

# To kill a mockingbird

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



In the novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, there is an ongoing conflict between written laws, moral laws, and injustice, meaning being judged unfairly. In a perfect world, they all work together but Maycomb County is not a perfect world. The same can be said about any other American city. Atticus Finch teaches his children the importance of written laws, mainly that all people are “innocent until proven guilty”. The social structure of Maycomb, however, encourages another kind of justice, mostly based on the color of your skin.

The result in a person of color being treated as guilty, even when he proves that he is innocent. In the beginning of the novel, injustice based on prejudice and fears are unknown of Jem and Scout, as they are only familiar with the rule of written law, which their father practices as a lawyer. Atticus raises Jem and Scout to be “color blind” and see everyone equally, and the written law sees everyone in the same way. However, by the end of the Tom Robinson case, they both come to realize that the court system and juries can ignore written laws.

Throughout the novel, Atticus promotes the necessity and importance of the written law. For example, when Atticus says, “The state has not produced on iota of medical evidence to the effect that the crime Tom Robinson is charged with ever took place. It has relied instead upon the testimony of two witnesses whose evidence has not only been called into serious question on cross-examination, but has flatly been contradicted by the defendant...” (Pg. 203).

Although Atticus knows that his client is innocent, he also knows that he must present his case in a way that will not offend the moral values of the jury. Even though Atticus could have used Bob Ewells' negative past history and bad character against him, he knew the all-white jury is not going to find that believable. Instead, they would think that Atticus was just attacking Bob Ewell's character since he has no case. Therefore, Atticus is forced to prevent the jury from hearing evidence that he would have used for a white client.

While Atticus may not be the top lawyer in Maycomb, his intentions are honorable and he takes the "high road" in his approach to arguing the case. Just as Atticus is limited by the moral values of the jury from using helpful evidence in the case, Bob Ewell uses his racist comments to unfairly sway the jury. "Why I run for Tate as quick as I could. I knowed who it was, all right, lived down yonder in that nigger-nest, passed the house every day. Judge, I've asked this county for fifteen years to clean out that nest down yonder, they're dangerous to live around ' sides devaluin' property. (Pg. 175)

This shows how Bob Ewell knows that to win his weak case, he must plainly lie and say the utmost negative terms about African Americans, to scare the jury, which is made up of uneducated and poor white farmers. These jurors only know how to follow the customs and traditions they were raised with in Maycomb. Since they are such racist individuals, the Ewells' moral laws made them treat the African Americans as "second class citizens", and allowed the jurors to believe that they are above them on Maycomb County's "social ladder".

Throughout the novel, there is another person, who suffers from injustice, but not because of his race. Boo Radley, a quiet, sympathetic white man, who is a neighbor of the Finch's, has a terrible reputation because of his links to several murders and because he is different and strange. However, he shows over time to be a fine man. As said wisely by Atticus, " 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" (pg. 30).

By this bold statement, Atticus is teaching moral laws to Scout, that she should not judge Boo just based on town gossip and his appearance, but by how she feels when she gets to know him. By the epilogue of the novel, Atticus' last lesson is that " Most people are, (nice) when you finally see them" (pg. 281). This quote speaks to Atticus' bravery, intelligence, and morality all at the same time. Even though the moral laws that Atticus teaches his children are not directly connected to the Tom Robinson case, they are moral laws that the jury does not follow.

Instead, the jury judges Tom based on appearance and prejudice, without attempting to understand him. Scout, the protagonist of the novel, is clearly horrified by the verdict of the case. A jury never looks at the defendant it has convicted, and when this jury came in, not one of them looked at Tom Robinson. The foreman handed a piece of paper to Mr. Tate who handed it to the clerk who handed it to the judge...I shut my eyes. Judge Taylor was polling the jury: " Guilty...guilty...guilty...guilty" (pg. 11)

Atticus says that he lives by the written law. But even then, his morals allow him to ignore the written law sometimes. When Boo Radley kills Bob Ewell,

Atticus and Heck Tate [Maycomb's investigator], agree to make up a story that Bob Ewell fell on his knife and died. Atticus felt lying was the right moral thing to do, because Boo would never get a fair trial. Just as Tom is judged by his race, Boo is judged by his different character. The moral laws of Atticus allow him to violate written laws. But that can be very dangerous.

Breaking the law to do what you believe in only is good if your beliefs are just. Otherwise, it can result in people breaking believing that lynching a man can be done to have justice. Unfortunately, the main and only point this trial proves is that during the 1930s, especially in the South, it is pretty much impossible for any hard-working, diligent and honest African American to win a court case, no matter how good the case. But most importantly, what the trial proves is how prejudice can dominate and eradicate the effect of written laws.