

To kill a mockingbird is racist, and here's why

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For decades, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been assigned reading for scores of high school students, meant to shed light on the brutality of racism, meant to instill tolerance with its story, narrated by little Scout Finch. Upon Lee's passing in February 2016, A-list celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Stephen King praised the novel and its impact on understanding race in America. There's only one problem — the book itself is terribly racist. Most ardent fans of the novel will refute this claim with great fervor. For many, though, the revelation that Atticus Finch, arguably the "hero" of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was deeply racist, will come as no surprise. There's his hateful bigotry in the sequel to *TKAM*, *Go Set a Watchman*.

A closer examination of the original, however, proves that Atticus was always racist, as are many of the other characters in the book. One need not even examine the characters themselves, however, to learn that, in its treatment of the black characters, the book itself is racist. There are several black characters in the book, none of whom are given any more than a cursory glance. We never get to see their inner lives, never get a glimpse of who they really are. From the housekeeper/nanny Calpurnia, to the wife of wrongly-accused Tom Robison (and Tom himself), these characters are wispy-thin, not at all as compelling as they could have been if they were given any more than the slightest of nods.

Even as a self-involved tenth-grader, I ached to know how Tom's death affected his wife and children, but Lee never let us see. I longed to know more about Calpurnia. Who was she? What was her life like outside the Finch household? Aside from a couple of casual references, and a scene in her church, we'll never know. Then of course there are the bigoted residents of

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Maycomb, who Lee treats with contempt. Why, if she tells us how hateful and wrong these people are - the Cunninghams, old Mrs.

Dubose, the entire Ewell clan - does she allow Atticus to be racist? When Scout uses the n-word, and Atticus reprimands her, he doesn't tell her it's a cruel or hateful thing to say, he merely tells her it's "common." His defense of Tom Robinson, which fans of the book point to as proof of his enlightenment, was pathetic at best. He doesn't do any of the things we'd all recognize as humanizing a defendant: he doesn't give the jury any information about who Tom is. He just defends Tom by being a white defense attorney, putting his own reputation on the line. In other words, he doesn't encourage anyone to actually take the advice he gave to Scout, to "climb into his skin and walk around in it."

Atticus wants Tom to be found innocent, but rather than relying on the tried-and-true tactics of a defense attorney, he wants the white, male jury to find Tom innocent because he, another white male, was defending him — his word ought to be enough to convince them. And when it isn't, when Tom is found guilty, what changes in the lives of everyone else in Maycomb?

Nothing. Order is mostly restored, except of course when Mr. Ewell attacks the children. It's this "nothing has really changed" end of the book that truly puts the final touch of racism on To Kill a Mockingbird.

Though Lee had a fantastic opportunity to launch into a series of scenes that would have sent a message of greater racial understanding, instead she pushes the characters and the plot arc into familiar territory: white, paternalistic, "safe." Nothing changes in their lives, and, if you read the

sequel, nothing was ever really meant to. There's no denying that To Kill a Mockingbird is a great American novel, giving readers a true taste of what life was like for a middle-class young white person in the segregated south. If anything, Atticus Finch is an even more interesting character because he isn't perfect; the story itself is deeper and has more meaning when examined through the lens of the racial divide we're still experiencing today. But it's certainly not a novel that can be celebrated as racially enlightening, because clearly it is anything but.