

To what extent is "to kill a mockingbird" a novel about social barriers? essay sa...

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



## **To What Extent is “ To Kill A Mockingbird” a Novel about Social Barriers? Essay Sample**

The source of this quotation is from the novel, ' To Kill A Mocking-Bird', by Harper Lee. It is relevant to this extended piece of writing as the essay is based on social barriers. The quotation clearly shows that there are barriers between these families. In this community there is a hierarchy of class, as summarised by Jem: the Finches and their neighbours represent the White middle class, the Cunninghams who are the badly hit farming community, the Ewells who are classed as the lowest form of the White community (commonly known as White Trash), and the Black community who are automatically seen as inferior.

These families are representative of the different socio-economic statuses in the novel. However by far the most marked social divide in Maycomb and, indeed throughout the Southern states of America was one of race. This racial divide, its origins dating back to the slave trade, was further exacerbated when the Civil War ended, the result of which was the so-called freeing of the oppressed slaves. This had a devastating effect on the nation. Before the Civil War, many Black Americans were sold and bought as slaves and were naturally considered inferior. After the Civil War, slavery in the Black community was abolished changing the legal position of the Blacks. However there were still many Black servants. In the novel, for example Calpurnia, a black woman, is a housemaid in the Finch family. Black Americans at that time found decent employment hard to find, as they were still considered little better than slaves. White middle-class families, who

pitied them, indeed found them to be subordinate, and employed many of them. Even though their legal status changed, to many White people, Blacks were still thought to be inferior and lower class. Indeed, although seventy years or so had passed since the end of the Civil War, the social climate in the novel appears to have changed little.

' To Kill A Mockingbird' is set in a fictitious town in the Southern States of America, Maycomb. Maycomb was a small town, an old town that had a separate part for where the White community lived and a part that was geographically removed from the White community, in which the Negroes lived. This alone shows some sort of prejudice since the question ' why should there be two separate communities?' is immediately raised in our minds. This racial barrier echoes the lifestyle that was present during the war.

Many Whites were racist, including Aunt Alexandra; she is prejudiced towards Calpurnia, the housemaid of the Finch family, because she is a Negro. She believes that Calpurnia is a bad influence to young Scout and Jem, taking into no account that Calpurnia has been a mother figure to the children since their early childhood. When Aunt Alexandra holds her missionary tea party, the ladies talk about the black community:

...the only reason I keep her is because this depression's on and she needs her and a quarter every week she can get it.

comments one of the ladies. She pities her piteous Negro maid:

...I tell you there's nothing more distracting than a sulky darky.

Thus criticised Mrs Merriweather, one of the ladies at Aunt Alexandra's missionary tea party. The term sulky darky is used in a racist tone as they feel that the Negroes degrade them.

Mrs. Merriweather is racist, following stereotypes and tradition. The reason for her racism is that it is inbred. She has been brought up believing in a narrow-minded view and cannot, or will not, see the innocence of the Blacks. Mrs Merriweather will believe what she wants to believe, and refuses to take in others' views. This is a substantial schism between the two races. Blacks had always been regarded as lower class due to tradition and the fact that they were unimportant; they were sold and bought as objects. The Whites' attitude to the Blacks has put up a barrier between the two races. However the prejudice works both ways. The Black community also feels prejudice towards the Whites. This is experienced when Calpurnia takes the children, Scout and Jem, to her local church:

You ain't got no business bringin' white chillun here - they got their church, we got our'n.

rattles Lula, a Black lady part of the church community. Not only the Whites, but also the Blacks can reinforce the strong racial barrier, clearly shown by Lula. They both even have their own, separate, place of worship. Because the Whites have and are treating the Blacks in this unsatisfactory manner, the Blacks have built up hatred for the Whites. I feel that these two

impressions lead to a self-reinforcing circle where either side believes the other race is completely different in attitude and behaviour.

Another event that shows that the racial prejudice is so extreme is in the courthouse. The Negroes had to allow the Whites to enter the courthouse before them as if the Whites were royalty. And, in the courthouse, they have a different seating area, away from the Whites. This is a physical barrier that also reinforces the non-physical barriers, and causes the Whites and Blacks to be separate.

The case with Atticus defending Tom Robinson also shows the prejudice that is so prevalent in Maycomb at the time. Atticus's argument had proven Mayella wrong and had the jury out for a long time. But despite the evidence shown and the logic, Tom Robinson was still sentenced guilty.

...I ain't ever seen any jury decide in favour of a coloured man over a white man...

It went against the nation's zeitgeist to have a Negro sentenced innocent over a White. During the 1930's, the time in which 'To Kill a Mocking-Bird' is set, it was always the Whites that came first; Black Americans were automatically seen as the lowest of human beings. However, Dolphus Raymond is also considered as of a lower rank. He is a character in 'To Kill A Mockingbird' that is married to a coloured woman. Dolphus Raymond is a white man and has mixed race children with his wife. The whole of Maycomb does not accept his family:

...once you have a drop of Negro blood, that makes you all black.

This is the reason why Whites, including Scout and Jem, do not accept his children, let alone his wife.

They don't belong anywhere. Coloured folks won't have 'em because they're half white; white folks won't have 'em 'cause they're coloured, so they're just in-betweens, don't belong anywhere.

This shows how distinct the divisions are. You either have to be one or the other. Because the two races, Whites and Blacks, will not accept each other, they will not accept anyone if they have the smallest interest in the opposite race.

As well as a racial divide, there are many social divides in Maycomb.

Arthur Radley was not Black but he and the rest of his family were very isolated. This is because the Radley family "kept to themselves", an idiosyncrasy that was unforgivable in Maycomb. They did not go to church on Sundays but worshipped at home. "The shutters and doors of the Radley house were closed on Sundays, another matter alien to Maycomb's ways".

