

# Mayella ewell: powerful or powerless character

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



For centuries, countries have fought with one another over power. Whether squabbling over who has control of their nation or who really owns a territory, struggles over domination have been commonplace throughout history, featuring not only countries as a whole, but their individual settlers. Power can be defined as the amount of control one has over one's own life or the lives of others. Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* revolves around the trial of Tom Robinson, a young, African American man living in the south during the Great Depression. Tom is accused of the sexual and physical assault of a young white woman, Mayella Ewell, who claims he has both beaten and raped her. While all evidence against him can be refuted and points to her father, Bob Ewell, as the perpetrator, Tom is convicted anyway and sentenced to death because he is African American. Although Mayella's race gives her power in the courtroom, overall, she is powerless in the eyes of society because she lives in poverty and her father controls her through constant abuse.

Poverty in the Ewell residence is just one of the reasons that they are seen as lower class in society and a reason why Mayella is powerless. The Ewell family is poor, uneducated, and filthy. They live off of welfare, and whatever money they have is used to purchase alcohol for Bob Ewell, who is a drunk. Mayella tries desperately to escape the low class her family fits into, as her socioeconomic status keeps her from fitting in with the white people of Maycomb, but her race keeps her from fitting in with the African American community. One attempt to escape her class is Mayella's garden, which contains " six chipped-enamel slop jars holding brilliant red geraniums, cared for as tenderly as if they belonged to Miss Maudie," a stark contrast to the

otherwise disgusting and dilapidated Ewell lawn and residence (143). Finding pleasure in beautiful, material things, Mayella's desire for a better, more beautiful life is revealed. She wants to see something besides what she has seen around her all her life; she wants an escape. Her failure in doing so successfully is what allows her to be typified as powerless, as she has no control over where she lies in the social hierarchy of Maycomb, Alabama. Similarly, Mayella tries to escape her class by "look[ing] as if she trie[s] to keep clean" (151). Lee indirectly characterizes her as somebody who actually cares about their appearance, a stark contrast to the rest of the Ewell family, who don't care about anything. This sets her apart from her family as she tries to be seen as something more than a Ewell. These attempts to rise above her family and their low-class, no-good reputation are ultimately failures, as when the court case is adjourned, despite her "victory", Mayella's existence is dismissed as nothing more than it was before the trial, proving that she has no control over herself and deeming her powerless as she continues to live with and be abused by her father.

Another reason why Mayella Ewell is powerless is because her father controls her through abuse. It is alluded to throughout the trial, and even expressly stated in certain instances, that Mayella is a victim of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse at the hands of her father, Bob. According to Tom Robinson's testimony, Mayella claimed that she was inexperienced with men, stating that "she says what her father do to her don't count," insinuating that Bob Ewell forces himself upon her sexually (164). Mr. Ewell takes control of Mayella's body, doing what he wishes with it, and her dismissal of these actions "counting" reflect an obvious lack of reciprocation on her end as well

as a lack of power over herself and her body. Also, when Mr. Ewell sees Mayella kiss Tom Robinson, he demeans her, saying “ you goddamn whore, I’ll kill ya!” alerting readers to both verbal and emotional abuse, as he said this while company was present, leading one to conclude that the abuse may be worse when doors are closed (164). Significantly, verbal and emotional abuse can create a situation in the victim’s mind of “ learned helplessness”, which is when an abuse victim starts to believe that there is no solution or escape from their problems, so they don’t try to do anything about them, allowing their maltreater to exert full control over them and surrendering their power over themselves. In addition, Atticus proves that Mayella was beaten by a left handed person, which describes Bob Ewell and not Tom, who’s left hand is “ useless” and “ rubber-like” (161). Coupled with his threat to kill his daughter, a strong likelihood is created that Mr. Ewell is beating and otherwise physically abusing her, once again proving that Mayella has no control over herself and her body. Atticus asks her during the trial if her father is good to her, to which Bob Ewell “ s[its] up straight and wait[s] for her answer” (155). When Mayella looks over at him, she gets uncomfortable and denies that he is ever intolerable in his behaviors towards her. Previous evidence paints a picture of Mr. Ewell’s abuse of his daughter and the environment she must have grown up in. Victims of abuse tend to see their abusers as all-powerful and allow themselves to be controlled by them, as there seems no other way to avoid harm. Such is the case with Mayella Ewell. Mr. Ewell relaxes when she denies these allegations, but it becomes clear to the reader that her father is controlling what is being said on the

stand, and allows one to conclude that Mayella is both a victim and pawn of her father with no control over herself, proving that she is powerless.

Because she is white, Mayella won her court case, unfairly condemning Tom Robinson to execution. However, she has no overall power because she has no control over herself, an idea stemming from her family's unescapable poverty and the control Bob Ewell asserts over her. While the idea of Mayella symbolizing a mockingbird is not a popular one with Tom Robinson sympathizers, it can be justified, because she is an innocent girl driven to committing a societal crime by her desire to feel loved and receive positive attention from somebody. The return of Mr. Ewell and her subsequent beating can be considered the shooting of the mockingbird and the ending of her innocence as she is then prompted by her father to file criminal charges against Tom for an alleged rape and beating that never occurred. Mayella Ewell is truly a victim of her circumstances.