

"to kill a mocking bird" by harper lee essay sample

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“ To Kill A Mocking Bird” by Harper Lee Essay Sample

The novel ‘ To Kill A Mocking Bird’ by Harper Lee is set in a town called Maycomb in Alabama in the 1930’s. Maycomb County is a small community that’s been isolated in the years following the Civil War. The society is clearly defined and divided into four groups, Old Southern Aristocracy, poor but honest country folk, poor white trash and the black community. These groups are set like a hierarchy each one is below the other. As well as these groups each individual in the town usually belongs to a club within their own social group.

The rich white ladies have their Missionary Circle; the old men who sit around the courthouse square have their Idlers Club and the black people have their own church. Like most small southern towns at this time, Maycomb has a problem with widespread racism toward Negroes. There are only two significant outsiders in the novel: Dill who is not a full time Maycomb resident but becomes almost a member of the Finch family during his summer vacations, and Mr. Raymond who belongs by birth to the rich white group but prefers to live with the black. He is a very sensitive man who hates the society which makes blacks and whites live separately and hates the

“ hell white people give coloured folks, without even stopping to think that they’re people, too”.

He is the only character in the novel who has crossed the strict class and racial boundaries in Maycomb society. This novel has a wide range of lively

characters but focuses mainly on one family, the Finches. There are three people in the family Atticus, Jem and Scout. Atticus is the Father of Jem and Scout, he sits on the Alabama State Legislature and acts as Maycomb's leading attorney. Atticus teaches his children and his community how to stand up for what they believe in. He shows this in many ways including defending a black man Tom Robinson, wrongfully accused of raping a white woman. Having lost his wife when Scout was two years old, he devotes himself to his children despite criticism from family and neighbours who think his children lack discipline. Jeremy " Jem" Finch acts as Scout's playmate and protector. Jem goes through phases as he comes to grips with his family's past and his future role in society.

Sometimes he is moody and sometimes kind and gentle, Jem takes on a sort of leader role as he helps Scout understand how to get along in school and reminds her to respect Atticus and their other elders. Six-year-old Jean Louise Finch " Scout" narrates the novel. A tomboy at heart, Scout works hard not to " act like a girl" by wearing overalls instead of dresses and beating up other children who criticize her. Scout spends her days playing outside with her older brother and her best friend, Dill. She is extremely smart and bright for her age. Scout loves to read and spends time reading with her father. She is head strong and voices her opinions which often finds her in trouble with her father, her housekeeper Calpurnia, her neighbours, her aunt Alexandra, and her teachers. Dill, who is Scout's age, comes from a broken family. Dill tells mad tales about his father. He usually lets his imagination run away with him and exaggerates the truth. He tells Scout that when he is older he wants to be a clown to make people laugh. During his

summer he, Jem and Scout entertain themselves by pretending they are characters in plays and attempting to get Boo Radley to come out of his house.

Arthur Radley " Boo" is Maycomb's town recluse. There are a lot of myths and rumours about Boo and his family. According to town gossip, Boo stabbed his father in the leg when he was a boy and has since not come out of his house in fifteen years. Any small crimes which were committed in Maycomb were said to be his work. At night when the moon was down, he went and peeped in windows. When people's azealeas froze in a cold snap, it was because he breathed on them. Even the children were affected by all these rumours, they refused to touch the pecans from the Radley place that dropped into the school yard- according to them Radley pecans would kill you. This is really unfair to Boo, because he never comes out of his house or socializes with other members in Maycomb people made up rumours about him as an excuse for why he stayed inside. The children imagine Boo as a ghoulish monster figure.

' Boo was six and a half feet tall...he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that's why his hands were blood stained...there was a long jagged scar that ran across his face...his eyes popped and he drooled most of the time'

This is the description of Boo Jem gives Scout and Dill . In fact, Boo stands as a figure of innocence who protects the children in his own way. Boo is portrayed as a mockingbird figure when he is locked away from any sort of normal life and society.

" You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point-of-view -until you climb into his skin and walk around in it"

This is a relevant quotation made by Atticus as when we first meet Boo Radley he is introduced as a bad person. However, when the character develops, it can be noticed that he is actually a caring person. From the time Boo Radley was a small boy until the time he was a grown adult he was a very misunderstood character.