After an incident with the police, Arthur Radley was not seen for the next fifteen years. A rumour spread that he tried to kill his father and was soon feared by the children. He was imprisoned and alone. The barriers that are put up for Arthur Radley make it difficult for him to interact with the other characters. This is epitomised by the fear that everyone has of him and a major physical barrier, the house.

Wonder what he looks like?.

asks Dill, giving a sense of ambiguity and mystery that surrounds the Radley family. Not one person has, according to rumour entered the house. Arthur Radley seems to isolate himself from the others. From this the Radley family has made themselves known to be loners, even when Scout and Jem attempted to speak to Mr. Radley. They do not socialize at all.

The Ewells are also outsiders. The Ewells are known to be foul mouthed, ill educated and poor Whites. They are more commonly known as ' White Trash', the lowest form of the White race. They are people who lived like animals. Atticus says the Ewells had been the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations. None of them had done an honest day's work in his recollection. Because of all these facts that describe the Ewells, they too, do not associate with anyone:

...the Ewells were members of an exclusive society made up of Ewells.

Mr. Bob Ewell was permitted to hunt and trap out of season; the common folks allowed this by becoming blind to some of the Ewell's activities. No one liked the Ewells. They had unsanitary living conditions and their appearance was atrocious. The family would stand out in the crowds because they did not seem human.

The Cunninghams are also a separate group within the community and had formed the nearest thing to a gang that was ever seen in Maycomb. They are poor but are proud, dignified people; Mr. Cunningham had paid Atticus more

than what was owed: turnip greens, stove wood, a sack of hickory nuts and much more. The Cunninghams did not accept things from people that they cannot return e. g. the incident when Walter Cunningham didn't accept Miss Caroline's money for his lunch. This is what separates them from the rest of the community. They keep to themselves and do not depend on other people so much.

Atticus, one of the main characters in the novel, can also be known as an outsider, or a loner of some sort. This is because he is going against the recognised way of life in Maycomb and everyone else. It was unjust to defend a Negro against a White; to say that a Negro is innocent and that a White is guilty. Not many people supported Atticus and his beliefs that everyone is equal. Many people referred to him as a 'nigger lover'. We can say that he is an individual who is tolerant, kind, fair-minded, and courageous for defending a Negro: he isn't biased. Even though he is a man of goodness it is not recognised by his sister, Aunt Alexandra, and her fellow friends:

...Mr. Finch, there ain't nothin' you can do now, so there ain't no use tryin'.

comments one of the ladies, implying that there would be no point in even trying to prove the Negro wrong as the White race will be put in first position.

This novel, 'To Kill A Mocking-Bird', has similarities to another novel, Of Mice and Men. Of Mice and Men was set around the same time period, the 1930's, and so thus will have similar situations of class distinctions amongst the



people. There are similarities in that the character Crooks is like Tom Robinson, and that Lennie resembles Scout.

Crooks is a Negro and resembles Tom Robinson, because they are both of Black race and have social and physical disabilities. They are both treated very differently because they are not White, and both have a separate living area to the Whites. These two physical features reinforce the barriers that are present between the blacks and the whites, taking into account that they are physical and social.

Lennie resembles Scout, as they are both very observant and very curious, ignoring the fact that they are both of different age groups. Despite the large age difference, they both have childlike minds and are unaware of the racial difference. Scout and Lennie both have their own role model, Scout having Atticus, and Lennie having George. From the person they look up to, they both learn morals throughout their life. In both the novels, a White goes and visits the opposite race: Scout visits the Negroes and Lennie visits Crooks.

We have seen that these prejudices and divisions are very much due to tradition and stereotypes. The black community isn't treated with respect because they were known as slaves and this novel portrays the unfairness between the two races. Reading 'To Kill A Mocking-Bird' may make one feel that there is a lot of prejudice and separation during the 1930's. Even though the Blacks were thought to be unfriendly and inhuman, Harper Lee makes them out to be very warm and loving indeed. We see Calpurnia to be knowledgeable by the way she has brought up Atticus's children, showing

that she is loving; she has brought up the children in such a way that Scout recognises as a mother figure. She is definitely not a bad influence on them and does not show signs of racial discrimination, to the children or Atticus.

Harper Lee has also made us see that Tom Robinson is not guilty of the rape charge and that he too is innocent and also caring. It was highly unlikely at the time for the Blacks to pity the Whites as the Whites treated the Blacks so badly that they despised the Whites. However Tom Robinson did feel sorry for Mayella Ewell. Even though he was being accused of a crime that he didn't commit and was deemed guilty, Tom Robinson felt sympathy for Mayella. Harper Lee has used this novel and the fact that there was prejudice to give out a positive effect. It has made us see that the Negroes aren't what the Whites had thought they are. In fact we see a more caring and gentle side to the Black community.

In 'To Kill A Mockingbird', there are a lot of racial inequalities, however the author has cleverly used this fact to give out a positive effect. The White race was thought to be at the top of the hierarchy and that they were superior in all cases. Theoretically this is true, however the Ewell family was portrayed to be no different to the Negroes. And as we read through this novel, we sense that each character holds the potential in a playing a part to break down these barriers. As stated, baby steps are the paths of having hope.

"All animals are equal but some are more equal than others" Animal Farm, George Orwell.

We are able to relate this quotation to the idea of equality within the human race. Even though the Blacks have been removed from a life of slavery, they still did not have the same opportunities as the Whites. Their status has changed but the short-term effect was not dramatic. In the long run, as time progressed, the attitudes and trends of people changed. ' To Kill A Mockingbird' is at the early stages of this, and has realistically shown minute changes of breaking down these social and racial divides. I feel that after reading ' To Kill A Mockingbird' I have learnt that if every individual put their differences aside, there would be no barriers at all.