

# "to kill a mockingbird" by harper lee essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



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## **“ To Kill A Mockingbird” by Harper Lee Essay Sample**

The novel is set in the 1930's in a small community in Maycomb County, located in the South of America. Although slavery has been legally abolished for many years, the Southerners in Maycomb continued to believe in white supremacy, and the novel projects the social snobbery and the prejudice attached to these southern values.

The residents of Maycomb are narrow-minded, by this we mean they keep themselves to themselves and have a strict set of opinions. People in Alabama in the 1930's were suffering from economic depression. This is when there is a high percentage of unemployment therefore very few people have money to spare. Maycomb is a hierarchical society. By this we mean that people are divided into levels by other people. In an hierarchy there will be a highest level, which have the most power, control and respect than the other groups, in Maycomb this group of people is the white people. Then there is a middle level who have power, control and respect but not as much as the highest level, in Maycomb this is the poor whites who don't have a lot of money, sometimes referred to as 'white trash'. Then there is a lowest level. This group, if any, has little power, control and respect. In Maycomb, this group is the black people, referred to as 'Niggers' by the white people.

Maycomb is also a religious community meaning almost everyone is religious. With Maycomb being such a small county with a small population everybody knows everyone else's business. This is how problems occur. The

first problem is hypocrisy. This is when people turn around and do what they criticize in others.

The second larger problem is racism. This is belief that people of different races have different qualities and abilities, and that some races are inherently superior or inferior.

The third and final larger problem is prejudice. Which means a preformed opinion, usually an unfavourable one, based on insufficient knowledge, irrational feelings, or inaccurate stereotypes.

I am going to write about the two main problems in Maycomb society which are racism and prejudice.

Racism is an unjustified negative attitude towards people of a different race.

In Maycomb society racism is shown in many forms. One of the most prevalent forms is psychological racism. This is when people have racist thoughts.

In the novel ' to kill a mockingbird' there are many examples of psychological racism.

A good example occurs during Tom Robinson's testimony. Mr Gilmer is cross examining Tom and he is asked whether Mayella Ewell was a liar.' I don't say she's lyin', Mr Gilmer, I say she's mistaken in her mind'. Tom didn't dare say that Mayella was a liar but that she was mistaken. If Tom would have said that Mayella was a liar he would have got himself into deeper trouble. This is

because Black people were not allowed to call White people liars because it was thought that only Black people lied. In today's world everybody knows that anybody can lie, whatever their colour. This is psychological racism because White people are thinking in their minds that all Black people are liars.

Another example of psychological racism is when scout asked to go to Calpurnia's house and aunt Alexandra quickly replies with a stern, ' you may not'. With aunt Alexandra saying not so quickly and sternly gives me the impression that White people are not allowed to Black peoples houses, even those who have been by your side for years. With this determination of aunt Alexandra it seems as though Calpurnia and her home have a contagious disease and that's why she doesn't want scout going. But the truth is that aunt Alexandra doesn't want scout to go because Calpurnia is black therefore her family is not trusted with scout in their care.

When Tom is being asked question during his testimony by Mr Gilmer he finishes them with ' boy'. ' Had your eye on her a long time hadn't you boy?' Mr Gilmer would embrace. Mr Gilmer is making Tom feel small and belittled. Tom is a 25 year old man so is not classed as a ' boy'. This is psychological racism because White people think that they are bigger, better and superior than Black people.

Another type of racism is isolated racism. Isolation means you are on your own, separated in two groups. In this case one race are on their own, the

Black peoples race. They are in a group of their own with the other group consisting of White people.

In the book an example of isolation is when Black people have to enter a White persons house by the back door. The evidence occurs when the mad dog is coming towards the finch lot. Calpurnia runs to warn the Radley's, she storms in their yard and bangs on the front door. Scout says ' she's supposed to go round in back'. This shows that White people expected Black people to enter their homes through the back door. White people must have thought that Black people were ' not good enough', and inferior to go through the front door. This is a form of isolation because Black people are separated from the White.

In the Maycomb newspaper Blacks had their own section. This is racism in the form of isolation because they are separated and in a group of their own.

In Maycomb most Black people lived in squalor at the side of the dump. It makes me wonder why Black people had to live near a dump separated from White people. Why was it that White people couldn't bare to live near Blacks? Was it because Whites thought Blacks were ' dirty' so made them live next to a dirty dump?. The fact that Black people had to live there is an example of isolated racism because they are separated in two race groups.

