

# "to kill a mockingbird" – novel of contrasts essay sample

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## **“ To Kill a Mockingbird” – Novel of Contrasts Essay Sample**

Harper Lee’s tragic and dramatic novel, “ To Kill a Mocking Bird”, is one of many contrasts. This enlightening novel sees the stamina of one man pushed to the limit when fighting for justice against a prejudice and hypocritical town. These contrasts are illustrated through Lee’s successful use of juxtaposition, in many key scenes, narration and most particularly characterisation.

Foremost, characterisation is used throughout this prose to clearly demonstrate contrasts, immediately shown through the dehumanising description of Boo Radley within the first chapter, “...his head was like a skull...” This simile initially symbolising the children’s fear and fright towards Boo. However, in contrast to this dehumanisation, Boo is re-humanised by Scout when she calls him “ Mr. Arthur”, thus highlighting the end of the division between Scout and Jem, and Boo. The portrayal of the Ewell family also aids to the contrasts of the novel. Their vivid descriptions and the way in which they believe they are above the law help us to identify with the characters of Maycomb, and therefore leave us with no option but to look down upon the Ewells. Their coward-like nature is without a doubt demonstrated through the actions of Burris Ewell. When asked to leave the classroom, he waits until he is “ safely out of range...” before

“...he turned around and shouted: report and be damned to ye!” this exclamation evidently emphasising how he is actually scared of authority but tries to reinstate his importance. This is done by raising his voice and yelling

at the teaching, shown by the exclamation mark. The behaviour of Burris is then contrasted by the chivalry of the other boys in the class when they reassure her;

“ Soon we were clustered around her desk, trying in our various ways to comfort her.” This symbolically illustrates how the rest of the boys in the class contrast Burris’ conduct.

Another feature of Lee’s prose is the extensive use of juxtaposition and symbolism, used prominently within key scenes. When there is a snowfall in Maycomb, Jem and Scout attempt to build a snowman, but with there not being enough snow, they have to find another way to craft it. Within this scene Lee uses many contrasting ideas, from the basic fact that they are building a “ snowman”, but they put “ Miss Maudies sunhat...” on it, which “ glistened with snow crystals”, thus making the snowman seem like a woman, furthermore, the juxtaposition used helps to emphasise the two opposing ideas of hot and cold.

This scene with the snowman also, importantly, symbolises the majority smothering the minority. In order to build the snowman they required “ five baskets of earth and two baskets of snow...”, by building a snowman with a foundation of earth, this clearly illustrates how the black people of Maycomb keep the town supported, and the white people – the “ snow” – are just there for the appearance, to make the town acceptable, in the 1930’s, without the earth, there is no snowman – without the black people of Maycomb, there is no Maycomb. The marginalisation between black people and white people is

further emphasised when the " Finch Negroes" are described as doing hard labour on the Finch property. This almost shocking statement clearly reveals how even the Finch family has slaves working for them, but in contrast to this, Atticus Finch defends Tom Robinson later on in the novel, therefore reinstating their position towards the top of the Maycomb hierarchy.

Finally, narrative stance is used all through this novel to great effective where contrasts are concerned. Firstly, there is a blending of child and adult, first person, narration, which, alone, contrast each other. At the start of this prose, when Scout reflects back upon her brothers football injury, she describes his fears as being " assuaged", this clearly illustrating the sophisticated dialect of an adult narrator, this is continued when Harper Lee writes " seldom self conscious", yet again adult vocabulary, sibilance, referring to how Scouts brother was rarely anxious about his injury. In contrast to the use of advanced terminology by the narrator, Scout states that her brother, Jem, could not care less, as long and he could " pass and punt", the lexical choice clearly showing the basic and uncomplicated alliteration used by the child narrator, thus juxtaposing the earlier complex phrases used by Scout, demonstrating the merging of the two narrators.

As well as these literary techniques being used to emphasise the contrasts throughout this novel, another technique used to show contrast within the novel is racial divide; used successfully to clearly illustrate the difference between the white and black people in Maycomb's hierarchy. For a black person to be considered inferior to a white person was common. When a white person defends a black person, no matter what the circumstances,

they, and any acquaintances, are completely looked down upon by society. The slaves that work on Finches Landing are referred to as " Finch negroes", this almost seems ironic that Atticus will defend a black man, Tom Robinson, yet the Finch family have black men working for them as slaves. The whole ordeal with the trial and a white man defending a black man in Maycomb almost juxtapose each other and is an evident contrast within the social structure of Lee's epic novel.

Overall, the excellently manipulated features used by Lee help to add to the understanding of the situation for Scout and many other characters at that particular time in their lives. The many contrasts, demonstrated through the use of narration; juxtaposition and symbolism; and most noticeably characterisation, add to the tension created before the trial of Tom Robinson and help us to get an understanding of the characters.