Poems for *To Kill A Mockingbird*

1. **My Papa’s Waltz**

By [Theodore Roethke](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/theodore-roethke)

The whiskey on your breath

Could make a small boy dizzy;

But I hung on like death:

Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans

Slid from the kitchen shelf;

My mother’s countenance

Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist

Was battered on one knuckle;

At every step you missed

My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head

With a palm caked hard by dirt,

Then waltzed me off to bed

Still clinging to your shirt.

2.  **Road Not Taken**

By [Robert Frost](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/robert-frost)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

1. **Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song**

(A poem to American poets)

By Countee Cullen

I said:  
Now will the poet sing,-  
Their cries go thundering  
Like blood and tears  
Into the nation’s ears,  
Like lightning dart  
Into the nation’s heart.  
Against disease and death and all things fell,  
And war,  
Their strophes rise and swell  
To jar  
The foe smug in his citadel.

Remembering their sharp and pretty  
Tunes for Sacco and Vanzetti,  
I said:  
Here too’s a cause divinely spun  
For those whose eye are on the sun,  
Here in epitome  
Is all disgrace  
And epic wrong,  
Like wine to brace  
The minstrel heart, and blare it to song.

Surely, I said,  
Now will the poets sing.  
But they have raised no cry.  
I wonder why...

1. **Sympathy**

By [Paul Laurence Dunbar](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/paul-laurence-dunbar)

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!

    When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;

When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,

And the river flows like a stream of glass;

    When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,

And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—

I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing

    Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;

For he must fly back to his perch and cling

When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;

    And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars

And they pulse again with a keener sting—

I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,

    When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—

When he beats his bars and he would be free;

It is not a carol of joy or glee,

    But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,

But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—

I know why the caged bird sings!

1. **We Wear the Mask**

By [Paul Laurence Dunbar](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/paul-laurence-dunbar)

We wear the mask that grins and lies,

It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—

This debt we pay to human guile;

With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,

And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,

In counting all our tears and sighs?

Nay, let them only see us, while

       We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries

To thee from tortured souls arise.

We sing, but oh the clay is vile

Beneath our feet, and long the mile;

But let the world dream otherwise,

       We wear the mask!

1. **I, too, sing America**

By [Langston Hughes](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/langston-hughes)

I, too, sing America

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I’ll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody’ll dare

Say to me,

“Eat in the kitchen,”

Then.

Besides,

They’ll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

1. **The Haunted Oak**

By [Paul Laurence Dunbar](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/paul-laurence-dunbar)

Pray why are you so bare, so bare,

   Oh, bough of the old oak-tree;

And why, when I go through the shade you throw,

   Runs a shudder over me?

My leaves were green as the best, I trow,

   And sap ran free in my veins,

But I say in the moonlight dim and weird

   A guiltless victim's pains.

I bent me down to hear his sigh;

   I shook with his gurgling moan,

And I trembled sore when they rode away,

   And left him here alone.

They'd charged him with the old, old crime,

   And set him fast in jail:

Oh, why does the dog howl all night long,

   And why does the night wind wail?

He prayed his prayer and he swore his oath,

   And he raised his hand to the sky;

But the beat of hoofs smote on his ear,

   And the steady tread drew nigh.

Who is it rides by night, by night,

   Over the moonlit road?

And what is the spur that keeps the pace,

   What is the galling goad?

And now they beat at the prison door,

   "Ho, keeper, do not stay!

We are friends of him whom you hold within,

   And we fain would take him away

"From those who ride fast on our heels

   With mind to do him wrong;

They have no care for his innocence,

   And the rope they bear is long."

They have fooled the jailer with lying words,

   They have fooled the man with lies;

The bolts unbar, the locks are drawn,

   And the great door open flies.

Now they have taken him from the jail,

   And hard and fast they ride,

And the leader laughs low down in his throat,

   As they halt my trunk beside.

Oh, the judge, he wore a mask of black,

   And the doctor one of white,

And the minister, with his oldest son,

   Was curiously bedight.

Oh, foolish man, why weep you now?

   'Tis but a little space,

And the time will come when these shall dread

   The mem'ry of your face.

I feel the rope against my bark,

   And the weight of him in my grain,

I feel in the throe of his final woe

   The touch of my own last pain.

And never more shall leaves come forth

   On the bough that bears the ban;

I am burned with dread, I am dried and dead,

   From the curse of a guiltless man.

And ever the judge rides by, rides by,

   And goes to hunt the deer,

And ever another rides his soul

   In the guise of a mortal fear.

And ever the man he rides me hard,

   And never a night stays he;

For I feel his curse as a haunted bough,

   On the trunk of a haunted tree.

1. **Dinner Guest Me**

Langston Hughes

I know I am  
The Negro Problem  
Being wined and dined,  
Answering the usual questions  
That come to white mind  
Which seeks demurely  
To Probe in polite way  
The why and wherewithal  
Of darkness U.S.A.--  
Wondering how things got this way  
In current democratic night,  
Murmuring gently  
Over fraises du bois,  
"I'm so ashamed of being white."  
  
The lobster is delicious,  
The wine divine,  
And center of attention  
At the damask table, mine.  
To be a Problem on  
Park Avenue at eight  
Is not so bad.  
Solutions to the Problem,  
Of course, wait.

1. **Racism Is Around Me Everywhere**

By Francis Duggan

Of human ignorance I am almost in despair  
For racism is around me everywhere  
But like they say sheer ignorance is bliss  
Just like Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss.  
  
Some people carry their honour in a flag  
And of their Nationality they brag  
They feel superior and they differentiate  
And against those who are different they discriminate.  
  
So many people still judged by their race  
For such there never ought to be a place  
'A fair go' those untruthful words I do recall  
There is no such a thing as a 'fair go for all'.  
  
Though we live in a so called democracy  
Of racism we never will be free  
They judge you by where you come from and the colour of your skin  
For many equality and respect seems impossible to win.  
  
It's been awhile since the days of Martin Luther King  
His name to it has a familiar ring  
If against racism he did not choose to strive  
Today the great man he would be alive.  
  
So many holding the reins of power not spiritually aware  
And racism is around me everywhere  
And racism only leads to division and war  
Just goes to show how ignorant some are.

1. **Courage**

By Anne Sexton

It is in the small things we see it.  
The child's first step,  
as awesome as an earthquake.  
The first time you rode a bike,  
wallowing up the sidewalk.  
The first spanking when your heart  
went on a journey all alone.  
When they called you crybaby  
or poor or fatty or crazy  
and made you into an alien,  
you drank their acid  
and concealed it.  
  
Later,  
if you faced the death of bombs and bullets  
you did not do it with a banner,  
you did it with only a hat to  
comver your heart.  
You did not fondle the weakness inside you  
though it was there.  
Your courage was a small coal  
that you kept swallowing.  
If your buddy saved you  
and died himself in so doing,  
then his courage was not courage,  
it was love; love as simple as shaving soap.  
  
Later,  
if you have endured a great despair,  
then you did it alone,  
getting a transfusion from the fire,  
picking the scabs off your heart,  
then wringing it out like a sock.  
Next, my kinsman, you powdered your sorrow,  
you gave it a back rub  
and then you covered it with a blanket  
and after it had slept a while  
it woke to the wings of the roses  
and was transformed.  
  
Later,  
when you face old age and its natural conclusion  
your courage will still be shown in the little ways,  
each spring will be a sword you'll sharpen,  
those you love will live in a fever of love,  
and you'll bargain with the calendar  
and at the last moment  
when death opens the back door  
you'll put on your carpet slippers  
and stride out.