Economical Racism is where Black people don't get a fair days pay for a fair days work. Black people are also given the jobs White people don't want to do. Sophie, Mrs. Merriwether's house keeper, asked for her weekly pay of \$1.

17. This is an extremely low amount for a weeks wage especially for all the work that housekeepers are made to do. Zeebo, Calpurnia's son, is the garbage collector. He was the one that had to do the dirty job of cleaning away the dead mad dog. Zeebo had this job due to the fact that the job was seen too dirty for White people to do. This reveals that black people are made to do the jobs that White people hate.

Racism can be expressed verbally. This is when a person would say something negative about another persons race. In the novel a common example of verbal racism is when white people refer to black people as ' Niggers'.

Mayella Ewell admits to calling Tom a ' Nigger' during her testimony. 'That nigger yonder took advantage of me' , she bellowed, she does this while Tom is in the room. ' Nigger' is an offensive word because black people don't like being called it so they feel offended by its use. This term is arguably the single most offensive racist slur in the English language. The word ' Nigger' comes from a latin word meaning black and is an example of anti-black prejudice. This makes it clear why black people don't like the word ' nigger'. Would you like it if you were referred to as the black man in front of a large crowd? Didn't think so. Not many people like being judged upon their appearance because the truth hurts. I suppose the term is more offensive when an adjective is added in front of it, ' a dirty nigger'.

On another occasion Bob Ewell was stalking Helen Robinson all they way to Mr Link Deas' house. Mr Deas asks Bob to get of his property or else he

would be charged with assault. ' I ain't touched her. Link Deas, and ain't about to go with no nigger!' Bob replied sarcastically. Ewell says this like it's a sin to go with a black person. Helen Robinson would have also found this offensive because she knows that she is like anybody else, just a different colour. My opinion is that anybody can go with anybody as long as there happy, whatever their colour.

The more serious type of racism is where physical abuse is present. This is when someone would make physical contact with someone else due to their race. Physical abuse often involves beating and killing. My opinion is that nobody should get beaten or killed because of their race. No matter what colour people are they are all the same inside, everybody is alike, we all think the same. In the book the best example of physical racism is when Tom Robinson gets shot. He was shot whilst trying to escape over the fence in jail. The most shocking fact is that Tom was shot 17 times. ' Seventeen bullet holes in him' declares Atticus. Couldn't the guards have shot him only once, that way it was much less painful?. My point of view, like many others, is that the guards at the prison didn't have to shoot Tom that many times. My question is, ' if Tom was white, would they of then shot him 17 times?'. I think I know the answer already. To me this trauma was an act of racism. If tom was white I think the guards would have been more respectable and human-like, and maybe have fired just a single shot because it doesn't take 17 shots to kill a human.

Prejudice is when someone has a very strong opinion about someone else without having good reason.

The majority of people who live in Maycomb are prejudiced. The two main reasons why they are prejudiced is due to the fact that Maycomb is a small town with a small town mentality and the other fact which is that prejudice has been passed down through generations.

Prejudice can come in many shapes and forms. Harper Lee included in the novel lots of different situations where prejudice is present. Lots of characters in the book are prejudiced against others.

In the book people show prejudice towards Walter Cunningham. Miss Caroline Fisher shows prejudice towards Walter by asking him some direct questions in front of his whole class. She does this after Harper Lee deliberately describes Walter as a boy whose face told everybody he had hookworms which indicates that Walter is poor. She asks Walter, " Did you forget your lunch this morning", even though she should tell by the way he looks that he is poor and unable too afford to bring his lunch. Harper Lee included this type of prejudice because she wanted to show us that prejudice comes in many forms. After Walter admitted that he had no lunch Miss Caroline goes over to her desk and opened her purse," here's a quarter", she said to Walter," go and eat downtown today. You can pay me back tomorrow",. This is another mistake because Miss Caroline should have known that he couldn't afford a quarter just by looking at the him. What Miss Caroline should have done was take Walter aside and ask him the questions instead there instead of in front of the class which was embarrassing for Walter. This is prejudiced because she judged Walter without knowing him



which suggests that Miss Caroline is not very observant and doesn't pay a lot of attention.

