout and Jem. The figures are followed in turn by chewing gum, a spelling bee medal, and an old pocket watch. The next day, Jem and Scout find that the knothole has been filled with cement. When Jem asks Mr. Radley (Nathan Radley, Boo’s brother) about the knothole the following day, Mr. Radley replies that he plugged the knothole because the tree is dying.

**Summary: Chapter 8**

For the first time in years, Maycomb endures a real winter. There is even light snowfall, an event rare enough for school to be closed. Jem and Scout haul as much snow as they could from Miss Maudie’s yard to their own. Since there is not enough snow to make a real snowman, they build a small figure out of dirt and cover it with snow. They make it look like Mr. Avery, an unpleasant man who lives down the street. The figure’s likeness to Mr. Avery is so strong that [Atticus](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/character/atticus-finch/)demands that they disguise it. Jem places Miss Maudie’s sunhat on its head and sticks her hedge clippers in its hands, much to her chagrin.

That night, Atticus wakes Scout and helps her put on her bathrobe and coat and goes outside with her and Jem. Miss Maudie’s house is on fire. The neighbors help her save her furniture, and the fire truck arrives in time to stop the fire from spreading to other houses, but Miss Maudie’s house burns to the ground. In the confusion, someone drapes a blanket over Scout. When Atticus later asks her about it, she has no idea who put it over her. Jem realizes that Boo Radley put it on her, and he reveals the whole story of the knothole, the presents, and the mended pants to Atticus. Atticus tells them to keep it to themselves, and Scout, realizing that Boo was just behind her, nearly throws up.

Despite having lost her house, Miss Maudie is cheerful the next day. She tells the children how much she hated her old home and that she is already planning to build a smaller house and plant a larger garden. She says that she wishes she had been there when Boo put the blanket on Scout to catch him in the act.

**Analysis: Chapters 7–8**

Originally portrayed as a freak and a lunatic, Boo Radley continues to gain the sympathy of the children in these chapters. Lee uses an elliptical technique in telling Boo’s story—she hints and implies at what is happening without ever showing the reader directly. The reader must read between the lines—inferring, for instance, that it was Boo Radley who mended Jem’s pants and placed the presents in the tree, since Scout does not realize that Boo’s hand is at work until Jem explains things to Atticus after the fire.

**Chapters 7–8**

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In comparison to [Scout](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/character/scout-finch/)’s still very childish perspective, [Jem](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/character/jem-finch/)’s more mature understanding of the world is evident here, along with his strong sense of justice. When Nathan Radley plugs up the hole in the tree, Scout is disappointed but hardly heartbroken, seeing it as merely the end of their presents. Jem, on the other hand, is brought to tears, because he grasps that Boo’s brother has done something cruel: he has deprived Boo of his connection to the wider world and has broken up his brother’s attempt at friendship. This incident, which the reader must detect behind the scenes of Scout’s narrative, plays into the novel’s broad theme of suffering innocence, and Jem’s anger at this injustice foreshadows his later fury concerning Tom Robinson’s trial. While Scout retains her innocence and optimism throughout the book, Jem undergoes severe disillusionment as part of his “growing up,” and the Boo Radley incident in this chapter is an important early step toward that disillusionment.

The implicit comparison between Boo’s soap figures and Jem and Scout’s snowman reveals the difference in how each party interacts with others. Whereas Boo carves his figures out of a desire to connect with the two kids, Jem and Scout craft their snowman out of a dislike for Mr. Avery. Further, Boo doesn’t make his carvings for himself; rather, he offers them as presents. Jem and Scout, on the other hand, make the snowman purely for their own enjoyment. Boo interacts with others on their terms, while the children, not yet mature, interact with others on their own terms.

Critic Claudia Durst Johnson has argued that *To Kill a Mockingbird*contains many Gothic elements, from the legends and secrets surrounding Boo Radley to Dill’s imaginative stories and the children’s superstitions. The unseasonable snow and the fire at Miss Maudie’s, as well as the later appearance of a mad dog, can be seen as contributing to a sense of supernatural foreboding leading up to the injustice that pervades Tom Robinson’s trial. This interpretation, however, is balanced by the fact that both the snow and the fire bring out the best in people—school is canceled, Scout and Jem build a fine snowman, the neighbors help save Miss Maudie’s belongings, and Miss Maudie perseveres after her house is destroyed. Even when she sees her prize flowers ruined, the brave old woman does not despair; instead, she offers a cheerful comment about wanting a smaller house and a larger garden. This interweaving of dramatic, Gothic atmospherics and good-hearted small-town values epitomizes *To Kill a Mockingbird* and mirrors the novel’s main theme. In a world in which innocence is threatened by injustice, cruelty, prejudice, and hatred, goodness can prevail in the form of sympathy, understanding, and common sense, as evidenced by how the townspeople’s affectionate willingness to help one another enables them to overcome the intrusion of these Gothic elements into their simple small-town lives.