

To kill a mockingbird essay summary

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



To Kill a Mockingbird stands as nothing less than a classic and is perhaps the great American novel as well as a great movie. When the book was written by Harper Lee, about the Depression South and their views on race relations, the ideas and themes were as relevant in 1930's America as it was the in the 1960's; even more so as the 1960's was finally able to address the issues of race and prejudice in ways that it had not been able to do so at any time in America's past. In the early 1960's, with the election of John F. Kennedy as the president, a new era of politics was about to show its face.

Under the Eisenhower Administration, little had been done in the face of race relations. Kennedy was elected and African Americans, after voting the straight Republican ticket for a hundred years, voted for Kennedy in record numbers and has voted overwhelmingly ever since.[1] The book and movie, although set thirty years in the past, is a reflection of this new attitude towards race. Concerning the 1960's, most of the attention concerning social change, is given to the end of the decade but a great deal of progress was being made at the time in which the movie was being made and shown to audiences.

As a result, the message of the movie and its relevance, hit a nerve in the consciousness of the American people, then as well as now. Race relations and the impediments that come from prejudice, have always plagued America to a greater degree than most countries in the world. To Kill a Mockingbird, and its unique and accurate look at the way in which African Americans were treated, helped to put a face and a name to a race in which much of the white community in America, had opinions based upon ignorance.

To Kill a Mockingbird, helped to address that problem, and in the end, succeeded to a greater degree than any other single movie or book ever has been able to accomplish. The theme of courage, not only for Tom Robinson and Atticus, but also for Jem and Scout, who are both at delicate ages and their exists within them, an internal battler concerning whether the actions of their father or the actions of their town will resonate in their minds for the next sixty to seventy years. There is a lot at stake for them as well.

During the last months of the 1960 Presidential Campaign, Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed in Georgia for refusing to adhere to the segregation laws of a local diner. When John F. Kennedy, the Democratic candidate from Massachusetts, and the front runner, heard of this, he applied political pressure to the governor of Georgia and King was released. (Wolper, 1961) This act helped Kennedy to capture the African American vote for him as well as for future democrats.

African Americans were becoming emboldened by their new found freedom and power and felt that Jim Crow and the segregation laws which had once been seen as sacrosanct in Southern culture, had outlived its welcome and needed to go. In August of 1963, Martin Luther King gave his: I Have a Dream Speech at the Lincoln Memorial and solidified the beliefs and the struggles for African Americans at that time as well as now: To Kill a Mockingbird helped to connect a name with a face and aided the Civil Rights Movement in the opening years of the 1960's.[2] This was most certainly the case as posterity would come to appreciate Lee's works more and more.

Within this historical context, the message of the book is twofold: “ That racial prejudice serves as an impediment, not only to the receiver of the injustice but also to the society as a whole is something that people as well as a society should avoid.”[3] It is also important for one to stand up for what one believes in: even though that fight is against impossible odds. Atticus was fighting against all odds and even he did not believe that was going to win this case, despite his unshakable conviction that Tom Robinson was indeed innocent. Atticus is not such an idealist that he really expects to be able to secure an acquittal for Tom Robinson.

This seems more than unlikely but when asked to by the judge; he still takes the case and the defense of Tom Robison. “ Atticus takes the case because he believes in the innocence of Tom Robinson as well as in the Constitution which affords every citizen of America the right to legal council in their own defense.”[4] The first message in the movie and the most obvious is the racial strife that comes from a black man being accused of raping a white woman.

This act alone invoked strong feelings at that time and there is already present, a racially charged atmosphere that has been present even before this most recent events. To Kill a Mockingbird places a name to not only a face but also to a race. Racial prejudice comes from ignorance. “ Many in the white community, especially in rural areas in the South or even the suburbs of the North, daily contact with African Americans might have been nonexistent.”[5]

This will often times lead to misunderstandings as well as stereotypes leaking into the minds of those who would otherwise have befriended a member of another race but due to a lack of contact and therefore understanding, allows himself to be overrun by these racist assumptions of a race. In this movie, Atticus reminds the members of the jury as well as the American public, that erroneous assumptions have serious consequences. Atticus is also aware of how his actions will affect his impressionable children and this desire to serve as a positive role model for his children is partially, what motivates him to take the case in the first place.

