

# Harper lee's "to kill a mocking bird" essay sample



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## Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mocking Bird" Essay Sample

Harper Lee, the American author grew up in the town of Monroeville, Alabama in the depression of the 1930s. The town has physically changed little since the thirties; many original buildings such as the courthouse and jailhouse still stand. However, these buildings are no longer used for their original purposes - they have become tourist attractions, viewed by visitors from across the world. But why do these people choose to visit Monroeville?

The answer lies in a book, Harper Lee's 'To Kill a Mockingbird'. This is an account of a childhood in 'Maycomb,' a thinly disguised Monroeville, told from the point of view of Jean-Louse Finch. The book was written in the early 1960's and is divided into two parts, the first of which gives an overall view of the community, and the second concentrates on a court case, in which many members of the community show their true prejudices towards the black community.

Prejudice is very apparent within Maycomb, although it is not only the obvious racial prejudice. There are prejudices against families, against individuals and against those of different faiths and classes of the community. One of the reasons for the divisions within the society is that the population is very static, with many families living on the same site for generations.

Two of the most important families in the story are the Ewells and the Cunninghams, these both have prejudices held against them by the wider community, but a closer look shows that the two families are very different. Both families have very similar financial situations, struggling to survive

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during the Depression. Although similar in some aspects, both have very different attitudes towards the community in which they reside. The Cunninghams are portrayed as poor and uneducated, but overall honest, decent, civilised and respectful of the community around them. The Ewells are also poor and uneducated, but a total contrast in the other respects, living 'like animals', with little care or respect for the society in which they live.

An example of this difference occurs on the first day when children from each of the families attend the school. Walter Cunningham is described as having 'a clean shirt and freshly mended overalls' whereas Scout describes Burris Ewell as 'the filthiest human I had ever seen.' Walter Cunningham's parents have evidently tried to make Walter make the best of his education, and have cleaned his clothes and mended his overalls in order for him to make a good impression. Bob Ewell has taken a different approach, as he believes that the children are required at home to work. 'They come first day every year, and then leave' 'the truant lady give up tryin' to hold 'em'

However, although the Ewells are seen as the lowest class of the white community, the second part of the book brings Bob Ewell into a courtroom situation attempting to prosecute Tom Robinson, a member of the black community, defended by Atticus Finch. Although the evidence suggests that Tom Robinson is innocent, the entire jury finds him guilty. Bob Ewell, despite the being seen as no better than dirt, is still believed and respected more than Tom Robinson.

A similar contrast is found between another two families, the Finch family, and Dill's family, the Harris family. The Depression has not affected these as much as the Ewells and Cunninghams, and they are probably two of the most wealthy families in the story. However, the contrast occurs in the parent/child relationships. As a family, the Finches are very close. There are very few points in the story where there is any friction between Atticus and the children, and mainly they work together. Dill is solitary, a 'pocket Merlin' who is independent from his family. He likes the Finch household due to the relaxed atmosphere and the obvious love between Atticus and the children.

Two of the most important characters in the novel are the adults that the children learn from throughout. These are Jem and Scout's father, lawyer Atticus, and their household servant, the black Calpurnia. Atticus has a strong sense of morality and community, risking his life on many occasions to save lives. On one of these occasions, Atticus risks his life to shoot a rabid dog, in another he puts himself at risk to rescue furniture from a neighbour's burning home. In the second part of the book, Atticus is defending Tom Robinson in the previously mentioned trial. Before the trial, Tom Robinson is moved to the jail in Maycomb. Atticus is prepared to risk his life to protect Robinson from a 'lynch mob', ignoring the advice from other citizens of the town.

One of Atticus' main philosophies in life is that 'you never understand someone properly until you climb into their skin and walk around in it.' This image is repeated throughout the narrative, and is very appropriate considering that one of the many themes of the book is racial prejudice. This

is one of the many things that Atticus attempts to teach the children, an attempt to bring them up unprejudiced towards other people.

Calpurnia is not genetically related to Scout but acts as a mother, teaching Scout to read and even giving her a view of the black community, by taking her to the ' First Purchase African ME church.' Calpurnia is influential in Scout's infant life. One of the most obvious points in the book occurs when Scout criticises Walter Cunningham, and attempts to redeem herself by saying, " he's just a Cunningham." Calpurnia replies, " don't matter who they are...don't let me catch you remarkin' on their ways like you was so high and mighty." This incident shows that, like Atticus, Calpurnia believes that all people should be treated equally, irrespective who they are.

One of the important parts of the backdrop to the story is the history of Maycomb itself. As with many of the southern states, less than a century before the story is set, black Africans were brought to the area as slaves. Even after they were freed, many people regarded black people as inferior or subhuman. There were also other problems for the freed slaves and their descendants. They were forced to find employment as servants and many were badly treated and paid very little. However, there were no alternatives, so black people had to continue living as slaves to receive any income.

Overall, ' To Kill a Mocking Bird' presents a realistic and poignant view of a Southern American town during the years of the depression. The child's view gives an innocent and mainly unbiased view of events and characters, and emphasises the obvious prejudices and injustices occurring due to the colour

of a person's skin, the social class of their parents, their education, or their ideologies, beliefs or principles.

The underlying message from the story can be indicated in one sentence, said by Dolphus Raymond while contemplating the trial of Tom Robinson, 'Cry about the simple hell people give ... folks, without even thinking that they're people too.'