Scout is a very prejudice girl for her age. She judges a lot of people without knowing them. She physically abused Walter Cunningham because he didn't thank her when she tried to stick up for him in the argument with Miss Caroline. She rubbed his nose in the dirt but was stopped by jem. I think that she holds a grudge against people who don't appreciate things and people with no manners. Scout should have seen the situation from Walters point of view. If she had, she maybe would have suggested that Walter didn't have the same upbringing as she did. He may have been brought up without being learnt any manners. Scout shouldn't go round thinking everybody is like her. Just because Walter didn't automatically thank scout that doesn't mean he wasn't grateful for what she did; scout should have seen this possibility.

During the meal with Walter scout made some comments on Walters actions. Walter poured molasses over his food because he didn't know that it was good quality food, scout made a comment ' what the Sam hill are you doing'; Calpurnia was furious!. She spoke to Scout in the kitchen. She told her not to contradict people who don't eat like themselves, she gave her a big hollering;

Scout shouldn't have judged Walter because she should have known that Walter had come from a different background. She had made a comment that judged Walter without having good reason.

I think Calpurnia was so furious at scout because she knows what it feels like to be judged upon. Cal is a Negro and probably feels sorry for people alike who get contradicted for their appearance and actions.

In the novel, Arthur Radley, known to the children of Maycomb as Boo, is a victim of prejudice.

Several characters in the novel show prejudice towards Boo, one of these being Jem Finch. Jem spreads gossip from a neighbour, Miss Stephanie Crawford, a busybody tattletale, knowing that the gossip is a load of lies. He tells most of them to impress Dill, he told him that Boo Radley has been known to come out of his house," he goes out alright, when its pitch dark. Miss Stephanie Crawford said she woke up in the middle of the night one time and saw him looking straight through the window at her...". Jem also backs up Miss Crawford's rumours. He says," Ain't you ever waked up at night and heard him dill..... I've seen his tracks in our back yard many a morning,". Jem says these things when I don't really think he should; all he is trying to do is look good in front of Dill.

Boo Radley is also victimised by Dill. Dill was obsessed with Boo, he was the one who made up the idea of making Boo come out. The book says that Dill wondered what Boo looked like. He says, " let's try to make him come out..... I'd like to see what he looks like". Dill shouldn't bother Boo because he wouldn't like it if it was himself who was being pestered. This is prejudice because he is imagining Boo looking abnormal just because of the rumours about Boo.

Jem also shows prejudice towards Boo by giving a gruesome description of Boo even though Jem had never seen him before. Obviously you have to have seen someone to give a description of them?. It says in the book that ' Jem gave a reasonable description of Boo: Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that's why his hands were blood-stained - if you ate an animal raw, you could never wash the blood off. There was a long jagged scar across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time'. To get this good of a description Jem would have to have been up to Boo pretty close. This is prejudice because Jem is spreading comments around about Boo that are not necessarily true, so Jem is kind of judging Boo without really knowing him or having good reason.

Dill acted out a play with Scout and Jem. The play started with Mrs Radley who was beautiful until she married Mr Radley and lost all her money. She also lost most of her teeth, her hair, and her right fore finger which Boo had supposedly bitten off. I think to impersonate people in this way is a good example of prejudice because all 3 of the characters don't know the Radley family personally and are just acting out rumours which they have heard.

Miss Stephanie Crawford is one of the main sources for stories involving Boo Radley. She is a gossipy neighbour who had given Jem all of his information about Boo.

Miss Stephanie explained to Jem that Boo Radley got involved with the wrong crowd when he was a teenager. One night the boys locked the Maycomb

County beadle in the courthouse outhouse. After that transgression Boo Radley's father locked him up in their own house. It was said that Boo wasn't seen again for fifteen years, until one day that Jem was old enough to recall. The gossips claimed that Boo had been cutting newspaper articles for his scrapbook and his father walked by. Without any warning, Boo supposedly stabbed him in the leg with the scissors and then went right back to clipping articles. Mr. Radley insisted that he not be sent to an asylum, so Boo was locked in the courthouse basement until the city council insisted that he go back home. Boo hadn't been seen in daylight by anyone since then, and his presence was a great source of curiosity for Scout, Jem, and Dill. Miss Stephanie had made up these rumours without seeing the situations with her own eyes and without other witnesses being there, so she obviously made these rumours up meaning that she is showing prejudice towards Boo Radley.

