

What does 'to kill a mockingbird' teach us about small town america in the 1930s?...



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Harper Lee's novel 'To Kill a Mockingbird' is set in the American Deep South in the mid-thirties. The story takes place in the small town of Maycomb in the state of Alabama, between 1933 and 1935. Through the young eyes of Jem and Scout Finch, we see Maycomb as a town steeped in prejudice. This manifests itself in several forms; against the black population, white women, new and different ideas and anyone who doesn't conform for example Boo Radley and Mr Raymond. It isn't just by the residents of Maycomb who are prejudiced, both the school and judicial systems are also discriminatory.

It is Jem and Scout who introduce us to the backgrounds of the people and surrounding area. On the pretext of explaining what 'started it all', Scout gives us a detailed description of how her family, the Finch family came to be settled around Maycomb and 'Simon's homestead', Finch's Landing. But it is Dill's arrival from Meridian in the summer of '33 that allows Jem and Scout to give us further information about residents of Maycomb, in particular the Radley family. It is Dill's fascination with the Radley place and its inhabitants that furnishes us with our knowledge of their dramatic history, according to 'Neighbourhood legend'. Harper Lee uses the entrance of new characters in this case Dill and Miss Caroline, Scout's schoolteacher, to continue explaining social details and introducing people and their backgrounds. The children explain the manners and behaviour of both Walter Cunningham and Burris Ewell to Miss Caroline by their surnames:

"He's one of the Ewells ma'am"

To each of the children, who have grown up in Maycomb, this description is sufficient.

Although the story is set entirely in Maycomb town, with a minimal reference outside the immediate area, Maycomb is typical of most small towns in the American South. It is described as a 'tired old town' where:

"There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County"

The main cause of this was the great Depression, which hit the world after the Wall Street Crash of 1929. The depression was a stark contrast to the 'roaring twenties' previously experienced.

America emerged from World War 1 with a strong economy. New developments in technology allowed for production methods such as the assembly line. These meant that more goods could be made quickly and they therefore became cheaper. Hire purchase agreements could be taken out, meaning that Americans could buy goods now and pay for them over a period of time. This led to increased sales but meant that most people were in debt. The economic boom led to low unemployment, high wages, and cheaper goods, which meant that people had more money to spend. In October 1929, a dramatic fall in the price of shares on the New York Stock Exchange caused thousands of businesses to collapse. The consequences were felt all over the world.

Because everybody had 'played the market' and the peak boom years of 1928-9 saw people feverishly buying shares in companies and then selling them at a later date when their value had risen, millions of ordinary

Americans were affected. The Wall Street Crash had a knock on effect. Many <https://assignbuster.com/what-does-to-kill-a-mockingbird-teach-us-about-small-town-america-in-the-1930s-essay-sample/>

people were unable to repay the money they had borrowed. By 1932, nearly half of America's banks had gone bust. People tightened their belts and bought fewer luxuries-so even more factories shut down or fired workers. Being unemployed, they in turn had less money to spend, so many more factories closed down and many more workers lost their jobs...and so it went on in a downwards spiral.

Farmers were hit badly by the depression because people no longer had money to spend on anything but the bare essentials. As Atticus tells Scout, "The Cunninghams are country folks, farmers, and the crash hit them the hardest"

Atticus allows Mr Cunningham to pay him with products from his farm; stovewood, hickory nuts, holly and turnip greens;

" As the Cunninghams had no money to pay a Lawyer, they simply paid us with what they had".

Another indication of the extent of the poverty of these people shows itself in the fact that Mr Cunningham cannot afford to send Walter to school with lunch;

" He didn't forget his lunch, he didn't have any. He had none today nor would he have any tomorrow or the next day".

It wasn't just the " country folks" that were hit badly by the depression; professional people were affected too. Atticus, a lawyer was not well off. He says that;

“ Professional people were poor because the farmers were poor”

and this was largely true.

Throughout the book, we are reminded that the role of women, though important is inferior to that of men. They do not have equal rights; not being able to serve on a jury for example;

“ Miss Maudie can't serve on a jury because she is a woman.”

and white women do not work. Scout describes the world of women as one “ where on its surface fragrant ladies rocked slowly, fanned gently, and drank cool water”. This was largely true. Women stayed at home to look after the family and manage their black servants. They fill their days with tea parties, missionary teas, and Aunt Alexandra became secretary of the Maycomb Amanuensis club. Despite a lack of occupation, “ she was never bored”. Within the Finch household, Aunt Alexandra is described as having a “ royal prerogative” to “ arrange, advise, caution, and warn”.

But Aunt Alexandra is described as being;

“ the last of her kind:

she had River-boat, boarding school manners; let any moral come along and she would uphold it; she was an incurable gossip.”

During Aunt Alexandra's missionary teas, the ladies talk of the African tribes and the “ poverty and darkness” they face. Mrs Merriweather says that;

“ right then and there I made a pledge in my heart.”

This shows us how deeply sorry she feels for the poor Mrunas. Despite this, she has no compassion or feeling for the coloured folks at home. The ladies at the missionary tea can't see what is beyond their own nose. They moan that "there's nothing more distracting than a sulky darky...just ruins your day to have one of 'em in the kitchen." she has no consideration of how they are feeling after their friend was imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit and just thinks about themselves.

