

# Is maycomb a microcosm of america's society in the 1930's? essay sample

[Society](#)



In the novel, 'To Kill a Mocking Bird', the Author describes the town in which the novel is set, to be a microcosm of America's society in the 1930's. By definition, microcosm means; 'a community or other unity that is an epitome of another unity.' Epitome means; 'brief or miniature form.' Therefore, if one said Maycomb (town that the novel is based in) was a microcosm of America in the 1930's, this would mean that Maycomb was a miniature form of America.

This statement is true because, throughout the book the people of Maycomb show views and beliefs, which the majority of people in America believed in that period of time. For example: in the novel, the people of Maycomb are racist against black people because, of their skin colour. In the 1930's the majority of American people felt and behaved in this manner. Another way that Maycomb reflects America in the 1930's is the people of Maycomb have many conflicts within the same religion. For example;

Miss Maudie, a very fair woman within the novel says to Scout (main character in novel) " My shell's not that hard, child. I'm just a Baptist... Foot washers believe that anything that's pleasure is a sin... told me my flowers were going to hell."

This shows that even within the same religion people are disagreeing over beliefs. This corresponds to America in the 1930's; as this kind of conflict was commonly known in those days.

Many of the Residents in Maycomb consider themselves to be Christians but they all seem to have separate rules. The so called ' Foot washing Baptists' seem to exclude Miss Maudie even though she is of their own religious book.  
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Hypocrisy is seen in Maycomb among religious groups who are supposedly meant to be promoting a 'love for fellow man'

The black people and the White people have separate churches even though they are of the same religion and beliefs. The Maycomb missionary circle is patronising and hypocritical. They believe they are charitable but, they pity Black's and they clearly don't see them as equals, they see them as second-class citizens. Which isn't really the way Christians should feel as they supposedly are meant to love everyone equally. The majority of the circle assumes that all of the Black community in their town live in sin and squalor. By reading the book we realise that this is obviously not true as the Black people of Maycomb are just as good Christians as they are. The White people of the missionary circle are coming this assumption arrogantly.

'To kill a Mocking bird' should be considered a reliable and un-exaggerated portrait of America in the 1930's as the Author Harper Lee tries to recreate the prejudice and depression that was spread throughout America in this era.

One of the main points that Harper Lee brings across in the novel is the massive impact that racial prejudice had on people's lives. He shows this at many points throughout the book but, one, which particularly sticks in my mind, is when Scout and Jem are taken to a church that only black people attend. They go to this church with their housekeeper 'Calpurnia'.

In this chapter the racism is turned around, as Jem and Scout became the unusual and were out of place rather than the black people. Jem and Scout

show that they have been brought up knowing that black people were excluded and they show their lack of knowledge on the culture. For example;

Jem says, " It's the same God ain't it?"

This shows that the white people of Maycomb do not consider the black people to be equals. Jem and Scout are still young and are therefore, not truly aware of the division between black and white people. Atticus has always taught them that everyone is equal but as they have grown up in a town full of racial prejudice they do not abide by Atticus's viewpoint as much as they should or could.

In the 1930's, America showed courage. The nation was emerging from the pressure of a civil war. The Civil war ripped the country apart and made a huge economic crisis. Through all this America worked for democracy and equality demonstrating courage. President Roosevelt said, " The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself." During this period of time, Martin Luther King showed great courage as he worked against prejudice; he put up a great fight against racism. Martin Luther King had become a legend in today's society as he changed the lives of a lot of people.

Martin Luther King was born in 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. His father was a Baptist preacher who was actively involved in the civil rights movement. King (Martin Luther King, most people refer to him as King) graduated from college in 1948, after considering a career in medicine and law but finally deciding on ministry. While studying King heard a lecture on the non-violent civil disobedience campaign that Mahatama Gandhi used successfully against

British ruling in India. King started reading books on the ideas of Gandhi, and eventually became convinced that the Black people in America to obtain civil rights could use the same methods. He felt struck by the words Gandhi said, for example:

“ Through our pain we will make them see their injustice”.

King soon became a pastor in a Baptist church, situated in Montgomery.

Like many towns in the South, the buses were segregated. Although on the 1st December, 1955, Rosa Parks a middle-aged tailor's assistant, was tired after a hard day's work and refused to give up her seat for a White man. She was later arrested, King and his friends helped organize protests against bus segregation. It was then decided that Black people would refuse to use the buses until passengers were completely integrated. For thirteen months 17,000 Black people walked to work and eventually the bus companies were forced to introduce integration. In 1957, King joined with the Reverend to form what was called The Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King carried on to do great things for the Black people of America but many attacks were taken out on supporters of King. King carried on to be a great leader. Martin Luther King showed real courage, as he did something, which not a lot of people would even attempt to do in this period of time.

