

# Theme of Racial Oppression in Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mocking Bird'

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Harper Lee's 'To kill a mocking bird' is an exceedingly influential novel highlighting the repulsion of racial discrimination and racial issues concerning a staunch, typically a white town in the deep south of the United States of America. Racial injustice is the backbone of the novel. The entire plot spins around the case of a black man, Tom Robinson, who is accused of raping a white woman. Atticus Finch is the man who tries to defend Tom. The differences between white and black has been explored throughout the novel. Tom is found guilty because of the color of his skin. The race stands against him as strong evidence and everything has proceeded from the perception of prejudice, racism has become a critical thematic string. The novel throws light on several social injustice issues which affect number black people and the chief victim is Tom Robinson.

**Keywords:** Black man, prejudice, racial discrimination, social injustice, victim, United States of America

## A THEME OF RACIAL OPPRESSION IN HARPER LEE'S 'TO KILL A MOCKING BIRD'

In "To Kill a Mockingbird", Harper Lee depicts quite a few social justice issues which affect a number of people in the novel. The chief justice issue in the novel is racism against black people and the major victim of this injustice is Tom Robinson. Along with Tom, the Ewell family has also been victimized by the people of Maycomb. The whole novel is an exploration of morality and presents the inherent nature of people. Atticus, father of Scout and Jem, is a lawyer by profession. Atticus teaches his children that people have aspects of good and evil but good will always conquer. He tries to defend Tom Robinson but he struggles to change the people's social perspectives, racism and racial equality.

Scout and Jem believe in the goodness of people, thinking all of them adhere to the same values. But after the trial of Tom, they realize that there is true evil in their society shake them to the core. Jem must reevaluate his understanding of human nature. Meanwhile it causes him emotional pain as he tries to come to terms with disappointing realities of inequality and racism. Scout also struggles to understand these things, struggling with good and evil, both of them try to understand what defines and creates social strata. Scout has a clear understanding of the social inequalities in the Maycomb community, but she sees these inequalities as natural and permanent. At the end of the novel, both children are faced with true evil, as Bob Ewell tries to kill them. True goodness, embodied in Boo Radley, saves them. In this final conflict between these opposing forces, as their father rightly states goodness prevails.

## Race and Class

Scout and Jem are looked after for by their black housekeeper, Calpurnia in the novel. While Scout shares with Calpurnia her differences, Calpurnia serves as the children's mother-figure. Atticus, who acknowledges that Calpurnia is educated, revered and respected her. Yet it's speech that separates the white from the black community. Tom Robinson's trial acts as the novel's crucial and highly anticipated moment. Tom Robinson is charged with raping Mayella Ewell, a young white woman. The Ewell family, representing the lower class, lacks education and resources. As the oldest child, to her younger siblings, Mayella becomes a mother figure. Bob Ewell represents bigotry and racial prejudice while Atticus represents justice and ethics. We quickly learn for

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Tom Robinson that he is convicted purely based on the color of his skin. Nonetheless, Atticus is struggling for justice. Atticus explains the ugly truth to Jem and Scout: "The white man always wins in our courts when it's the word of a white man against a black man." Atticus displays disgust with white people taking advantage of the ignorance of black people.

Scout clashes with her teacher Miss Caroline on the first day of class. Miss Caroline is offering money to one of her students, Walter Cunningham, at lunchtime. Scout explains to Miss Caroline that the Cunninghams are suffering from poverty when Walter refuses the money. Scout narrates a time when Atticus acted as the Cunningham's counsel, and the Cunninghams paid Atticus in the form of stovewood and hickory nuts, without having any money to repay Atticus. Jem invites Walter to their home for lunch later in the story. Walter pours molasses "with a generous hand on his vegetables and meat" while eating their meal. Not only does this act cause Scout to comment and ridicule Walter, it also demonstrates a gap in rank between the Cunninghams and the Finches.

### Social Inequality and Prejudice

Social status differences are largely explored through Maycomb's overcomplicated social hierarchy, the ins and outs of which the children are constantly baffling. The relatively well-off Finches stand near the top of the social hierarchy of Maycomb, with most of the people below them. Ignorant farmers like the Cunninghams are under the townspeople, and the white trash Ewells is under the Cunninghams. But, despite its abundance of admirable qualities, the black community in Maycomb squats below even the Ewells, allowing Bob Ewell to compensate for his own insignificance by persecuting Tom Robinson. The novel shows that these rigid social distinctions that make up so much of the adult world are both irrational and harmful. Discussions are at the core of *To Kill a Mockingbird* on bigotry in general, and racism in particular. Conflicts over prejudice trigger some of the novel's most unforgettable and convincing scenes. Racial conflict causes the story's two dramatic deaths. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a simplistic and moralistic view of racial prejudice on one level. Atticus risks his reputation, his community position, and ultimately his children's safety because he's not racist, and therefore good. Bob Ewell falsely accuses a black man of rape, openly spits on Atticus, and threatens to kill a boy for being racist, and therefore evil. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the treatment of prejudice is not only simplistic in morality, but also in perspective.

### Mocking Birds

*To Kill a Mockingbird*'s name has very little direct relation to the story, but in the novel it carries a lot of symbolic weight. The "mockingbird" comes to reflect the concept of innocence in this tale of innocent people killed by evil. Killing a mockingbird, therefore, is killing innocence. A number of characters (Jem, Tom Robinson, Dill, Boo Radley, Mr. Raymond) can be identified throughout the book as mocking birds— innocent people who were wounded or destroyed by contact with evil. This connection is made explicit several times in the novel between the title of the novel and its main theme. Atticus argues that killing a mockingbird is sin. Mockingbirds never hurt anybody and are in no way pests. The mockingbird comes to represent true goodness and purity. Tom Robinson and Boo Radley are examples of human "mockingbirds."

### CONCLUSION

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is told exclusively through Scout's eyes, who is initially a traditionally prejudiced child of Maycomb who is quick to turn to combat and violence as a solution to conflicts. Nevertheless, we see her evolving and grow to become a fair and wiser character through such scenes as the lynch mob outside the prison where Scout disperses the entire mob simply by talking to them rather than through intimidation and also through the Boo Radley subplot. This progression is largely brought about by Atticus and shows that views and beliefs are ultimately passed on from parents and those children can overcome the prejudices held by society through the right education and teaching.

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