

Examination of key themes and ideas in to kill a mockingbird

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



To Kill a Mockingbird " Lawyers, I suppose, were children once. " A very appropriate, and poignant, opening statement for one of the seminal literary works of the modern age. Everybody knows the story of the Finch family, and of the struggle against injustice that their patriarch, Atticus Finch, leads. One summer during the 1930's, Atticus, a small-town barrister in Maycomb, Alabama, defends whom he considers a wrongly accused African American, charged with rape. As such, he incurs the wrath of a society that prides itself upon its deep-set and dearly held traditionalist values, i. e. the inferiority of particular members of the human race due to their skin colour. The story is, of course, Harper Lee's 1960 Pulitzer Prize winning novel To Kill a Mockingbird. Told from the point of view of Atticus' young daughter Jean Louise Finch (better known to us as Scout), the book is an engaging and informed look at the darker, and lighter, aspects of man's persona. Lee employs the many tricks of her trade in crafting this novel, and these tricks have come to define this work for millions. Through the characters, the setting, the titular Mockingbird, the themes and motifs, right down to how she has presented it to us, To Kill a Mockingbird registers today as an American masterpiece. One of the more notable and acclaimed aspects of the book is the narrative style in which it is written. As events unfold, they are related to us by young Scout Finch, about seven years of age. The reader experiences the story from the perspective of an innocent, uncorrupted child. As the saying goes, ' a child can ask questions that a wise man cannot answer'. Scout asks her own questions during the novel, questions that her father Atticus struggles with. Why did they find that poor man guilty? Why do reasonable, god-faring people we see each and every day want to hurt him

so badly? We were all children once; we all grew up, and learnt the harsh lessons of life, but we were once children: carefree, adventurous, and filled with a sense of wonder and curiosity about the world around us. As the narrator struggles with issues that she is too young to understand, as she has not been acclimatized to the bitterness of life, the hearts of the readers leap out to her, and we empathize greatly with Scout Finch. On her travels, Scout introduces to the cast of characters that make up her home town. They all flit through, and give us their view of the issue to Scout, who relates it back to us. As such, they appear to the reader almost as if they were witnesses in a court case, arguing the case for and against racism. Among the most eminent of the supporting cast is one Dolphus Raymond, a white man who has committed social suicide by having the nerve to marry a black woman. It's alright, though, because he is a drunk who is occasionally seen stumbling around the town, bottle in hand, in a drunken stupor. On the day of the court case, however, Dolphus reveals to Scout and her brother Jem that it is not actually alcohol in his brown paper bag, but Coca-Cola. Why the deception? Because people could not accept his union at face value, and, as Dolphus says, 'It helps folks if they can latch onto a reason.' This is one of Harper Lee's overarching themes of the novel, that when people are confronted with something they do not understand they need a hidden reason to bring it into perspective for them. As interesting as Dolphus Raymond is, as he epitomizes many aspects of the novel, he is only briefly seen, unlike another character though, one that stays with us all throughout: the town of Maycomb, Alabama. It is an old town, with its own established society and code of conduct. It is old, Christian, and highly traditional, which

also describes 90% of its inhabitants. Time has stood still in Maycomb for quite a while when the story begins- it may be the 1930's, but some of those in the town still seem to believe they are living in pre-Civil War times. As such, Maycomb is not so much of a town as a culture, much like the rest of the South, bred into them by their bitter elders, angered over the loss of their liberties after the Civil War. As the story progresses, it appears that Atticus may not be fighting to secure Tom Robinson's freedom, but battling the stubborn refusal of the townspeople to shift into a different era. Tom Robinson becomes a symbol of how outdated the townsfolk have become. The novel is rife with symbolism. Scout is a symbol of innocence, while Atticus is a symbol of justice and right. Bob Ewell, Tom Robinson's accuser, is a symbol of hatred and racism. But there is one symbol that stands out more so than the rest- the titular Mockingbird. Why is the novel titled To Kill a Mockingbird? I mean, no birds were harmed during the making of this text, so why? Because Tom Robinson is a mockingbird; Atticus, when gifting to his son a pellet gun, informs him that it is ' a sin to kill a mockingbird'. Curious, the children ask a neighbor why. ' Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy...but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to.' And so Tom Robinson, a struggling black man who helps out a poor young white woman of even less means than he, is wrongly charged with rape, found guilty and subsequently shot whilst trying to escape. So, in a metaphorical sense, a " mockingbird" has been killed. There is, though, another mockingbird in the story. He is the reclusive, and mentally ill Boo Radley. Legends persist about him, legends that enthrall the children to adventure and fantasy. While the picture portrayed of him is one of a

horrible monster, the children discover that he is in fact a kindly, gentle spirit, as he leaves them candy and gifts in a hollowed out tree-trunk on his lawn. When Bob Ewell threatens Atticus with vengeance after Atticus humiliated him in the courtroom, he attacks Scout and Jem as they are on their way home on night. Boo, hearing the attack, rushes out with a kitchen knife and fatally stabs Bob, saving the children's lives. Atticus, having for years tried to instill in his children a sense of right and wrong, refuses the suggestion that ' Bob Ewell fell on his own knife'. Scout, realizing what sort of scrutiny would descend upon the hapless Boo if his actions were made public, tells her father that it is alright to lie in this case, for subjecting Boo to this would be like killing a mockingbird. ' Let the dead bury the dead', the police chief remarks. Although one mockingbird has lost its life, another such tragedy has been averted. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* delivers a strong message to her readers. Her only published work, it cries out against the injustices she has witnessed of the world, of how people view and treat one another, and how some aspects of society act toward others. It employs rich symbolism, a recognizable setting and memorable characters into a damning treatise on the deepest evils of the human soul, of the inability of man to see beyond their own needs and beliefs to understand the plight of others, and our narrow-minded damnation of others based upon the most trivial of differences. As Atticus says, ' you can never really understand someone until you walk around in their skin'. A successful plea on the part of Lee for us all to stand back and become better human beings.