' To kill a Mocking bird' could be considered a perfect example of what racism in America was in the 1930's. In the book, Tom Robinson (a black farm worker) was charged with raping a white girl even though, there was much evidence pointing out that he was innocent. The fact is that the only

reason he was charged was because he was black. Even if there had been a mountain of evidence against Bob Ewell, Tom would still have been found guilty. Bob Ewell was the father of the girl who had presumably been raped by Tom Robinson. The Tom Robinson case was quite similar to the Emmet Till case, that took place in America during the 1930's.

Emmet Till was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. When Emmet was fourteen though, he went to Mississippi to spend the summer with his uncle. Till was not accustomed to the racism of the segregated South and he unknowingly bragged to his Black friends in the South that he EVEN had a White girlfriend in the South. His black friends evidently didn't believe him, so they dared him to enter a store and ask a White woman for a date! Inside, Till hugged Carol Bryant's waist and squeezed her hand, then whistled at her as his friends rushed him away. Later, on August 28, 1955, Carol Bryant's husband and his half brother, abducted Till from his uncle's home. Then, three days later his naked, beaten, decomposed body was found in the Tallahatchie River. He had been shot in the head.

An all White jury tried the two White men one month later and despite the fact that they admitted abducting Till, they were released because, the body was too disturbed to be identified.

This relates to the Tom Robinson case as the two White men were more than probably guilty in anyone's eyes but, because they were White and Till was Black they got away with it. This corresponds and connects with the Robinson case in 'To Kill a Mockingbird', as Tom Robinson was only

proclaimed guilty because, he was in fact Black and the girl he supposedly raped was White.

In the 1930's Till's murder became a rallying point for the civil rights movement. The public were outraged over the injustice of the trial and this helped to ensure that congress included a provision for federal investigations of civil rights violations in the civil rights act of 1957.

This case goes to show how much Maycomb is a microcosm of America in the 1930's. Harper Lee seems to have included events within the book, which seem to have been just adapted to fit into the character's lives.

Throughout the Novel, Maycomb county people were racist. In Maycomb the racism isn't even repelled against by the Blacks because they too, don't know any better and ACTUALLY believe that this was their place and this is the way it had to be!! This is obviously much different from the circumstances of today.

Even within the young, prejudice is shown.

Jem shows this when he says:

" There are four kinds of folks in the world. There's the ordinary kind like us and the neighbours, there's the kind like the Cunninghams out in the woods, the kind like the Ewells down at the dump, and the Negroes."

When Jem says this he refers to four types of people present in Maycomb:

Finches and neighbours - White Middle Class

Cunninghams - Badly hit farming community

Ewells - Lowest Class of Whites (White trash)

Blacks - Seen as bottom of social strata

This shows that even Jem and Scout, the children of Atticus, one of the most un-prejudiced people within Maycomb still think in this way. This is through no fault of their own it's because, of the era they are brought up in and the affect of other people's views.

In the 1930's, the civil war had long been over but divisions were still strongly present between counties and states. Although, this caused many negative vibes between different sections of America e. g. North and south, if there was a crisis the neighbouring counties would forget their differences and unity would be shown. Harper Lee shows this in the novel. He shows this when Miss Maudie's house catches fire. As the fire engine comes all the way from a neighbouring county. The fire engine has to travel through the snow and there are big problems but they keep going. This shows a great deal of unity, as the two counties don't particularly get along.

He also shows unity within the Maycomb residents themselves at the same point in the novel. As all the residents come out of their houses in the middle of the night and they all try and help each other, even those who normally argue or disagree with each other. The Author even goes to the extreme of Arthur Radley emerging from his house. Arthur Radley is one of the main characters in the novel. He is the gossip of the town, as he never comes out of his house due to issues from his childhood.

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Even though no one sees Arthur come out of his house, the author shows that Arthur has a great love for the children (Jem and Scout). The fact that Arthur is involved shows even more that even though these people have their differences, deep down they do care about each other. This again shows unity!

America showed unity in the 1930's at the time of ' THE DEPRESSION'. The Depression caused wide spread poverty. The Wall Street Crash initially caused the Depression in 1929. People at all levels of society were affected. Those at the highest levels of the financial spectrum were affected as they lost money on investments and future plans. This in affect, filtered down throughout society as the employers had to decrease wages and lose many staff. This unity that existed in America is shown within Maycomb.

For example: Atticus is affected as a lawyer as his clients cannot afford to pay him therefore, causing him to have financial problems. The Depression is also shown through the Cunningham family within the book as, their farm struggles. Atticus and the Cunningham's show that unity takes place as, The Cunningham's cannot afford to pay him for some work he has done. So they pay him back in ways they can. For example: Mr Cunningham paid Atticus instalments, he gave him a sack of hickory nuts etc. When Scout asked her father why he paid him in this way Atticus simply said; " Because that's the only way he can pay me. He has no money."

This shows that Atticus understands and does not penalise them because, they have no other way to pay him. This again shows unity as he could have refused to work for him.

