

# Stereotypes and discrimination in the novel "to kill a mocking bird"

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



To Kill a Mocking Bird “ Cry about the simple hell people give other people- without even thinking” My considered opinion of this novel in the light of this comment. If Harper Lee had limited her portrayal of prejudice and discrimination merely to the trial of Tom Robinson, a victim of the most virulent form of racial prejudice, “ To Kill a Mockingbird” would probably be little more than a historical footnote. Wisely, though, Lee manages to tie racial prejudice to the many other forms of prejudice we all face every day of our life.

Remarkably, the novel begins by focusing not on the racial prejudice that dominates much of the story but, instead, on the kind of insidious prejudice endured by those who dare to be different in a small-town neighborhood. While Scout’s early description of Boo seems comical on its face, it takes on very different connotations when we realize that this prejudice reinforces the harsh punishment inflicted on Arthur “ Boo” Radley by his domineering father: Inside the house lived a malevolent phantom. People said he existed, but Jem and I had never seen him.

People said he went out at night when the moon was down, and peeped in windows. When people's azaleas froze in a cold snap, it was because he had breathed on them. Any stealthy small crimes committed in Maycomb were his work. Once the town was terrorized by a series of morbid nocturnal events: people's chickens and household pets were found mutilated; although the culprit was Crazy Addie, who eventually drowned himself in Barker's Eddy, people still looked at the Radley Place, unwilling to discard their initial suspicions.

Obviously Scout and her older brother Jem, because they are young, are not immune to the kind of ridiculous prejudice that follows those who, for one reason or another, are different from those around them. Jem describes Boo as dining “ on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that's why his hands were blood-stained—if you ate an animal raw, you could never wash the blood off. ” While this kind of prejudice may be more predominant in small town neighbourhoods it is also displayed in our own neighbourhoods toward those who are “ different. Thanks to revelations like Miss Maudie’s comment that if Boo was not crazy “... he should be by now. The things that happen to people behind closed doors, what secrets---" the reader slowly realizes that Boo has been the victim of child abuse, or at least child neglect. Because of her prejudice, though, Scout is unable to recognize that Boo expresses his fondness for her and Jem by leaving them gifts: Jem let me do the honors: I pulled out two small images carved in soap. One was the figure of a boy; the other wore a crude dress. Before I remembered that there was no such thing as hoodooing, I shrieked and threw them down.

Jem snatched them up. " What's the matter with you? " he yelled. He rubbed the figures free of red dust. " These are good," he said. " I've never seen any these good. " He held them down to me. They were almost perfect miniatures of two children. The boy had on shorts, and a shock of soapy hair fell to his eyebrows. I looked up at Jem. A point of straight brown hair kicked downwards from his part. I had never noticed it before. Jem looked from the girl-doll to me. The girl-doll wore bangs. So did I. " These are us," he said. " Who did 'em, you reckon? " " Who do we know around here who whittles? he asked. And later, when Boo covers her with a blanket during the fire, this

simple act of kindness nearly causes Scout to faint " Thank who? " I asked. " Boo Radley. You were so busy looking at the fire you didn't know it when he put the blanket around you. " My stomach turned to water and I nearly threw up when Jem held out the blanket and crept toward me. It is not only those who are stereotyped who are victims of prejudice; the very ones who are prejudiced also suffer not only because they cannot see the truth but because they are denied the possibility of benefiting from the relationship.

Scout realizes throughout the novel that she, too, is the victim of another form of prejudice, though she is not sophisticated enough at first to realize it is discrimination: Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of my attire. I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches; when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn't supposed to be doing things that required pants. Aunt Alexandra's vision of my deportment involved playing with small stoves, tea set, and wearing the Add-A-Pearl necklace she gave me when I was born; furthermore, I should be a ray of sunshine in my father's lonely life.

Scout suffers because she is a " tomboy" and does not fit others' stereotypes of what little Southern girls should act like. However, she does realize the prejudice against women when she goes to Calpurnia's church and hears the minister's sermon: Again, as I had often met in my own church, I was confronted with the Impurity of Women doctrine that seemed to preoccupy all clergymen. It seems remarkable that such sexism can pervade the very churches where women seem to be the staunchest supporters. After all, it's

not pure coincidence that every small town seems to need both a church and a bar, now is it?

Of course, the reason these forms of prejudice are often overlooked in this novel is that the racism that dooms Tom Robinson when he tries to help Mayella Ewell is much more dramatic. Though racial discrimination seems most virulent at the Ewell's level, all levels of Southern society seem infected with this disease. Even Atticus' immediate family is prejudiced: Grandma [aunt Alexandra] says it's bad enough he lets you all run wild, but now he's turned out a nigger-lover we'll never be able to walk the streets of Maycomb again.

He's ruinin' the family, that's what he's doin. Even educated people, or at least people who should be educated, like Scout's teacher, are prejudiced and totally unaware of it. There is irony, but it is a dark irony when Miss Gates discusses Hitler: Then Miss Gates said, " That's the difference between America and Germany. We are a democracy and Germany is a dictatorship," she said. " Over here we don't believe in persecuting anybody. Persecution comes from people who are prejudiced. Pre-judice," she enunciated carefully. There are no better people in the world than the Jews, and why Hitler doesn't think so is a mystery to me. " Adolphus Raymond, the white aristocrat who pretends to be drunk so that people will overlook the fact that he is living with a black woman, summarizes the effects this prejudice has on the black people of the South: Cry about the simple hell people give other people-- without even thinking. Cry about the hell white people give coloured folks, without even stopping to think that they're people, too.

For many readers, the most shocking moment in the book comes when they realize that for the townspeople of Maycomb Tom Robinson's greatest crime, even worse than being caught in the room with a white woman, may well be that he felt sorry for Mayella Ewell: " Yes Suh. I felt right sorry for her, she seemed to try more'n the rest of 'em--" " You felt sad for her, you felt sorry for her? " Mr. Gilmer seemed ready to rise to the ceiling. The witness realized his mistake and shifted uncomfortable in the chair. But the damage was done. Below us, nobody liked Tom Robinson's answer. Mr. Gilmer paused a long time to let it sink in.

In Maycomb a black was not allowed to ever feel sorry for a white person because that would suggest that somehow he felt superior to a white. Atticus Finch seems one of a relatively few white people who are able to see the injustice done to blacks and to realize that there will one day be a terrible price to pay for this injustice: 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. Atticus was speaking so quietly his last word crashed on our ears. I looked up, and his face was vehement. " There's nothing more sickening to me than a low-grade white man who'll take advantage of a Negro's ignorance. Don't fool yourselves-it's all adding up and one of these days we're going to pay the bill for it. I hope it's not in your children's time. If Harper Lee had focused just on Tom Robinson's trial, some readers could simply argue that such discrimination is merely a historical phenomena, that rehashing history unnecessarily stirs up emotions best forgotten.

By combining all of these kinds of discrimination, though, Harper Lee explores the very roots of stereotyping and the discrimination that inevitably results from such stereotyping. No one can deny that such discrimination continues and that we are the poorer because of it. It is only constant vigilance and, most of all, empathy for our fellow man that can ever overcome this natural, but unfortunate, tendency to misjudge the "other," those who are different than we are. Bibliography: ? To Kill a Mockingbird movie ? To Kill a Mockingbird reading book ? Oxford dictionary