Atticus does not feel the way most people do about women and their role. His liberal upbringing of Scout goes against Aunt Alexandra's views. She comes to stay with the Finches so that the children have "some feminine influence". Scout describes her as being "fanatical about my attire" because Scout likes wearing overalls. Atticus doesn't agree with the idea that just because Scout is a girl, she should be "a ray of sunshine in her father's lonely life". He tells his daughter that;

"There were already enough sunbeams in the family and to go on about my business, he didn't mind me much the way I was".

Atticus treats everybody with respect and dignity and Mrs Henry Lafayette Dubose is no exception, despite the fact that "she was vicious" and "we could do nothing to please her". When he walked past her house each evening;

"Atticus would sweep off his hat, wave gallantly to her and say, "Good evening, Mrs Dubose! You look like a picture this evening"".

When Mrs Dubose dies Atticus says that she was a “ great lady”. He says this despite the fact that “ she had her own views in things, a lot different from mine maybe”. This shows how his views of women differ greatly from society at the time. He allows women to have their own opinions and to act how they see fit. He also gives her the credit most people wouldn't have for being the “ bravest person I knew”. He uses her as an example to teach Jem;

“ I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand.”

According to Atticus, women can be courageous too.

School is seen to be important in this book. In Maycomb at the time, there was in place a rigid structure of learning, where children are only supposed to know what their teacher has taught them. This is why, when Scout turns up on the first day of school and is able to read and write, her teacher Miss Caroline is not pleased;

“ She discovered I was literate and looked at me with more than faint distaste.”

The education system used is the Dewey Decimal System and is a new way of teaching introduced at teacher training college. This teaching method requires a strict pattern of learning where every stage of education was planned, leaving no allowance for bright or struggling children. It was a very basic system of learning employed to raise standards. Instead of encouraging advanced children like Scout, everybody was expected to be at the same basic level;

" We don't write in the first grade, we print. You won't learn to write until you are in third grade."

In Maycomb reputation and background are crucial for a good position in society. Aunt Alexandra has a " preoccupation with heredity". She " was of the opinion, obliquely expressed, that the longer a family had been squatting of one patch of land the finer it was." Name, land, ownership and occupation are very important factors in Maycomb. People lived on the land of their ancestors. Atticus Finch was the first Finch to leave the Finch family homestead, Finch's Landing. He went to Montgomery to read law and Uncle Jack, his younger brother went to Boston to study medicine. Their sister Alexandra stayed at the Landing. Walter Cunningham's father was;

" willing to go hungry to keep his land and vote as he pleased."

The Ewells " had lived on the same plot of earth behind the Maycomb dump, and had thrived on country welfare money for three generations". While at school, we are introduced to Burris Ewell who was " the filthiest human I had ever seen". Twice during Scout's first day at school, someone is introduced by their surname only; Burris Ewell and Walter Cunningham. This shows the great influence that your surname had over you character. The type of person you were was pre-determined by your surname. Burris is introduced to Miss Caroline by Little Chuck Little;

" He's one of the Ewells...disgrace of Maycomb". Scout says " there was indeed a caste system in Maycomb". This is clear from the way that;

“ the older citizens, the present generation of people who have lived side by side for years and years, were utterly predictable to one another: they took for granted attitudes, character shading, even gestures, as having been repeated in each generation and refined by time. Thus the dicta No Crawford Minds His Own Business, Every Third Merriweather Is Morbid, The Truth Is Not in the Delafields, All the Burfords Walk Like That, were simple guides to daily living; never take a cheque from a Delafield without a discreet call to the bank; Miss Maudie Atkinson’s shoulder stoops because she was a Burford; if Mrs Grace Merriweather sips gin out of a Lydia E. Pinkham bottles it’s nothing unusual- her mother did the same.

Everybody knew that the Haverfords were “ synonymous with jackass” and “ The Cunningham’s never took anything they can’t pay back”.

Racial prejudice is the central theme of the book. Its title ‘ To Kill a Mockingbird’ refers to something Atticus says when Scout and Jem are given air rifles for Christmas;

“ Shoot all the Bluejays you want, if you can hit ‘em, but remember it’s a sin to kill a Mockingbird.”

This theory can be applied to life. In the metaphor, the Bluejays are the white people and the Mockingbirds are the coloured folks. Scout tells us this later in the book;

“ Atticus says cheating a coloured man is ten times worse than cheating a white man.... It’s the worst thing you can do”. Therefore it is a sin to kill a mockingbird and this is exactly what happens in the book.

