

# To kill a mockingbird



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The most important theme of the 1960 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is author Harper Lee's tenacious exploration of the moral nature of people.

Lee tenaciously explores the moral nature of human beings, especially the struggle in every human soul between discrimination and tolerance. The novel is very effective in not only revealing prejudice, but in examining the nature of prejudice, how it works, and its consequences. One of the ways it accomplishes this is by dramatizing the main characters, Scout and Jem's, maturing transition from a perspective of childhood innocence. Initially, because they have never seen or experienced evil themselves, they assume that all people are good by nature and tolerant of others. It is not until they see things from a more realistic adult perspective that they are able to confront evil, as well as prejudice, and incorporate it into their understanding of the world (Castleman).

As a result of this skillful literary portrayal by Harper Lee of the psychological transition from innocence to experience to realization, *To Kill a Mockingbird* succeeds admirably in portraying the very real threat that hatred, prejudice, and ignorance have always posed to the innocent. Simple, trusting, good-hearted characters such as Tom Robinson and Boo Radley are tragically unprepared. They are ill-equipped emotionally and psychologically to deal with the unexpected depths of the prejudice they encounter — and as a result, they are destroyed. Even Jem is victimized to a certain extent by his discovery of the evil of prejudice and its hidden power over so many people during and after the controversial trial (Bergman and Asimow). In the end, Scout is able to maintain her basic faith in human nature despite the shock

and unfairness of Tom Robinson's courtroom conviction. However, on the other hand, Jem's faith in truth, justice and humanity is very badly damaged. He does not understand why all of this is happening.

Prejudice and racism do not make any sense to Jem as they are so foreign to his nature that he had assumed they did not exist. When the shameful courtroom proceedings are over he retreats into a troubled state of deep disillusionment. In contrast, Atticus Finch has experienced and understood evil throughout his life. He has been confronted with prejudice and racism, but has not lost his faith in the human capacity for goodness.

Atticus understands from his own experiences and reflection that, rather than being simply creatures of good or creatures of evil, most people have both good and bad qualities. Jem and Scout only learn this after their troubling experiences with racism and prejudice during the trial. When they do, it is a revelation which eases some of the burden of their discovery of prejudice. One of the most powerful scenes in the novel is when Jem asks, "If there's just one kind of folks, why can't they get along with each other? If they're all alike, why do they go out of their way to despise each other?" He sadly declares, "Scout, I think I'm beginning to understand something, I think I'm beginning to understand why Boo Radley's stayed shut up in the house all this time. It's because he wants to stay inside." In Jem, the sadness is deep and lasting (Lee 240). Lee proceeds to demonstrate the range of prejudice and tolerance in people by emphasizing the point very effectively through the sheriff's explanation that, "I'm not a very good man, sir, but I am sheriff of

Maycomb County. I??™ ve lived in this town all my life an??™ Im goin??™ on forty-three years old.

Know everything that??™s happened here since before I was born. There??™s a black boy dead for no reason, and the man responsible for it??™s dead. Let the dead bury the dead this time, Mr. Finch, let the dead bury the dead?? (Lee 290). Lee goes on to say through Atticus that the important thing in life is to appreciate the good qualities and understand the bad qualities by treating others with sympathy and trying to see life from their perspective. He tries to teach this ultimate moral lesson to Jem and Scout to show them that it is possible to live with conscience without losing hope or becoming cynical.

For example, in this way, Atticus is able to admire Mrs. Dubose??™s courage even while deploring her prejudice. In much the same way, Scout??™s progress as a character in the novel is defined by her gradual development toward understanding the lessons Atticus Finch tries to teach her, culminating when, in the final chapters, Scout at last sees Boo Radley as a human being. Her newfound ability to view the world from his perspective ensures that she will not become jaded as she loses her innocence.

In conclusion, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, author Harper Lee tenaciously explores the moral nature of human beings, especially the struggle in every human soul between discrimination and tolerance. The novel is very effective in not only revealing prejudice, but in examining the nature of prejudice, how it works, and its consequences. Bibliography Bergman, Paul, and Asimow, Michael. *Reel Justice*. New York: Andrews and McMeel, 1996.

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