

How is racial tension  
and prejudice  
portrayed in "to kill a  
mocking bird" essay  
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## **How is Racial Tension and Prejudice Portrayed in “ To Kill A Mocking Bird” Essay Sample**

“ To Kill A Mocking Bird” was published 1960, just four years after the start of The American Civil Rights Movement. Many people found the book shocking, as it was written by a white woman who was openly opposed to the way black people were treated. The book is primarily about the way we treat those who are different to us, not only in race but in lifestyle, such as Boo Radley and Mr Dolphus Raymond, who are considered outcasts because they choose to live their lives differently. It also discusses why society is so wrong, with references to the American Civil War and the Slave Trade. It implies that society indoctrinates children into being discriminative by pointing out that when people are treated unfairly “ only the children weep”. The book is very persuasive due to Lee’s implications about society. She never directly attacks it but still manages to change the way the reader sees aspects of society and consider his own prejudices.

The major incident involving racism in the book is the trial of Tom Robinson for raping a white woman. He is found guilty even though it is clear from the evidence of the trial that he is innocent. Jem is upset by the open injustice of this, however Atticus is not shocked but in fact pleased that he managed to keep the jury out for so long, as normally it would take them a matter of minutes. The racist view of the community is highlighted as they believe the word of a disrespected, dishonest white man over that of a respectable, honourable black man. In his closing speech, Atticus discusses racist ideas in depth saying that there is “ an evil assumption that all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings”. This portrays racial prejudice as

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something very wrong. The people of Maycomb all react in the same way to Atticus's passionate defence of Tom Robinson. They call him a "nigger-lover" and try and outcast him from society. When Tom Robinson is shot, they have no sympathy for him or his family. They merely write it off as being "typical of a nigger...not to think of the future and just run blind". At one point they talk about him as if he has a disease, saying that even though he was a Christian and led a respectable life "the nigger always comes out in them eventually"

Throughout the book there are subtle references made to racism that are not questioned, showing that in Maycomb it is part of everyday life. An example of this is education; in Cal's church only a handful of people are literate showing that they had very little access to education. The author cleverly uses the children's visit to the church as an insight into how the black community regards the white community. When they arrive some people greet them respectfully and others greet them with hostility. This shows the hatred that some of black people have for the white people and how they feel they are treated unfairly.

This hatred stems from the disrespect with which they are treated; they are given jobs that no one else wants, such as garbage collectors; they are expected to stand for white people to sit, like in the courthouse and their church is treated with no respect, "Negroes worshipped in it on Sundays and white men gambled in it on weekdays". The black community understandably found this incredibly insulting and as there was nothing they could do about it, their hatred and resentment for the white community grew, leading to stronger separation. On a wider scale the separation

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stemmed from the slave trade during which white people considered black people as animals or machinery, therefore, when they were freed and given their own rights in 1865 it was difficult for white communities to accept their black members. To combat this a policy of segregation was introduced whereby black and white people were equal but they lived apart, and up until The Civil Rights Movement black people were treated as inferior beings.

In some parts of the book, the racism in Maycomb is portrayed very ironically. An example of this is when Scout's teacher talks about Adolph Hitler's anti-Semitic policies.

"Over here we don't believe in persecuting anyone. Persecution comes from people who are prejudiced" This is highly ironic and is stressed to the reader later when Scout asks Jem,

"How can you hate Hitler so bad an' then turn around and be ugly to folks right at home". Another example of irony is the ladies missionary tea party. It marks a certain loss of innocence on Scout's part as she learns that ladies are false with each other. The ladies are discussing Helen Robinson and talking of how they should forgive the black community when it is obvious that it is the black community who need to forgive the white community.

"We are fighting a losing battle...we can educate 'em till we're blue in the face but there's no lady safe in her bed these nights." This is ironic as in fact the white community offered the black community little if any support with things such as education.

Although throughout the novel Lee criticises racism, it is not all hopeless as there are some characters, such as Miss Maudie and Atticus, who “ when they look at a black person, think there but for the grace of God, am I”. After Tom’s trial Scout and Jem both think no one opposes the verdict, however throughout the novel they discover more people who do, such as Judge Taylor who purposefully gave Atticus the case, and Aunt Alexandra who is upset by Tom’s death.

It is obvious that Lee’s intention for this book was to change the racist ideas she discusses. I think she achieved this because it is difficult, as a reader not to look at how one treats others and question ones own morality. Although it was clearly relevant to the changing society of the 1960’s, it is still relevant today because, however much we try to deny it society will always be unfairly prejudiced against a particular group of people. The novel also makes the reader question how we teach children to treat others and pass our prejudices onto the next generation. I think that “ To Kill A Mockingbird” has changed and will continue change the way we look at other people, for the better and therefore I consider it a timeless classic.