“ I wanted you to see what courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It’s when you know 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.”[6] This is a quote that makes the reader think and perhaps applies it to his own life. Are the battles that one undertakes, only the ones in which a favorable outcome is expected? Is this the measure of courage?

Or is courage standing up for what one believes in and knows to be right, when everyone else thinks differently and your actions will do little to positively affect anything, even to the smallest degree? If this is the true test of a person’s courage, then there are few works of fiction that have better examples than in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

There may have been people in the audience, in movie theatres all across the country and in libraries in every school in America that may have disagreed with that assertion because they had never known an African

American, except through the racist jokes and stories that their friends may have told.

That was their only access to African Americans and as a result, their opinion towards African Americans was incorrect. One of the greatest accomplishments that *To Kill a Mockingbird* has is the ability for Americans to rethink their own opinions on race and to help prepare for a dialogue on race that was going to touch almost every aspect of American society, to one degree or another during the 1960's.

The other message is that it is noble for one to stand up for their beliefs and that courage and conviction is what will help the individual to achieve this. “Atticus knows that his defense of Tom Robinson is a lost cause. Yet, he still defends him with the same passion that he would have given to anybody else, even a white man of means and a greater chance of receiving an acquittal.”[7]

The belief in a noble goal, despite the knowledge that such beliefs will yield only negative results from the majority, yet does not deter those beliefs and the sacrifices associated, gives a positive message to contemporary audiences, forty five years after the movie was made. Its effect has not diminished over time. Atticus knows that he needs to serve as an example and as a role model for his children. In talking to his children about what is to come within the trial of Tom Robinson, Atticus states: “The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is in a courtroom, be he any color of the rainbow, but people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury box.

As you grow older, you'll see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don't you forget it- whenever a white man does that to a black man, no matter who he is, how rich he is, or how fine a family he comes from, that white man is trash.”[8] Atticus does not mince words in this speech to his children and knows that he must win the battle for the hearts and minds of his children and not the evil of racial bigotry which has a fighting chance of consuming either of his children.

The narrator of the movie as well as the book is Atticus's daughter Scout. She is an inquisitive young girl who attempts to understand her father as well as the motivations behind the trial of Tom Robinson. Since her mother died when she was really too young to remember him, she relies upon Jem's account of her mother as well as whatever Atticus can tell her about her mother. However, Atticus's personality is not overt and he finds it difficult to express his feelings except in the courtroom.

Therefore, Scout needs to be the one to narrate the book as well as the movie. “ Even though it is Scout as an adult that is narrating the story in both the book and the movie, it is to the benefit of the audience but also to Scout's own benefit that she be allowed to narrate the story since in the process, she can better understand a father and a community which, at the time, she found confusing.”[9] And there is no doubt that Atticus is able to make an impact on Scout. This is never more relevant than in the racial feelings that Scout has and that it is much more innocent than that of her peers.

This comes from the guidance that Atticus gives his children. In one passage, Atticus tells his children: “ The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is in a courtroom, be he any color of the rainbow, but people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury box. As you grow older, you'll see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don't you forget it - whenever a white man does that to a black man, no matter who he is, how rich he is, or how fine a family he comes from, that white man is trash.”[10]

In the 1930's, such ideas must have been so foreign to Scout, that she could not help but remember them thirty years after they were said. They came from a father that was a source of continuing puzzlement and reverence, all at the same time.

