

To what extent is 'to kill a mockingbird' a critique of the values promoted in ma...

[Sociology](#), [Racism](#)



To what extent is 'To Kill A Mockingbird' a critique of the values promoted in Maycomb society? Maycomb County is its own little world, made of real people but it reflects the wider world of America in terms of its attitudes, issues and characters. It, the microcosm which reflects the macrocosm of America, such as the way blacks are regarded and treated. The story is told from a viewpoint of a growing 6 year old child, Scout Finch. So we are seeing situations from an innocent 'eye', 'she looked and smelled like a peppermint drop' after the misinforming way the child regards adults and the way they act and talk. This sober judgement is a truth to be understood by all young people because they don't understand certain things in life. For example recognising the quality of their parents, such as when Atticus had the 'best shot in the county' with the mad dog incident. Scout discovers values of Atticus, which develops her respect for him. Scout doesn't understand why ladies disapprove of the manner of her growing up, 'Jean Louise stop scratching your head,' and also why Atticus is very strict in what's right and wrong. This again highlights her innocence and that she'll soon learn to discover that things change in life and one must accept them. Scout represents how people develop attitudes because of a lack of knowledge. For example, she imagines Boo Radley being a 'malevolent phantom' which is based purely on hearsay. She comes to learn that people can be different yet there need be no prejudice against them. This is shown by the way she grew to understand Boo Radley and really she's teaching a lesson to the community through the words and visions of the writer. This idea is portrayed in the New Testament where children, without prejudging through their innocence, show adults the way they should act. Scouts point

of view idealises the belief in power of the Law but the reality is that the Law failed Tom Robinson, ' Guilty...Guilty...Guilty.' We see how savage, normally reasonable adults can be when they came as a lynching party to prison. As in the book, the ' Lord of the Flies', we are shown that civilization is only a thin veneer and just below the surface people are savage and vicious. ' You know what we want get aside from the door Mr Finch,' was quoted by a member of the lynch mob. It is interesting how the author is the innocent child throughout the novel, as there is hope on one side for a better world with the next generation, but a fear that when the child will grow, she may turn into the character of other adults and so lose her innocence. Hope is also indicated for the black community where, if lucky, had white people beginning to openly support them. At that time, however, the feeling was not strong enough and the accused black man was doomed to be condemned before the trial even started. For example, when Atticus forcefully showed that Tom was innocent and that the Ewells were lying, with proof, the verdict was still going to be guilty and the reader certainly gets the feeling of white supremacy when Tom was shot in prison. This shows that it is victimisation as there was no ' absence of any corroborative evidence.' The white ladies of Maycomb society were a very typical group of hypocritical gossips. The majority belonged to the Missionary society in which gossip would be rife. For example when they lamented over an African tribe called the Mrunas and their living conditions, it led to a discussion about how ungrateful the women believe Maycomb's African-American community is. ' Her eyes were always filled with tears... those poor Mrunas...not a white person will go near em,' however, they were failing to see that they have their own brand of

racial discrimination happening in their daily lives. This is highlighted in the set out of Maycomb town. Through segregation, the blacks lived on one side of the ' railway track' and the whites on another. This also applied to the churches that the citizens attended. We know this owing to Scout and Jem's experience to the ' colored' church, escorted by their black cook Calpurnia. Harper Lee presents the black people in a better light, which is true as we see the jury, lynch mob and most certainly the Ewells being anything but nice. On the other side, Calpurnia, the firm boss of her own kitchen has respect from Atticus and is an almost surrogate mother. She leads a ' double life' with the white and black communities and is accorded respect by the ones who care and gives respect in return. The ladies feel that it is their duty to start to influence Scout to behave more ' lady like' as we see with Scouts and Aunt Alexandra's conversations. But even here, we see them being very human and real as with the sharp-tongued Mrs. Dubose, until Jem learns a very important lesson about life, about not judging people unless you know their circumstances. ' You never really know a person until you stand and walk around in its shoes.' We, as teenagers, relate to Scout in objecting to what is seen as the fussy interference of the ladies. But as time goes by and Scout accepts more and more, she is beginning to evolve into being a new lady. This reflects Atticus' splendid way of bringing his children up and explaining issues and morals to be learnt, ' just remember that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird' even though they are criticised by Aunt Alexandra. It is a measure of successful parenting that society tolerated these ladies in such a dignified way. Education is a key value that is criticised too. One lady in particular was singled out for a critical portrait and that was the

