

The title of to kill a mockingbird

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



The title of *To Kill a Mockingbird* has very little literal connection to the plot, but it carries a great deal of symbolic weight in the book. In this story of innocents destroyed by evil, the “mockingbird” comes to represent the idea of innocence. Thus, to kill a mockingbird is to destroy innocence. Throughout the book, a number of characters (Jem, Tom Robinson, Dill, Boo Radley, Mr. Raymond) can be identified as mockingbirds–innocents who have been injured or destroyed through contact with evil. This connection between the novel’s title and its main theme is made explicit several times in the novel: after Tom Robinson is shot, Mr. Underwood compares his death to “the senseless slaughter of songbirds,” and at the end of the book Scout thinks that hurting Boo Radley would be like “shootin’ a mockingbird.” Most important, Miss Maudie explains to Scout: “Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but . . . sing their hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” That Jem and Scout’s last name is Finch (another type of small bird) indicates that they are particularly vulnerable in the racist world of Maycomb, which often treats the fragile innocence of childhood harshly. The title of the novel alerts us to the importance of this theme. It comes from an old proverb that “it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird”. The children first hear this from Atticus, when he gives them air rifles as Christmas presents (Chapter 10). He tells them they should shoot only at tin-cans but, seeing that they may well shoot birds, allows them to shoot the very common bluejay (regarded in the USA rather as pigeons are in the UK) but not mockingbirds. (Modern readers, especially in the UK, where many bird species are protected by law should note that hunting birds is considered acceptable sport in most parts of Europe and the USA even today. In the 1930s most

children would have seen it as normal to hunt animals and birds.) Scout is puzzled by this remark and asks Miss Maudie Atkinson about it. Miss Maudie says that: " Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, they don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird. " When Scout and Jem receive airguns for Christmas, Atticus tells them that although he would prefer that they practice their shooting with tin cans, if they must shoot at living things, they must never shoot at mockingbirds. Atticus explains that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird. Clearly, this is the title scene, but the theme continues throughout the book. Miss Maudie explains why Atticus is correct - mockingbirds never do anyone any harm, and are not pests in any way. All they do is sing beautifully and live peacefully. Therefore, it is a sin to kill them. The mockingbird comes to represent true goodness and purity. Tom Robinson is one example of a human " mockingbird". He stands accused of raping and beating Mayella Ewell, but is innocent of the charges. The town commits the ultimate sin by finding him guilty and sentencing him to death. In effect, they have killed a mockingbird. Boo Radley is another example of a human " mockingbird". He has spent his entire life as a prisoner of his own home because his father was overzealous in punishing him for a childhood mistake. Boo Radley observes the world around him, causing no harm to anyone, and then saves Jem and Scout's lives when Bob Ewell attacks. The sheriff determines that Ewell's death will be ruled an accident to avoid forcing Boo to go to trial, even though Boo killed him to protect the children. Atticus agrees, and wants to make sure Scout understands why this little white lie must be told. She

replies saying of course she understands, putting Boo on trial and in the public sphere would be like killing a mockingbird. The mockingbird represents true goodness and innocence that should always be protected. The main themes of *To Kill a Mockingbird* are illustrated through two major subplots running parallel throughout the novel. One of the major themes in the novel is the mockingbird motif. Atticus feels that it is wrong to kill a mockingbird because all they do is sing beautiful songs and never harm anyone. This theme is illustrated through the trial of Tom Robinson. A black man, Tom Robinson is accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a white woman. In this subplot, the racially prejudice nature of Maycomb is clearly portrayed through such instances as the fact that Atticus is accused by the town of being a "nigger lover" for defending Tom's case and also through the lynch mob scene outside the jail. It is in the Tom Robinson trial that the greatest example of injustice because of prejudice is seen. Although Atticus actually manages to prove the innocence of Tom Robinson, the white jury still refuses to declare the innocence of a black man over a white resulting in the most blatant testimony to the fact that the town of Maycomb held racial discrimination above justice. Through its decision the town essentially kills a mockingbird. Tom Robinson was a man who did no harm to others but instead actually helped others out of kindness - a mockingbird who becomes victim to a racist society.