

How does chapter one prepare us for the main theme of prejudice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*...



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Harper Lee, who was born in 1926 in the southern state of Alabama, is said that as a white woman writing in the 1950's, she was perhaps expressing her views on sexism, racism and prejudice throughout the novel, as it touches on some of these issues. She symbolises important ideas using a variety of language techniques and symbolic characters such as Scout. The characterisation of Maycomb County, inhabitant families and themes show different forms of prejudice, ways in which chapter one prepares for prejudice later on in the novel.

The description of Maycomb County is both characterized and personified by using a variety of different language techniques, for example, 'flicked flies in the sweltering shade' (alliteration) and 'sagged in the square' evoke images of a hot, tired town, and too old to adjust to new ideas. It seems to be a small town, 'across the square' suggests that there isn't ever far to go to get somewhere in Maycomb. Therefore, using literal meaning in contrast to metaphorical meaning, Harper Lee has prepared us for prejudice through her use of language in describing Maycomb.

It seems to be dubbed as one unit quite frequently - 'Maycomb County had recently been told that it has nothing to fear but fear itself.' This unit seems to be exclusively structured into sections of men, women, children and black people, for example 'ladies bathed before noon' and 'men's stiff collars wilted.' It doesn't appear to be any room for individuality because of the generalisation Harper Lee has used. Therefore, a reader would perhaps prepare for a theme of prejudice because of the oppressive imagery created by the language used 'the courthouse sagged in the square' and generalisation 'Maycomb County' - one unit, one being, no room for change.

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Prejudice is also indicated by the stereotyping and categorizing families in Maycomb.

When families are referred to in the novel there is, again, generalisation - 'the Ewells started it all' and later on, the Cunninghams - 'the Cunninghams had no money to pay a lawyer.' Families are referred to as tribes rather than individual members later on in the novel. However, the stereotyping family characteristics prepare us for the theme of prejudice later on in the novel by demonstrating the fixed ideas that the inhabitants of Maycomb have.

Obviously, one of the key themes in the novel is the position of the Negroes in Maycomb County. People's opinions and awareness subconsciously communicate to the reader about how open-minded the people in the town are. At this period (1950's) black people were generally classed as second class citizens and had few rights - 'A negro would not pass the Radley place at night' and 'Calpurnia rarely commented on the ways of white people.' These comments are faint, especially as Scout is quite unbiased and doesn't show racist views, but prepares the reader for prejudice because they show how low down black people were socially in towns like Maycomb.

Later on in the novel, Calpurnia's sound judgement of a mad dog is believed by Atticus, however doubted by Eula May - '...Miss Eula May, but I know a mad dog when I see one!' Also we know that other members of the Finch family are racist as they call Atticus a 'nigger-lover'. This prepares the reader for the main theme of prejudice. The low social position of Negroes becomes far more noticeable later on in the text as Atticus defending Tom Robinson creates uproar - 'mortifying the family.' The way in which black

people were referred to as another species is similar in a way to the Radley family - another aspect of the novel which prepares us for prejudice.

The recount of the Radley legend shows more forms of prejudice. The Radley place seems cold in contrast to the features of Maycomb, but conclusions have been drawn from gossip. This is why Scout's opinion is distorted, because the gossip has been exaggerated and changed because of something that happened years ago, the Radley's are permanently alienated from society and disapproved of. People have made up their minds and are unwilling to change them. Gossip is based on looks and rumours but the liberal gossip circulating Maycomb via 'Miss Stephanie Crawford' certainly prepares us for the theme of prejudice.

Maycomb is a small town, and everyone knows everyone else's business, people are all too willing to judge, including Jem and Scout, and use what they see as disadvantages against their victims - 'Scout, you act more like a girl!' Although this is only a mild form of sexism against Scout, and will probably soon be picked up on and stopped by Atticus, it shows that even at a young age children develop defined ideas which show there will be prejudice again later on in the novel. Because of the small, prejudiced atmosphere, in contrast to Atticus' educated mind, there are permanent themes of codes of behaviour conflicting with compassion. An example of this is Atticus defending Tom Robinson, because of the gossip in Maycomb; readers are prepared for prejudice that is not only unfair but distorted too.

Harper Lee uses Scout as a narrator throughout reading back over her life when she was a young girl. It can be said that Scout is used as a symbolic

mockingbird along with Boo Radley; Scout especially, is innocent 'Atticus, what's a nigger-lover?' and is matter of fact not offensive when using racist terms. However, the use of words like 'nigger' and, alternatively 'white trash' even from an impartial perspective, prepares us for the theme of prejudice later on in the novel. It is very subtle in chapter one and Harper Lee demonstrates racism only slightly 'put him in jail alongside Negroes' rather than 'niggers' but, Scout's innocence and unbiased views just prepares us from another point of view for still existing prejudice concepts.

I conclude that the themes in chapter one such as characterisation of families, position of Negroes and Harper Lee's use of Scout as the narrator, prepares the reader for racism later on in the novel. She does this very successfully, I believe, by her use of a young white girl with an educated father who teaches her that 'it is a sin to kill a mockingbird' relates to a matter of fact.