

# Novel appreciation: to kill a mockingbird by harper lee essay (book review)

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Very few writers are able to create narratives that can be both entertaining and intellectually demanding at the same time. This thought continuously plagues students who are forced to incorporate the so-called “ must-read” books in their intellectual repertoire. Unfortunately, this approach can sometimes completely stifle a person’s interest for literature of any kind.

This sense of disappointment can be familiar to many readers, especially those ones who study fiction at a professional level. Yet, Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the rare exceptions that retain its popularity even despite significant changes in the literary canon in the second half of the twentieth century. In particular, it proves to be an exciting reading experience and prompts the audience to reflect upon the nature of moral choices that an individual has to take.

This novel gives a person deep insights into the life of American South in the early thirties, at the time when the country was passing a dramatic turning point in its history. The author enables the audience to immerse into the fictional world of the Deep South and its complexities. The plot of the novel revolves around Atticus Finch and his children. He is a lawyer who desperately struggles to protect an unjustly accused Tom Robinson.

Atticus is aware that this accusation is mostly driven racial prejudices, rather than solid evidence, but his attempts are of no concern to other people who are mostly driven by their prejudices and biases. This narrative may not seem too sophisticated at first glance; it gives rise to many remarkable characters and themes that retain their relevance and vitality.

The contemporary discussion of this novel is often tied to the question of racism; nevertheless, I'm convinced that this book can be of great interest to modern readers, and I'd like to discuss this claim in greater detail.

Arguably, the most striking element in this novel is its narrator. Scout Finch<sup>1</sup> is a six-year-old girl who tries to make meaning of other people's behavior. If you do not know much about this book, you may certainly ask why on earth I need to read ramblings of a child. However, this misgiving turns out to be groundless as soon as a person starts reading the book. The most surprising thing is that Scout combines serenity and naivety that make the reader look at the world through the eyes of this child.

This is one of the details that have often captivated me. One may just look at her description of Maycomb, " Maycomb<sup>2</sup> was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop. ... There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County"(Lee 6). In this way, the author introduces us into a small Southern town struggling through the Great Depression.

Admittedly, this narrator is slightly unrealistic, because one can hardly expect a six-year-old girl to be so insightful, attentive, and sophisticated. It is not likely that a child may use expressions like " vague optimism" in her speech (Lee 6). Nevertheless, this limitation does not undermine the credibility of this book because the characters portrayed by the author can gain the trust of the audience. This argument is particularly relevant if one

discusses children who explore the surrounding and discover both beauty and injustice.

For instance, Scout is completely puzzled by the fact that people can be dehumanized only due to the color of their skin. Unfortunately, many adults, who surround her, take these norms for granted. This sense of misunderstanding can remind many of readers of their own childhood and their attempts to understand why adults can act foolishly or even cruelly. In turn, Harper Lee can describe the experiences of a child in a very engaging way.

Although, this novel includes the elements of the Bildungsroman<sup>3</sup> depicting the intellectual growth of a child (Mills 61), Harper Lee is also able to explore the concepts of justice and injustice in the American society (Mills 61). In many cases, post-modern literature is strangely silent on this topic. One should keep in mind that this book is partly based on Harper Lee's childhood experiences, and she was a direct witness to the problems affecting the community.

In particular, the author focuses on the prejudiced attitudes against black people who could be marginalized by the existing institutions. At the same time, this novel evokes the memories of childhood which is full of unexpected discoveries and joys. However, the most remarkable thing is the way in which the protagonist tries to overcome her fears.

This argument is relevant if one speaks about her relations with Arthur Radley who is often viewed as a mystical monster by other children. Yet, it

eventually turns out that children's beliefs are completely unjustified. To a great extent, Harper Lee meticulously captures the experiences of a child who cannot easily accept the unknown. It seems that very few writers are able to achieve this degree of realism. This is the reasons why this book continues to be of great interest to readers representing different generations and cultures.

This novel is also remarkable because it highlights the importance of moral education without being too obtrusive. Much attention should be paid to Atticus Finch who is able to act as a role model without imposing his opinions on Scout and Jem. As a rule, such attempts are doomed to failure and he chooses a different strategy by encouraging children to think critically.

It is possible to say that moral education is one of the themes that are looked down upon in the post-modern literature. In contrast, Harper Lee is able to show how art and ethics can be reconciled. This attribute of the novel makes readers place themselves in the position of Atticus and Scout who are able to combine kindness and intelligence. So, to some degree, Harper Lee sets an example for parents who need to understand how to influence the behavior of children.

Admittedly, modern critics do not pay much attention to this novel since it doesn't entirely belong to the post-modern age. Contemporary literary canon lays too much stress on the use of allusions and inter-textual references. However, one should keep in mind that very often, critics prove to be mistaken and in many cases, they can just overlook true literary

masterpieces. *To Kill a Mocking Bird* is one of the literary works that can be better appreciated in the future. This is one of the hopes that I cherish.

Older readers know about this book mostly due to the eponymous film directed by Robert Mulligan. The roles of Scout and Atticus were masterfully played by Mary Badham and Gregory Peck whose performances are still memorable. Nevertheless, reading this novel is a more fulfilling experience that enables a person to relive the moments of childhood. This is why it is worth reading.

At the same time, this novel has a very complex historical background demonstrating how American societies struggled through racism and economic depression that threaten the very survival of many people. It is also possible to say the author shows how people can retain their humanity despite the prevalent stereotypes and dominant social conditions.

The main strength of Harper Lee is that she is able to explore the connections between social and individual forces. In turn, readers are prompted to examine these relations more closely. The main issue is that this examination is both engaging and thought-provoking.

Despite possible limitations, this novel is the fiction that combines intellectualism and breath-taking narrative that makes readers emphasize with Scout, Atticus, and Jem. To a great extent, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the books that retain the status of a classic work without being boring. Admittedly, this novel depicts the problems that do not seem to be relevant to the modern societies.

However, the author is able to create characters who seem to override cultural and age differences. More importantly, the ethical questions that they ask have not lost their meaning. So, reading this novel can still prove a rewarding experience. This book combines naivety and shrewdness, and this combination distinguishes it among other literary works.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1988. Print.

Mills, Catriona. *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*, New York: Insight Publications, 2011. Print.

1 Her real name is Jean Louise, but other people call her Scout.

2 Don't try to locate this town on the map. It is a fictional place imbedded in the fictional universe created by the author.

3 The novel describing the psychological and moral development of a person.