

# Bob ewell: a journey into the world of an alcoholic

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



To Kill a Mockingbird is many things: just to name a few, it is a comment on racism, class, and the mob mentality. In this brilliant novel, there are a lot of well defined characters whose goings on in the fictional Maycomb County help to propel the story along. One of the most interesting characters, in my opinion, is Bob Ewell. At first, he appeared to me as the stereotypical antagonist. He is racist, rude, abusive, and an alcoholic. Even his description of being dirty and cruel fits perfectly with the antagonist idea. The antagonists in some stories seem to be slapped together, feel that they are evil just for the sake of being evil, and Bob Ewell seemed to be no exception. However, after the reader who looks into his traits with the help of modern psychology will realize that there may be more to him than is originally evident. When you look at his actions and character in general, you begin to realize that almost all of Bob Ewell's traits could be symptoms of alcoholism. What if to Kill a Mockingbird's greatest villain is a comment on alcoholism? What if the downfall of Bob Ewell is but an example of the downfall of the many people living with alcoholism?

It is well established throughout the story that Bob Ewell is an alcoholic. One example of this is during the trial in chapter 18, when Atticus is asking Mayella questions. When Atticus asks Mayella if she loves her father, she says that he is tolerable. "' Except when he's drinking?' asked Atticus so gently that Mayella nodded" (Lee, 245). Mayella presumably didn't disclose this information voluntarily because her father was sitting mere feet away at the time, but she is set at ease to tell the truth by Atticus. Another example of Mr Ewell being an alcoholic is earlier in the book, when Atticus is talking to Scout about the Ewells. During this scene, he says "...but when a man (Bob

Ewell) spends his relief checks on green whiskey, his kids have a way of crying from hunger pains" (Lee, 41). This is another bit of evidence that shows us that Bob Ewell is an alcoholic who would rather spend the finite amount of money his family has on alcohol, instead of the food that his family will need to survive. Only a person who is addicted to alcohol would put getting whiskey ahead of getting food. According to the American Addiction Center, this is a telltale sign of an addiction. In their article on the signs of addiction, they list " Spending excessive amounts of money on the substance" as one of the signs of an addiction (American Addiction Centers, 1). Before long, alcohol starts to completely take over Ewell's life. Chapter 27 is where Ewell started the transition from a rude, racist to a possible killer. An excerpt from page 332 of *To Kill a Mockingbird* points to how this may have started. In this scene, " Mr. Bob Ewell acquired and lost a job in a matter of days"(Lee, 332). In the same section, Scout remarks that " he was the only man that I had ever heard of who was fired from the WPA for laziness" (Lee, 332). According to the Illinois Institute for Addiction Recovery, one of the possible symptoms of addiction in the workplace is when an individual is " Withdrawn from responsibility." and they " experience a loss of interest." (IIAR, 1). While this can be seen as " laziness", really job performance is described as " far below the expected level," (IIAR, 1) especially in the later stages of alcoholism.

Another example of alcohol addiction taking over Bob Ewell's life is when Scout is discussing Bob Ewell and she says that " Ruth Jones, the welfare lady, said Mr Ewell openly accused Atticus of getting his job" (Lee, 332). This blame game is practically the trademark of a late-stage alcoholic, according

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to an article from The Recovery Village. In this article, it is stated that “When it comes to the blame game, alcoholics are professionals. We can blame anyone and anything but ourselves when it comes to the predicaments we find ourselves in and the choices we make.” (The Recovery Village, 1). Finally, we come to the climax of the story, which is also the climax of Mr Ewell’s alcoholism. In this scene, Bob Ewell tries to kill Scout and Jem. We know that alcohol is the main influence behind Bob Ewell’s actions because of a number of moments in the chapter. During the attack, Scout accidentally touches Bob Ewell’s face, thinking that it is Jem’s, and notes that “ I smelled stale whiskey.” (Lee, 352). This shows us that Bob Ewell has been drinking that night and is presumably drunk.

We get further confirmation of Ewell being drunk when Scout and Jem arrive home safely and begin to unravel what happened. When Mr Tate comes to the house and tells them that Bob Ewell died, he describes him as a “ Low-down skunk with enough liquor in him to make him brave enough to kill two children.” (Lee, 360). This confirms that Ewell tried to kill them because of his alcoholism. This quote also shows us that alcoholism can make a person go as far as killing children. He completely lost control of his inhibitions, as alcoholics do. He has gone further than he has ever gone before. There should be no doubt in anybody’s mind that Mr Bob Ewell is a loathsome character, but maybe we should feel sorry for him too. Not because of his actions, for which there is absolutely no justification. No, we should feel sorry for him because he is the symbol of a much bigger problem facing the world, the problem of alcoholism. His death, while an important one in the novel, is

perhaps more important in the context of alcohol addiction because it symbolizes the people who have died of alcohol addiction.

In expert writing, such as the writing of Harper Lee, there are no mistakes. All characters in the novel are there for a purpose. Atticus is there to portray the voice of reason in chaos, Scout is there to represent the pureness of a child, and Bob Ewell is there to represent (on top of the racism he exhibits in the book) alcoholism, an epidemic that continues to this day. As Atticus says to Scout, “ 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” (Lee, 39). Atticus is correct of course. Until we have seen Ewell’s struggle with alcoholism from his eyes, we can’t really understand him, can we?

## **Works Cited**

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