

Race portrayal in "to kill a mockingbird" how we treat those different to us essa...

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Harper Lee's 1960 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* tells the story of Scout Finch, the six year old daughter of Atticus Finch, a strong father, a virtuous lawyer and the defender of Tom Robinson. Scout grows up in the small town of Maycomb, Alabama in the 1930s, among the other interesting and entertaining people in the town. Going through her life and growing up with her friends, she learns many lessons from her father and the town itself. Much like Atticus with Scout, this book is incredibly important because of its teachings of morality and virtue; the book teaches the importance of honesty, respect, justice and patience, among others. Furthermore, it remains an important American novel because of its strong, vivid language and its powerful discussions of race and justice in the 1930s. Based very much on author Harper Lee's life; Lee's father was a lawyer, just like Atticus; he once had the case of defending black men who were accused of murder. Scout was heavily based on the personality and attitudes of young Harper Lee, and her friend Dill was also based on famed author Truman Capote, a friend of hers as a child. Boo Radley's family was based on a family near where she grew up, and Tom Robinson is a combination of many different stories from her childhood of black men being falsely accused of crimes (Sova and Fitzwater, 2004). Since the town of Maycomb is based so heavily on Lee's childhood, the authenticity that is present in *To Kill a Mockingbird* helps the book present a very accurate picture of the Deep South in 1930s America.

The racial issue in *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains one of the most well-known facets of the book. The primary conflict that Atticus encounters, framing the story, is having to defend African-American Tom Robinson, who has been

accused of rape. All throughout the story, Atticus and his children are chastised and disrespected by the town for being "nigger-lovers," showing that the rest of society at the time did not take kindly to black people (Lee, p. 179). At this time in American history, blacks were still a disenfranchised race, constantly being discriminated against and robbed of their dignity. The fact that Tom Robinson is blamed for the rape of Mayella Ewell is a clear case of racism, as it is much easier to blame someone you do not know. Atticus, seeing through this, and not caring about the lack of respect he is getting from his neighbors, works as hard as he can to set things right and defend Tom. The book itself takes a stand against this kind of discrimination, and teaches many important lessons about tolerance. The most important of these has to be when Atticus tells 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, p. 48)

Lee's portrayal of Southern whites and their attitude towards racism is an important one to discuss and learn from, which makes it a perfect reason to include the book in future English courses. Race remains a very sensitive issue in America today, and as such, many lessons can be learned from *To Kill a Mockingbird* that can be applied to current events. By discussing the poor treatment of the innocent Tom, as well as the Finch family and other whites who support him, students can talk about what made people behave this way, and see how they can apply healthier attitudes to their own lives. The discussions that come through in class could help to create better understanding of race in this country, and how the attitudes such as those that led to the trial of Tom Robinson, an innocent man targeted because of

his race, should be discouraged at any cost.

Lee demonstrates a very strong sense of humor with the book, particularly through the precociousness and joking nature of Scout; her constant curiosity and zest for life help to guide the reader through the town of Maycomb, particularly in the opening chapter. " bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade of the live oaks on the square. Men's stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon, after their three-o'clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum" (Lee, p. 7). Scout always finds humor in observation, and this humor mixed with the serious issues of racism and growing up in the South makes it a very good and important book to read in classrooms. Students and instructors could talk about the relationship between humor and drama, and how humor can be used in writing to make the often heavy drama that is provided in books like these easier to read.

In conclusion, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the most important works in American history. Its treatment and handling of the topic of racism in racially-charged Alabama is accurate and haunting, and provides a wonderfully dangerous snapshot of the views of many towards minorities. The novel itself presents the first steps towards racial tolerance in America, particularly the Deep South - by reading this book, the audience can learn more about life in the South at that point in American history, as well as the subject of race and how it was handled in a time before such feelings were not so secret.

Works Cited

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