schoolteacher of Scout who should have known better. Mrs. Caroline Fisher objected that Scout had been taught to read at home and therefore wanted her to start afresh than building on whatever had been done. ' When Miss. Caroline threatened...' The ' ladies' will become an increasing influence on Scout on the absence of her mother; they mean well and wish to be of use, but they find it difficult to move away from their traditional attitudes of the South, which saw slavery as an unchallenged way of life and white superiority is the norm. This has been so true of school teachers over the years, who don't want parents to interfere with education and it is only recently that a more open attitude has been shown by the education profession where they will encourage and build on skills for the more able. The people of Maycomb were like any other American community at that time. They were entrenched in racial prejudice, where an accused black man was presumed to be guilty. For all of Atticus' logical demonstration that Tom could not have raped Mayella and that it was most probably her father who assaulted her when he was drunk, the jury convicted Tom. Scout was disturbed and confused by this but Atticus advised her, ' It's not okay to hate anybody'. This was not the only criticism to be levelled at the adults of Maycomb. There was much debate about Hitler and his oppression of the Jews. Such segregation was seen as wrong. In fact Miss Gates explained democracy with ' Equal rights for all, special privileges for none', and stated ' We are a democracy', without recognising the racial oppression in her home town. Maycomb was certainly a town of the South with its serious, atmospheric court room, segregating black and white, ' colored balcony,' and its slow pace of life which was reflected by the drawling dialects of the

speakers, ' yes suh...no comment,' which again showed how the people had search into accepted ways of life. Another deep, but understandable prejudice by the adults was the way they considered Boo Radley. Scout created in her mind a vision of a monster for this recluse, ' it's because he wants to stay inside.' The adults were not so different in their views, apart from Atticus, for they allowed all sorts of stories to develop purely because he was different and didn't fit in. Fear may be the reason, ignorance certainly is a cause. Scout had a sufficiently open mind to allow a new awareness to develop about this kind, quiet man. Her understanding led to his rescuing from the Ewell's attack. Scout comes to realise and understand that persecuting Boo would truly be ' like killing a Mockingbird.' What sort of world Harper Lee was portraying and how true to life was it really? What sort of world did she want to portray? Harper Lee had a vision of the world, similar to Martin Luther King who was influenced by this book. Lee ' had a dream' where there was no prejudice against those who were different physically and mentally, for example with Tom Robinson and Boo Radley, one was a ' nigger' and the other was ' white' and one ' mockingbird' was ' shot' and the other ' mockingbird' was forced to kill. There would be no prejudice in terms of race and only be, ' one kinda folks. Folks.' Also the relevance of Atticus's belief in Calpurnias dignity and how he had no prejudice against women generally, ' listen to your aunt' is shown. Lee saw a world which was based on respect for a set of Laws that protected the vulnerable, would be followed, and which would allow a way of life where reason would overcome emotional prejudice. For example ' Somehow Atticus had hit her hard in a way that was not clear to me, but it gave him no

pleasure to do so', shows he never humiliated Mayella Ewell but felt sorry as he realised that she had been raped by her father. Very positive visions in reality have all too often negative manifestations, but the hope was that things would improve in the future. Lee presents the speech of the characters in their own dialect. For example, the attitude of the white people to the blacks is shown when they refer to them as 'niggers' or 'darkies'; these emotive words would be disapproved of today. This language suggests the character of the speaker and Judge Taylor cautions Bob Ewell for his bad language in court. In contrast, Miss Maudie uses rather posh language when Jem offered her some chewing gum. 'Chewing gum cleaved to her palate and rendered her speechless.' This language fascinated Jem. Calpurnia at one stage turns to black grammar and Scout comments on her change from white standard English and asks 'Cal...Why do you talk nigger talk?' The most important feature of the language is shown by two of the characters. Atticus is very serious as would be expected from a lawyer in court. 'She has merely broken a rigid and time-honored code of our society, a code so severe that whoever breaks it is hounded from our midst as unfit to live with.' He does not do this to show off but because his way of life demands precise language, which is calm and reasoned. The other person is Scout who is the narrator. The language she uses is adult in style, because Scout is recounting memories of her childhood. This is a very clever technique carried out by Lee because it allows her to ask questions about the adults in Maycomb and to show how puzzled she is by what goes on. For example, her narration leads into Atticus explaining to Jem why Mrs. Dubose is so bad-tempered and yet should be understood. Scout's misunderstanding about

her world and the adult's, usually to humorous situations, but it also draws us, the reader, into her world where she observes Maycomb and its people. Lee presents the vision for a better future through Scout's open minded innocence and Atticus's words. We, like Scout are caught up in his conversations and come to realise, as did Scout, that ' it was not until many years later that I realised he wanted me to hear every word he said.'