Maybe Boo isn't the monster most people make him out to be?. Maybe he is just a normal boy?

There is some evidence to suggest that Boo Radley is totally the opposite to what people say. In fact this evidence reveals that Boo is a sweet-natured, caring adult. When scout asks Miss Maudie whether she thinks the rumours about Boo are true, Miss Maudie replies, " No, child',. ' that is a sad house. I remember Arthur Radley when he was a boy. He always spoke nicely to me, no matter what folks said he did. Spoke as nicely as he knew how'. This shows that Boo is a normal, polite boy. Miss Maudie is a respectable woman

in the novel who is also religious, so it is highly unlikely she was lying about Boo.

On the occasion where Jem, Scout and Dill decided to peep through the open shutter in the Radley place, Jem got his pants stuck in the fence after scrambling to exit the Radley garden. Jem's pants were well and truly stuck and torn on the Radley wire fencing. He left without them. Later that night he decided to go and retrieve his pants. He says to Scout, 'When I went back for my breeches - they were all in a tangle when I was getting 'em, I couldn't get 'em loose. When I went back..... they were folded across the fence... like they were expectin' me'. 'And something else...they'd also been sewn up. Not like a lady sewed 'em, like something I'd try to do. All crooked. Its almost like -'. This shows that somebody from the Radley household had found the pants, sewed them and placed them neatly on the fence ready for them to be taken away. I think that Boo was responsible for this. This shows that Boo does really care about people and it also shows that Boo is loving. If Boo was who people said he was then he wouldn't of had the decency to mend the pants.

Jem and Scout regularly find gifts in a knot hole in the tree at the bottom of the Radley lot. The kids are unsure whether the gifts are left for them but later realise that they are. I think that Boo is the one that is leaving Jem and Scout the small gifts. This proves that Boo is kind and caring. The person that people describe Boo as would not do a thing like this.

When Miss Maudie's house is on fire Jem and Scout stand on the pavement outside the Radley house. They stood watching the house burn and watching what everyone was doing; like a police officer monitoring the whereabouts of a suspect. After all the commotion had come to a halt they were led into their own home. Scout noticed that Atticus was staring at her with curiosity, then with sternness. Everybody had realised that Scout had a blanket over her shoulders protecting her from the cold. Atticus thought that Jem and Scout had gone back into the house after he had told them to stay put. But they hadn't gone back inside and it weren't there when they went out. Who could have put the blanket over scout? I'm pretty sure it was Boo that put the blanket over scout, Atticus also agrees because he says, ' looks like all of Macomb was out tonight, in one way or another'. Atticus says this because he knows it was Boo who put the blanket over Scout. It takes a kind hearted man to do what Boo did that night. This shows that Boo is not who people say he is.

When Scout was holding Boo's hand, in the finch house, he was holding it gently. When he said, ' will you take me home?', he said it softly. This tells us that Boo is also soft and gentle. Overall Boo sounds like a normal man. He doesn't sound like the man people said he was.

All this evidence reveals that Boo is as normal as can be and it also portrays that all the rumours about Boo are false. Would somebody give somebody else two soap dolls, a broken watch and a chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and somebody their lives if they were a monster? I thought not.

I think that Harper Lee is trying to say never believe any rumours that you hear unless you witness it with your own eyes. She has also shown us that not everybody is truthful or trustworthy.

The reason why I think Harper Lee wrote ' to kill a mockingbird' is because she wanted to expose how many faults there were in such a small town.

Harper lives in a similar small town called Monroeville. She would have also been about the same age as Scout when the book was set so I see this book as an autobiography based on her childhood. I also think she wrote the book to identify the sort of people she liked and did not like. The novel is full of characters who are hypocritical, violent and prejudiced; obviously these are the kind of people she dislikes. I also think that Harper agrees with people that are tolerant and a lot like Atticus, who I think she adores.

The book is a hopeful novel because it took the jury a long time to come to a decision to whether Tom was guilty or innocent. This gives the impression that there is hope for Tom to be found innocent. The more important issue is that Harper hopes that people in the future will not be prejudice or racist.

The big message that I think Harper is desperate to spread is that she hopes people will see thing from other peoples point of view or as Atticus said in the book, " you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it".

This is true because you never really know what a person is feeling until you imagine yourself in their position.