Scout exemplified courage in a number of different ways. As it is the case for millions of children in America and around the world, their childhood revolves around their puzzlement towards their parents as they attempt to decipher who these people really are to them. This is exactly what is occurring with Jem and Scout in the pursuit of understanding their father. When the story begins, Scout is a five year old girl whose mother had died a few years ago, before she had the ability to remember who exactly she was. This leaves Atticus as the single parental figure in her life.

Atticus's sister comes to stay with the family and the interactions of their maid, Calpernia serves as a female role model in her life but these women are seem more as impediments to her freedom than really anyone that she can confide in; at least at her current age. Scout is protective of her

individuality as Atticus is protective of her innocence in the face of evil that is being shown during this rape trial.

Scout shows courage in the fact that she will not conform to the expectations of society and their detailed beliefs on what constitutes a lady in the genteel South. Scout will not conform, nor will she allow herself to be defined by others. As a result, Scout is a bit of a tomboy and is fearless towards the others in her class, especially the boys who she routinely fights and usually wins. Scout's actions at this time, though seemingly innocent and unimportant, speak to a larger theme that is all too present in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

That is whether or not Scout will conform to the evil and racial prejudice that is present in the rape trial of Tom Robinson or whether she will come out of that trial, still believing, as her father does, “that good vs. evil will triumph in the end and that is what behooves one to always try to be on the side of good instead of letting one's soul sour with the poison of hate.”[11] Scout comes out of the trial, believing more than ever before, in the rightness of racial tolerance and love.

At the beginning of the story, the question is still in doubt as to whether or not Scout will end up cynical about the triumph of good over evil as had been the case with Boo Radley or Tom Robinson or whether her sense of right and wrong will stay in tact. Thanks to her father, the latter becomes the reality and Scout and Atticus are that much better off in life because of this effort.

It would be nice to say that the same outcome occurred for Scout's older brother Jem. Jem is a few years older than his brother and at the start of the book, seems to be as innocent and optimistic as his sister. This comes from his age as well as his interactions with his father. At that age, most children feel that their parents are invincible and that their actions will easily be able to triumph over any injustice or hurdle.

Jem goes into the trial of Tom Robinson thinking that Tom is innocent and that surely his father will make sure that he is found innocent and allowed to return home to his family. Jem is not able to absorb all of the social and racial implications that are present in this case. He is courageous because he believes in his father and in the rightness of America's judicial system. This is an it naive for an adult to believe, although it is better to go through life optimistic and trusting of others, than to be pessimistic; tucked away from the world, never allowing anyone or anything to affect you. However, the former does have its impediments.

Those that believe that good will always triumph over evil, as was the case in the comic books and radio dramas that Jem probably listened to, will sometimes be wounded to their core as they discover the hard way, that life does not always end up the way in which it should. This is the case for Jem. He emerges from that trial, a cynical and jaded young man; perhaps more so than contemporaries, three or four times his age.

After the trial, it may seem as though Jem will retain this cynicism for a good portion of his life as children are very impressionable at that age. Had it not been for the actions of the misunderstood neighbor Boo Radley and he saved

the lives of both Jem and Scout, makes the reader believe that Jem and Scout will not submit to the prevailing ideology of his town and the racist feelings which has been choking it since before the Civil War. At such an early age, to believe as one's own faith and consciousness dictates their actions, all in spite of what is popular, is an important example of how Jem is, in the end, one who exemplifies courage, all in the actions of a child.

To Kill a Mockingbird, in both book and movie form, is not only a great work of art, but is also an important work of art which serves the interests of all those who are interested in equal treatment under the law and a level playing field for all. Even though the setting of the movie and book are thirty years in the past, its issues were as alive in the South during the 1930's as it was in the 1960's.

Hopefully, African Americans no longer have to face such trials and fear for their life, as long as American wrestles with race and questions of race, To Kill a Mockingbird will not only be a good film; one to study in history classes in order to understand troubles long passed, but to understand the progress that the country has made in race relations as well as what remains necessary for contemporary and future generations need to accomplish in order to ensure that everyone is free from racial prejudice and its poisonous effects upon the human psyche.

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