

Compare and contrast the cunningham and ewell families essay



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In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, as an additional message to the main theme of the novel, Lee seeks to show two polar reactions to poverty, that of the Cunninghams and the Ewells. Her experience of the Great Depression was a major influence in the writing of the book, as she uses the contrast of these two families to show that there is hope for those in poverty, if people learn from the Ewells and emulate the Cunninghams.

She introduces the values she considers to highlight the difference between the Cunninghams and Ewells, and uses this example to show that “Fine Folk” are not born into the position, but rather are considered as such on account of their qualities. The position of “Fine Folks” is an issue debated throughout the novel, first raised when “Aunt Alexandra was of the opinion “that the longer a family had been squatting on one patch of land, the finer it was.” This definition is clearly ridiculous, because “That makes the Ewells fine folks then”, a family who are portrayed in possibly the most pejorative sense in the novel.

Lee further shows the hypocrisy of Alexandra’s statement when she mentions that “the Levy family met all criteria for being Fine Folks”, except for being white, illustrating the invalidity of this definition. However, Scout “had received the impression that Fine Folks were people who did the best they could with the sense they had”, a definition shown to be far more practical and robust than that of Alexandra. As this includes the Cunninghams but not the Ewells, it creates a contrast expanded upon throughout the novel.

Perhaps the strongest way that Lee conveys this contrast is through the way in which the two families are regarded by the Finches. As Jem says, “ the kind like the Cunninghams out in the woods” have far more respect than “ the kind like the Ewells down at the dump”. Atticus recognises that “ Mr Cunningham’s basically a good man”, even though he was the leader of Tom Robinson’s lynch mob; in contrast “ Atticus said [the Ewells] were absolute trash”. Scout also shares this opinion, saying that “ Walter[’ s]... not trash, Jem.

He ain’t like the Ewells. Harper Lee uses the Finches to illustrate this contrast, as they are shown throughout the novel to be unprejudiced and principled. It is interesting to note that the rest of Maycomb considers the Cunninghams to be almost equal with the Ewells. This is exemplified when Aunt Alexandra calls Walter Cunningham “ trash”, a term used often to describe the Ewells. This difference between them is further developed through various values Lee identifies with each family. The first major difference in scruples is the Cunningham’s strong sense of justice, juxtaposed with the Ewells’ complete lack thereof.

In chapter 15, when Scout helps Mr Cunningham to see sense, he realises that the mob has no right to lynch Tom, and has a strong enough moral virtue to enjoin the rest of the mob to “ clear off”. After this incident, Lee demonstrates that they have learned from this mistake, and will stand by the cause they consider to be right: we learn from Atticus that one of the Cunninghams, who was on the jury in the Robinson case, “ took considerable wearing down” and that “ in the beginning he was rarin’ for an outright acquittal”.

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This shows their change to a steadfast support of Tom, and that the Cunninghams are more morally upstanding than the rest of the population represented in the jury, as they are able to look beyond Tom's black skin to see an innocent man. In contrast to this, although the Ewells also know Tom is innocent, they choose to accuse him merely to hide Mayella's socially tabooed love of a black man. This iniquity confirms the Ewell's disregard for justice, a quality whose value is stressed throughout the book. Ignominy and dignity are another set of contrasting values in the novel.

This is illustrated in the classroom scene in Chapter 2, when each family is first introduced. Although it is obvious that Walter Cunningham is poor, he does "have on a clean shirt and neatly mended overalls", illustrating the effort he makes to be presentable. Burris Ewell, however, "was the filthiest human being [Scout] had ever seen". He "laughed rudely" and "slouched leisurely" away from the classroom. This apathetic, lackadaisical and disrespectful attitude is typical of the Ewell family, and contrasts with Walter's strong sense of dignity, showing the vast difference between them.

A characteristic that is strongly emphasised in the novel is pride, which Lee uses to show that poverty does not necessarily humble a family. The Cunninghams' pride is so strong they will not accept outside help, as shown when Scout tells her teacher, "the Cunninghams never took anything they can't pay back". In stark contrast to this, the Ewells "had been the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations", living off "regular weekly appearances at the welfare office for his [relief] check". Bob Ewell has no qualms about living like a parasite, and none of his family care that they are seen as the lowest level of society, apart from blacks.

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The Cunninghams have pride despite their poverty, in contrast to the Ewells' complete absence of self-respect. Work ethic is an important part of the contrast between the Cunninghams and the Ewells. Even though Walter Cunningham " gets held back sometimes because he has to stay out and help his daddy", he still attends school regularly. Mr Cunningham also displays a hard-working attitude, as he " could get a WPA job", but does not so that he can " keep his land and vote as he please[s]", and also as he " don't have much but gets along on it".

He is willing to work hard and go through suffering to eventually rebuild his family's position. The Ewells' mentality is to take as much as they can for free, and to not bother earning any more. Mr Ewells' only income is by " relief cheques", and he uses his starving family as persuasion for farmers to permit " him to hunt and trap out of season". He was also the first man to be " fired from the WPA for laziness". The Ewell children also display this laziness, as they come to school on the " first day every year then leave".

The Cunninghams reap the benefits of hard work in inpecunious times, as opposed to the Ewells indolent and consequently indigent lifestyle. Finally, Lee presents the bravery, or lack thereof, shown by these families as a further difference between them. Walter's preparedness to come to school even though he had no lunch " today, nor would he have any tomorrow or the next day", and Mr Cunningham's willingness " to go hungry to keep his land and vote as he pleased" shows their bravery, as they are willing to silently endure hunger each day in order to reach their goals.

Mr Cunningham's actions in telling his mob to " get going" are also very courageous, because he could easily be ignored or rejected. On the other hand, the fact that Bob Ewell attacks Jem and Scout, who are children, at night and with a knife shows the extent of his pusillanimous vindictiveness. He does not dare beard Atticus, a slow old man; instead he " stopped Atticus on the post office corner, spat in his face, and told him he'd get him if it took him the rest of his life", and then attempts to kill his children. He is also afraid to reveal what Mayella did to Tom Robinson.

Although Burris has " been comin' to the first day o' the first grade fer three year now", when he is threatened by Little Chuck Little he " seemed to be afraid of a child half his height". This cowardice contrasts strongly with the courage shown in many instances by the Cunninghams. Despite these many differences, there are also similarities between the two families. Both children are poor in appearance, Walter with a face that " told everybody in the first grade that he had hookworms", and Burris being " the filthiest human being I had ever seen". They both occupy low tiers of the social hierarchy, and do not live in Maycomb itself.

They are also both involved in the court case. Another link between the Cunninghams and the Ewells is that, according to Aunt Alexandra, " the longer a family had been squatting on one patch of land the finer it was", making both the Cunninghams and " the Ewells fine folks, then". This is ironic as it is obvious to the reader that the Ewells are antithetical to " Fine folks". These superficial factors, however, are the extent of the two families' similarities. Lee uses the juxtaposition of the Cunninghams and Ewells to illustrate two opposite reactions to poverty.

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By showing the intrinsic morals and values of each family, she shows that those “ hit hardest” by the Great Depression need not flounder in iniquity like the Ewells, but rather can work their way out in the footsteps of the Cunninghams. To further impress upon the reader this difference, Lee also examines the definition of “ Fine Folk” throughout the book, reaching the conclusion that they are people who “ do the best they can with the sense they have”, such as the Cunninghams. She seeks to use this example to impart to her readers the value of hard work in times of hardship.