In thirties America, blacks and whites were segregated in everyday life as well as public facilities. All the coloured folks lived outside the boundaries of the town in an area called the Quarters. The black community had their own church, the First Purchase African M. E. Church so called because it was paid for from the first earnings of the freed slaves. The coloured church was not treated respectfully by the white population;

“ Negroes worshipped in it on Sundays and white men gambled in it on weekdays”. This quote shows that the white folks committed sins, gambling is against the 10 commandments, in a building that is Holy to coloured folks. The black people are also not allowed to sit with the white people in the courthouse. They had their own balcony which “ ran along three walls of the courtroom like a second-storey veranda.” The hatred and racial tension are shown when Mr Ewell beats up his daughter Mayella for kissing a black man, Tom Robinson. This is the crux of the book and the story is based on how the trial and aftermath effects the white citizens, the black citizens and the family of the white lawyer appointed to defend Tom Robinson. Emphasis is put on the legal system that tries Tom and the different rules it applies to blacks and whites. Atticus says that;

“ In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins.”

The reason for this is that “ people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury box.” The courtroom was only racist because the jury was racist. More evidence of racism can be seen in the antics of the lynch mob that turned up the evening before the trial to kill Tom Robinson. Atticus was

there, but it “ took an eight-year-old child to bring 'em to their senses”.

Scout reminded them that Atticus and themselves were the same- normal people. They had no reason to hurt Atticus and Scout made the men “ stand in my shoes”. It is the jury's racial prejudice that affects the outcome of the trial. Atticus tells Jem that they had lost the case because;

“ Those are twelve reasonable men in everyday life, Tom's jury, but you saw something come between them and reason”. The ' something' Atticus is talking about is their prejudice against Negroes. According to Miss Maudie, there is “ only a handful of people in this town who say that fair play is not marked White only; the handful of people who say a fair trial is for everybody, not just us; the handful of people with enough humility to think, there but for the Lord's kindness am I”. Miss Maudie is one of those “ handful of people”, she is not prejudice and admire Atticus for what he has done for Tom. She says that these people are “ the handful of people with background”. This is another definition of background and it makes a smaller group of people with a good background.

The racial prejudice in Maycomb is so intense that even Atticus knows that there is no chance that Tom will be acquitted at the trial, but that they might have a chance at the appeal. Despite this, it was a close thing. Miss Maudie says;

“ Atticus Finch won't win, he can't win, but he's the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that”. She says that they are making a “ step- it's just a baby step, but it's a step”. She thinks that change

is occurring. This case had made people think and maybe, just maybe life was going to improve for the coloured folks.

Although it is racial prejudice that is the main issue in this book, other forms of prejudice are mentioned, religious prejudice for example. Miss Maudie is told that " her and her flowers were going to hell" because the foot-washers that said it believe that anything that is a pleasure is a sin and that Miss Maudie spent too much time outside in her garden and " not enough time inside reading the Bible".

As well as showing the prejudice and hatred of the adults in Maycomb, the book also shows that the children do not have the ridged views of their parents. The whole world of their parents is a puzzle to Jem and Scout. As the book progress and Jem grows up, he understands the adult world more and is constantly trying to persuade Scout to do what is expected of her and " not to antagonise Aunty". Mr Raymond who was shunned by the white population because he's " got a coloured women and all sorts of mixed chillun", tells Dill and Scout his secret. He is always to be seen drinking out of a brown paper bag. Inside he is supposed to have " a Coca-Cola bottle full of whisky in there", but as he reveals to Dill and Scout, it is just plain Coca-Cola. When asked by Scout why he does " like you do", he tells her that " some folks don't like the way I live.... I try to give 'em a reason". This shows how unjust society in Maycomb is; a man can't live how he wants to without justifying his actions;

“ folks can say Dolphus Raymond’s in the clutches of whisky- that’s why he won’t change his ways. He can’t help himself, that’s why he lives the way he does”.

Mr Raymond epitomises the idea that as you grow up you take on your parent’s views when he explains to Dill that;

“ things haven’t caught up with that one’s instinct yet. Let him get a little older and he won’t get sick and cry. Maybe things’ll strike him as being- not quite right, say, but he won’t cry, not when he gets a few years on him”. This also shows how not all adults do not notice that things are “ not quite right” but they don’t do anything about it.

Atticus explains to Jem why the jury found Tom Robinson guilty;

“ Atticus had used every tool available to save Tom Robinson, but in the secret courts of men’s hearts Atticus had no case. Tom was a dead man the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth and screamed”.

It is when Jem and Scout are trying to figure out the difference between them and Walter Cunningham. With child-like innocence Scout comes to the conclusion that there is “ only one kind of folks. Folks”. She can’t see the difference between blacks and whites, Finches and Cunninghams, smart people and slow people. Jem, with his newly acquired wisdom says “ I used to think that way when I was your age”. Despite this, he can’t answer his questions, “ if there’s just one kind of folks, why can’t they get along with each other? If they’re all alike, why do they go out their way to despise each other?”. These are very natural questions and ones that can’t be answered,

even today. These questions form the basis of the book and the unjustness of the way Tom Robinson is treated.

The new generation of Jem, Scout and Dill are much more open-minded than the older generation in Maycomb. "So far nothing in life has interfered with your reasoning", a father's words when trying to explain why men who are reasonable in everyday life become blind, prejudiced and unjust. Despite this, a change is occurring in the adults, it was a Cunningham who delayed the verdict. The mob that had tried to lynch Tom Robinson the night before was now partly responsible for the jury verdict taking so long. The change that is visible within the deep-set manners of the older generation is a sign that progress is on the way.