' Mockingbirds don't do one thing but to make music for us to enjoy...they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us, that's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird'

Boo is a like a mocking bird as he has done nothing wrong, he gives things and does things just so the children are happy.

We start to see his good nature when Jem got his pants stuck on the fence. Jem was dared by Dill to go up and peep in the window with the loose shutter to see if he could get a look at Boo Radley. Jem suddenly saw the shadow of a man with a hat on who was moving across the porch towards him. Jem leaped off the porch and got his pants stuck while trying to escape. When he came back though Boo had sewed them up and folded them for when Jem came back to claim them. We know this because Jem tells Scout

'...they'd been sewed up. Not like a lady sewed 'em, like somethin' I'd try to do. All crooked..'

Boo also shows his caring side when Miss Maudie's house caught fire by a flue in her kitchen. Scout stood outside watching and someone who Atticus later told her it was Boo had put the blanket around her shoulders, so she would not get cold. Scout had not even realized that she had a blanket round her.

' I looked down and found myself clutching a brown woolen blanket I was wearing around my shoulders, squaw- fashion'

Finally, Jem and Scout receive presents from Boo which he left in the tree outside his house. He left them Soap dolls, a watch and chain and a pair of good luck pennies. A lot of work and thought went into the dolls but he made them just to pleasure Jem and Scout. The thing that definitely made Boo a good person was when he saved Jem and Scout's lives from the crazy Bob Ewell.

On the way home from the Halloween night Jem and Scout are attacked by Mr. Ewell. A mystery man came in and started to stop him. When the fight had ended someone grabbed Jem and brought him into the house and Atticus ran over to get Scout who was dressed as a ham. Heck Tate who is the sheriff of Maycomb came over and informed them that Mr. Ewell had been killed by his own knife. It turned out to be Boo Radley who saved the children by fighting off Mr. Ewell. The man who they thought ate squirrels and cats raw turned out to be a misunderstood guy who preferred to be inside then to face the world outside.

Mr Tate realizes that if all the residents of Maycomb found out about Boo saving Scout and Jem's life they all would be round giving him presents and that would not be right

'...taking the one man who's done you and this town a great service an' draggin' him with his shy ways into the limelight- to me that's a sin. It's a sin and I'm not about to have it on my head. If it was any other man it would be different. But not this man...'

This is an important quote as Mr Tate knows that it would be like killing a mockingbird as he would be taking a shy man out into the limelight to a load of people praising him for what he had done, Boo would not want that.

If it hadn't of been for Boo, the children would never have made it home that night. This shows that Boo is like a Mockingbird, he doesn't do any wrong at all, and just watches over the children to see they are safe and bring them nice things.

When we actually get a real description of Boo by Scout he does not look anything like Jem's description of him.

'...his face was as white as his hands...his mouth was wide...his grey eyes were so colourless I thought he was blind. His hair was dead and thin, almost feathery on the top of his head.'

Scout tells us how thankful she is to Boo when she says

" Neighbours bring food with death and flowers with sickness and little things in between. Boo was our neighbour. He gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives."

This is where we see the first connection between Boo's story and Tom's because Tom Robinson is also a Mockingbird Figure. Tom Robinson is a twenty five year old young black man who is the father of three children. Tom is at the bottom of the hierarchy because he is black. He is accused of rape by Mayella Ewell the nineteen year old daughter of Bob Ewell. Bob Ewell is a white man who is the father of eight. His family lives behind Maycomb's dump. They are desperately poor. Bob uses his welfare money to buy alcohol while his children go hungry. Atticus agrees to take the case and when asked by his daughter why he tells her

'...if I didn't I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent this county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or scout to do something again'

This shows Atticus is a man of many morals and if he didn't defend Tom Robinson which is the right thing to do, then how could he tell his children to do anything if he had done the wrong thing himself. Atticus displays the most courage by defending Tom Robinson in court. He knew that having a white man defend a black man in court was unacceptable. He knew that people would resent him for it and he also knew that he would most likely lose the case because a black man has never won a court battle against a white. Atticus even though he knew this never gave up hope. Scout gets told

by Atticus that every lawyer gets one personal case and this one is his. This makes Tom Robinson the most important client of Atticus' career.

