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Literature, American Literature



Jessi Machnik Ms. Madding English 9 Honors-1 15 February 2013 The Sins of Mayella Ewell " Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit ' em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (119). It's a sin because all mockingbirds do is sing and bring joy to the world. All Tom Robinson tried to do was help Mayella Ewell and bring a little joy to her life and she accused him of rape. Harper Lee's novel tells the story of two children, Scout and Jem Finch, as they come-of-age in Depression-era Alabama. The children quickly grow up as they witness their father defend a black man accused of raping a white woman even though he has no chance of winning. In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee uses the characterization of Mayella Ewell's guilt, loneliness, and fear as a source of motivation to accuse an innocent man of rape; this shows the reader that good and evil exist together. First, it is reasonable to conclude that Mayella's guilt about kissing a young black man led her to lie about rape. For example, when Atticus is speaking to the jury in court, he says, " I have nothing but pity in my heart for the chief witness for the state, but my pity does not extend so far as to putting a man's life at stake, which she has done in an effort to get rid of her own guilt. I say guilt, gentlemen, because it was guilt that motivated her. She has committed no crime; she has merely broken a rigid and time-honored code of our society, a code so severe that whoever breaks it is hounded from our midst as unfit to live with. [...] she was white, and she tempted a Negro. She did something that in our society is unspeakable: she kissed a black man. Not an old Uncle, but a strong young Negro man. No code mattered to her before she broke it, but it came crashing down on her afterwards" (271-272). Atticus suggests that the reason she has accused Tom Robinson of rape is to get rid of her

guilt. He claims to have pity for her, but not enough pity to justify her actions. Furthermore, when Atticus was cross-examining Mayella he asked her if she remembered Tom "beating her about the face" and she said "No, I don't recollect if he hit me. I mean yes I do, he hit me." [...] "Huh? Yes, he hit- I just don't remember, I just don't remember... it all happened so quick" (248). Atticus questions Mayella's honesty when she says that, but, he doesn't say anything about it. He feels as though she isn't telling the whole truth. He knows she feels guilty about lying. At the same time, Mayella may be lying, but she may also have been led to lie by her loneliness. Next, Mayella was likely driven by her loneliness and wanted to make a friend. When it was Tom Robinson's time to speak he said he felt sorry for Mayella and as Scout listened to what he was saying she thought, "As Tom Robinson gave his testimony, it came to me that Mayella Ewell must have been the loneliest person in the world. She was even lonelier than Boo Radley, who had not been out of the house in twenty-five years. When Atticus asked had she any friends, she seemed not to know what he meant, then she thought he was making fun of her. She was as sad, I thought, as what Jem called a mixed child: white people wouldn't have anything to do with her because she lived among pigs; Negroes wouldn't have anything to do with her because she was white" (256). Scout believes that Mayella really is lonely, the more she hears Tom speak. She concludes that Tom truly did feel sorry for Mayella. When Atticus is speaking to Mayella he asked her if she has any friends, and she says, "Miss Mayella," said Atticus, in spite of himself, "a nineteen-year-old girl like you must have friends. Who are your friends?" The witness frowned as if puzzled. "Friends?" "Yes, don't you know anyone near your

age, or older, or younger? Boys and girls? Just ordinary friends? " (245).

Mayella believes that she will never have friends. She knows she's an outcast, so why would she have friends. Regardless of how lonely she is, she is obviously afraid of something so maybe she was driven by fear. Finally, it is possible that Mayella's intentions were misunderstood and driven by fear, so she accused an innocent man of rape. When Atticus asks Mayella about her father and if he's good to her, she says, " I mean, is he good to you, is he easy to get along with? " " He does tollable, ' cept when-" Mayella looked at her father, who was sitting with his chair tipped back against the Riling. He sat up straight and waited for her to answer. " Except when nothin', " said Mayella. " I said he does tollable. " Mr. Ewell leaned back again. " Except when he's drinking? " asked Atticus so gently that Mayella nodded. (245).

She is obviously afraid of her father and Atticus knows it. He could tell she's afraid when he asked her that question. When Atticus is asking Mayella to tell the truth about what happened and she refused and this is what happened, " When Atticus turned away from Mayella he looked like his stomach hurt, but Mayella's face was a mixture of terror and fury" (251).

Mayella is afraid that she is going to get caught up in her lie, so she refuses to talk anymore. She just wants them to believe her. To sum up, the characterization of Mayella's guilt, loneliness, and fear is the motivation for Mayella accusing Tom. It shows that good and evil do coexist in the world. Someone who may usually be a good person can do bad things just like everybody else. She's obviously lying to get rid of her guilt, remove her loneliness, and hide her fear, but everybody knows everything and she should just stop lying. Everyone has a good side and a bad side; it all

depends on what side they choose to follow in their life. The coexistence of good and evil is something that is very real in life, everybody should think about that.