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Many characters throughout the book show courage. For example: Mrs Dubose shows REAL COURAGE when fighting the losing battle of breaking off from her addiction of morphine. Mrs Dubose comes across as a very abrupt, nasty character at the start of her appearance within the book but as the book carries on we realise that she is a woman with strong opinions on certain issues, which happen to concern Atticus. She is not scared to show those opinions as we see in the novel. For example: one day as the two children (Jem and Scout) pass by her house she rudely calls at them. They haven't actually done anything wrong but she feels the need to say something obviously! She says:

Towards Scout - " you'll grow up waiting on tables if somebody doesn't change your ways... Not only a Finch waiting on tables but one in the court-house lawing for niggers!"

She then proceeds to say - " Your father's no better than the niggers and trash he works for!"

This makes Ms. Dubose out to be a really cruel and harsh old woman where as, she is quite on the contrary. In the book Ms. Dubose clearly shows a great deal of courage as when the book carries on we see her full colours shine. When Ms. Dubose finally dies, Atticus explains to the children (mainly Jem) that Ms. Dubose was actually a great lady.

He says:

" She was a great lady ... She was. She had her own views on things, a lot different from mine, maybe ... son, ... I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand."

This shows that Ms. Dubose has a great influence on the children's lives, she teaches them REAL COURAGE and what it was to have determination in the hardest of circumstances. Atticus carries on to say:

"... It's when you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do"

This statement sums up Atticus's beliefs about courage. Atticus had great respect for Ms. Dubose, as even though their beliefs were very different and their opinions on life and others very opposite. He considered her one of the greatest people in Maycomb, " She was the bravest person I ever knew."

Another character in the novel that shows courage is Arthur Radley (commonly known as Boo) as even though he knows that the town gossip about him, he still shows passion for the children. He shows courage, when he saves the children at the end of the book. As he leaves his house even though he is agoraphobic and he faces his worst fears by leaving the house and all to save the children that he has watched for years and who have been obsessed with seeing him, just for a split second. This shows Arthur to have real courage as he faces all his worst fears at one moment. It is not expected of him to look after the children and has no reason to show compassion towards people of the village as they have not shown him with the same compassion that he showed Atticus's children.

In the 1930's, America had a declaration of independence that stated that all men are created equal. In spite of this fact, it took an awful long time for this to apply though all the States. This relates to Maycomb in 'To kill A Mocking Bird' as despite this declaration, the jury in The Tom Robinson Case still show racial prejudice towards Tom Robinson. We know this, as Justice is clearly not done. Although, Atticus and few other residents of Maycomb try to uphold America's ideals they were not successful for a long period of time. Again we can refer to the Emmet Till case, as justice is clearly not shown in this matter, as it is not in the Tom Robinson Case. The declaration that was present seems a bit pointless at this period of time as hardly anyone in America seemed to live and abide by it. Prejudice is shown through courtrooms, school, religion, jobs and many others and this is reflected in 'To kill a Mockingbird' very affectively by the Author ' Harper Lee'.

In the Tom Robinson case within the novel, Atticus points out the racist prejudice that is taking place. He clearly knows that the jury will find him guilty just because he is Black and he tries to make them think about the declaration and what it is to uphold it. He says in the courtroom as his final plea for the jury to show justice towards Tom Robinson:

" The witness for the State, with the exception of the Sheriff of Maycomb County have presented themselves to you, gentlemen, to this court, in the cynical confidence that their testimony would not be doubted, confident that you, gentlemen, would go along with them on the assumption - the evil assumption - that all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, that all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women, an

assumption one associates with minds of their calibre... Thomas Jefferson once said that all men are created equal... But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal ... in this country our courts are the great levellers, and in our courts all men are created equal."

This statement shows the passion Atticus has against racism. He knows they will not agree all men are equal outside the Court room so he tries to make them see beyond the colour of Tom Robinson but to see the innocence forgetting that he is what they consider to be ' second class citizen.'

In the 1930's America was a mixture of complex societies. There were many immigrants from different countries, different ethnic groups, different economic levels in society (e. g. class) etc. There was a lot of tension between these different groups in society. This is also shown throughout Maycomb, there seems to be a split between all different people in Maycomb and tension is present between groups. There are the Black People, the White people, poor people, rich people, and foot washing Baptists, Baptists, and Methodists.

All these points show that Maycomb is in fact a Microcosm of America in the 1930's. All the beliefs and issues present in America are shown in different ways throughout the book. The Racial prejudice, The Justice / in-justice, the depression and the causes of the depression, the courage shown by individuals e. g. Martin Luther King in comparison to say Atticus in Maycomb, the way the people unite in times of crisis, the hypocrisy in religion and the amalgamation of different societies. Evidently, in conclusion I would say ' To Kill A Mockingbird' by Harper Lee is in fact a reliable example of life in America

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during the 1930's. It is a small portrait of the lives of different groups present in America.