In the courtroom once the case has got started Mr Gilmer who was from Abbotsville and is described by Scout as

' A balding smooth faced man, he could have been anywhere between forty and sixty' insists in calling Tom ' boy' and not calling him by his first name.

' had your eye on her a long time, hadn't you, boy?'

This is another word being used because of his colour.

. Also Tom in the trial shows how caring and honest he is when he says,

" I felt right sorry for her."

This was a big mistake by Tom as a black man feeling sorry for a white woman was almost like he was mocking. But this also shows the caring side of Tom, he did honestly feel sorry for Mayella.

' Looked like she didn't have nobody to help her, like I says-'

This shows that Tom liked her and tried to help as she had seven children to look after on her own. It seems that Mayella was so lonely and desperate for attention she kissed a black man that was unspeakably not heard of in Maycomb Town. This also shows that like Boo Tom has done nothing wrong except help a girl with her jobs that her father had left her alone to do. This shows he again was a mockingbird figure as Boo was. In ' To Kill A

Mockingbird' Tom Robinson and Arthur are both judged before anyone actually gets to know them.

We can see that during the case Atticus was under stress and does two things that shows this. The first one is when

'.. he unbuttoned his vest, unbuttoned his collar, loosened his tie and took off his coat...we exchanged horrified glances'

Scout tells us that Atticus had never loosened any clothing until he undressed at bedtime. This shows that he was very tense and he needed to loosen up. The second thing that Atticus does that shows he was under a lot of stress

' Atticus paused and took out his handkerchief. Then he took off his glasses and wiped them, and we saw another ' first': we had never seen him sweat- he was one of these men whose faces never perspired, but now it was shining tan'

Atticus was so tense he was sweating, just like it is said that when your palms sweat you are nervous.

Atticus' closing speech is a very emotive one. That day he did something that would start off the first bit of justice for all Negro cases against whites, he made an all white jury think twice before saying he was guilty. Even with all the evidence that pointed to his innocence, he was found guilty. In a way Tom Robinson was found guilty even before he walked into the courtroom because of his colour. Many people, including Atticus, knew that the verdict

would be " guilty" even before the trial started. Tom Robinson was " judged" before anyone knew anything about him. If the jury had kept in mind, " do not judge people before you get to know them," an innocent man probably would not of lost his life. There was no evidence whatsoever to say that Tom did it, and plenty to say that he was totally innocent. When Tom Robinson is found guilty we see Jem has understood what has happened

' It ain't right, Atticus'

For the first time Jem gets upset about the Jury's decision and starts crying which shows he understands more, is starting to grow up and is not judging people by their colour just like his father Atticus.

Even though the jury had said guilty Atticus tells Scout there is still a good chance he will get an appeal. All that is shattered though when Atticus comes back with some terrible news that Tom is dead. Atticus tells Aunt Alexandra that

' He was running. It was during their exercise period. They said he just broke into a blind raving charge at the fence and started climbing over...they fired a few shots in the air, then to kill...seventeen bullet holes in him.'

In both Tom Robinson's and Boo Radley's cases it was like shooting a mockingbird.

So, by judging them, it was like killing them, and in Tom Robinson's case it did result in his death.

The white jury knew that Bob Ewell had beaten his daughter Mayella Ewell and that Tom was innocent . But because a human being had a different colour skin it is assumed they would be guilty without question so truth was never a factor.

The American Courts of the 1930's were also hypocritical. Truth and Justice were held as the most basic right for Americans. Truth in the Tom Robinson case was never a factor.

There were alot of problems with widespread racism toward Negroes in the 1930's. Arthur Radley and Tom Robinson were treated very badly at first but through the course of time people realize they aren't as bad as they thought they were. Sadly though it was too late for Tom Robinson as he was killed trying to escape. We see that A mocking bird is innocent and Tom Robinson and Boo Radley were just that. The way people treated them was a sin just like killing a mockingbird. Black people were treated in the Deep South in the 1930's extremely unfairly. One of the most important quotes that relates to all of the themes is

" You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point-of-view -until you climb into his skin and walk around in it,"

This is said by Atticus and it is very true as you cannot judge people by what they say or do unless you actually can walk around as them because everyone has reasons for their actions.