

Assignment 01: compulsory

Literature, American Literature



Assignment 01: COMPULSORY 20 August 2012 — semester 2 Unique no.: 673276 Topic: Essay on the prescribed novel. In order to do this assignment you need to have read the book *To Kill a Mockingbird*. ‘Cry about what, Mr Raymond?’ ‘Cry about the simple hell people give other people — without even thinking...’ In an essay of approximately 1000 to 1500 words give your opinion of the prescribed novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Your essay should deal with aspects of the book such as symbolism, pathos, humour, and satire. You should round off your essay by stating whether or not you consider this book to be useful and relevant to your future career as a teacher. A delightful novel which brought back memories from when I first read it whilst a learner at school. As an adult I can appreciate Harper Lee’s use of symbolism, pathos, humour, and satire. I especially enjoy the manner in which Harper Lee effectively used symbols to demonstrate rejection of prejudice and racism. Symbolism “the practice of representing things by means of symbols or of attributing symbolic meanings or significance to objects, events, or relationships”. Songbirds and their associated symbolism appear throughout the novel. The family's last name of Finch also shares Lee's mother's maiden name. The titular mockingbird is a key motif of this theme, which first appears when Atticus, having given his children air-rifles for Christmas, allows their Uncle Jack to teach them to shoot. Atticus warns them that, although they can “shoot all the bluejays they want”, they must remember that “it's a sin to kill a mockingbird”. Confused, Scout approaches her neighbor Miss Maudie, who explains that mockingbirds never harm other living creatures. She points out that mockingbirds simply provide pleasure with their songs, saying, “They don't do one thing but sing their hearts out

for us." [74] Writer Edwin Bruell summarized the symbolism when he wrote in 1964, "'To kill a mockingbird' is to kill that which is innocent and harmless—like Tom Robinson." Lee often returns to the mockingbird theme when trying to make a moral point. The mockingbird symbolizes something or someone who is attacked by society unjustly. Tom Robinson and Boo Radley are symbolized as mockingbirds. Tom Robinson a black man who works as a field hand is like a mockingbird in relation to Mayella because all he ever did was try to help and treat her right. When Bob and Mayella Ewell accused Tom of raping Mayella it was like killing a mockingbird. And again it was like killing a mockingbird when Tom was convicted of rape. Boo Radley was a very mysterious, but caring and harmless, man. During his rescue of Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell he kills Bob Ewell. Atticus wanted to put Boo on trail but it soon became apparent that if he did so, it would be just like killing a mocking bird. All Boo ever did was try to protect the children from Bob Ewell. Both Boo Radley and Tom Robinson, are peaceful people who never intend to do any harm. To kill or harm them would be as great a sin as killing a mockingbird, is a harmless bird that makes the world more pleasant. Although the mockingbird is the most prominent symbol in the novel we encounter symbolic character names as well as other symbols such as the snowman Jem and Scout build one winter. There is not enough snow for the snowman, so Jem uses dirt for the foundation and then covers it with the snow that they have on the ground. The snowman is symbolic in that Jem is trying to cover up the black 'man' and showing that he is the same as the white man, just with a different colour. "' Jem I ain't ever heard of a n***** snowman', I said. " " He won't be black long', he grunted. "' (p. 89) The

snowman is a symbol of racism which is also integral to the theme of the novel. The symbol of the snowman can be seen as mixing both races together while the symbol of the mockingbird can be seen as segregation from those who are different. The symbols give depth to the novel and highlights the problems of the time. It is quite noticeable that some characters' names in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are implicitly symbolic. Scout, gathers information and scout out new experience. Atticus's name is a reference to the district Attica of ancient Greece in which Athens was located. In some way Atticus's rational approach to life is similar to that of ancient philosophers, the Stoics: The Stoics four cardinal virtues are wisdom, courage, justice and temperance. Atticus serves these four virtues, justice, wisdom, courage and temperance in the story, just like the ancient philosophers of Athens did. Another aspect of the novel is the humour which abounds in many forms, humour being " the easiest way to make things laughable is to exaggerate to the point of absurdity their salient traits".. Harper Lee uses a great deal of humour in her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, most of which is satirical in nature. She also uses indirect ways to show some things, for example, she says " Judge Taylor went out behind the stage and slapped his knees until his wife had to bring him a glass of water and his pill" to show that he is laughing instead of just saying that he is laughing because it makes the reader think about the event highlighting the funniness. The use of indirect humour is seen again when Mr. Tate says he got the knife " took it off a drunk" because it is correct, as Ewell was drunk because " he smelled of stale whisky" it was actually partly correct, she did this so that the readers could guess what was going on in the end and where he had really

gotten the knife from. The way Atticus talks is also humorous, he tells Dill "put some of the country back where it belongs" when Dill is covered in dirt but he actually means for Dill to take a bath. The humorous tone lessens the horror of the injustice to Tom Robinson and we tend to rather remember the novel for its humour. Harper Lee uses satire, usually meant to be funny and using wit as a weapon, to gently poke fun and at other times to seriously criticise the prejudices and shortcomings of society for example the small town pageant, held to celebrate the Halloween, with the children dressed as vegetables and meat mocks. Scout was dressed as a ham. After the pageant finished Jem and Scout were returning home, when they were attacked by Bob Ewell. Scout was not hurt at all but Jem's arm was badly broken: bringing the novel to full circle, it started with Scout talking about Jem's broken arm and ends with her talking about Jem's broken arm. "His left arm lay out from his body: his elbow was bent slightly, but in the wrong direction" (p. 271). Scout was still wearing her costume the time of the attack and "this thing probably saved her life" (p. 275). At the end of the story Jem's broken arm is a sign that he will be wounded forever by what he has experienced and Scout, on the other hand, has been protected from harm by her ham costume, a symbol of the sense of humour and naivety that insulate her from "ugliness" of society. Although this is a delightfully funny book, pathos, a quality which causes feelings of pity and sadness, is ever present in it. The underlying Boo Radley theme is tragic. We witness, in fact, gross abuse of a child. Consider the unbearable, understated pathos of the following lines: The doors of the Radley house were closed on weekdays as well as Sundays, and Mr Radley's boy was not seen again for fifteen years.

(Chapter 1, page 16). We also need to consider Mayella's character and life: Mayella looked as if she tried to keep clean, and I was reminded of the row of red geraniums in the Ewell yard (Chapter 18, page 182). Mayella considers Atticus to be mocking her when he address her as `Miss Mayella' and `ma'am' because no-one has ever treated her courteously in her life before. Harper Lee's novel To Kill a Mockingbird has ones again highlighted to me the need for me as a teacher to be like Atticus and defend the peaceful people who make the world more pleasant namely the mockingbird learners. In today's South African society we encounter mockingbirds in our schools, learners who are attacked by society unjustly and/or racially discriminated against. Harmless learners who never intend any harm and as a teacher we need to protect them. Harper Lee has provided me with two valuable tools to be part of my teaching toolkit. The first being that words are well adapted for description and the arousing of emotion, but for precise thoughts symbols are more effective. The second being " 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. " (p. 35) References 1. Wehmeier, Sally, ed. 2005. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. 7th edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2. Prozesky, S et al. 2008. This round and delicious globe. Study Guide for EED202K. University of South Africa Press. 3. Lee, H. 1960. To kill a mockingbird. Heinemann. 4. Tutorial letter EED202K/101/3/2012. University of South Africa Press. 5. Davey, B & Nonkwelo N. 2011. Second impression. Literature Study Guide. To kill a mockingbird by Harper Lee. Maskew Miller Longman. 6. <http://www.gradesaver.com/to-kill-a-mockingbird/lesson-plan/>