

The truth behind mockingbirds

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The title *To Kill A Mockingbird* had very little literal meaning in relationship to the plot of the novel; however, it carries a great deal of symbolical weight in the story. The “mockingbird” comes to represent the idea of innocence; thus the phrase “to kill a mockingbird” translates to being the equivalent of destroying someone’s innocence. Numerous characters throughout the book can be identified with being such mockingbirds. Jem Finch, Tom Robinson, and Boo Radley are characters who have had their innocence eradicated, making them face characters for the idea of mockingbirds. A finch is a tiny songbird that is distantly related to the mockingbird, so it should be no surprise to the bird lover that Jem is identified as a mockingbird.

After Tom Robinson is unjustly found guilty, Jem Finch is badly affected when his faith in justice, the legal system and humanity is shattered. While trying to fathom the real world, Jem says: “‘It’s like bein’ a caterpillar in a cocoon, that’s what it is,’ he says. ‘Like somethin’ is asleep wrapped up in a warm place. I always thought Maycomb folk were the best folks in the world, least that’s what they seemed like’” (Lee, 1960, p. 288).

This is a perfect analogy of Jem— a young boy who is presumably going through the stress of dealing with puberty. He is forcibly woken up to the harshness of reality by the experience of the trial. Everything Jem thought was true before is suddenly proven to be wrong. He is no longer the young, naive, innocent child who dances along the edge of his father’s rules. Instead, Jem is thrown into a world where his painted reality has been ripped to shreds; his innocence as a child no longer in existence as he struggles with the concept that life is not fair and the real world is quite honestly a dark and horrid place.

Meanwhile during this trial, another mockingbird is being killed. Tom Robinson has also had his innocence destroyed when the members of the jury wrongly pronounced him guilty for a crime which he did not commit. The jury members were not the only ones to blame for the loss of Robinson's innocence, but the community of Maycomb, Alabama as well, possibly even more so. Prejudice caused Tom to lose the trial, favoring Mayella over Robinson because she was white and he was black. Townspeople condemned a man to his death through reasoning based solely on the color of his skin, despite their knowledge of his innocence. It was Mr.

Underwood who "likened Tom's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children" (Lee, 1960, p. 232). Mr. Underwood understood that the man's innocence had been betrayed by the townspeople, and he knew that it was a sin to do such a thing. The third main character who symbolizes a mockingbird is Arthur "Boo" Radley.

Boo has been locked away for most of his life, forced to observe through the glass of a window. This lack of interaction with the real world gave him a childlike mentality and innocence. Although Boo would never intentionally harm anyone, he still kills Bob Ewell while trying to protect Jem and Scout - both for whom he cares deeply even though he had never officially met them. Heck Tate, proclaims that "'Bob Ewell fell on his knife. He killed himself.'" (Lee, 1960, 366).

Tate tells this false story rather than giving Boo the credit because he knows that being in the public eye would be a punishment for the shy, reserved hero. When Atticus asked Scout if she understood why they would lie about

Bob Ewell's death instead of telling the truth, Scout reassures him simply with: "' Well, it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?'" (Lee, 1960, 370). Even at her young age, Scout has a phenomenal understanding of life; knowing that, like shooting a mockingbird, bringing Boo to trial for the death of Bob Ewell would be a sin. *To Kill a Mockingbird* demonstrates how several of its characters are like mockingbirds that have been killed due to their innocence being destroyed. Jem Finch has his innocence taken from him by his involvement in Tom Robinson's unfair trial. Tom Robinson lost his innocence in the eyes of others when he was falsely judged and sentenced to death.

Scout directly compared Boo Radley to the likes of a mockingbird when she said destroying his innocence in the real world would be like shooting one. Even Atticus came to the same conclusion as Scout when he said: "' Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit ' em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird'" (Lee, 1960, p. 119). These events allow readers to make connections between the symbolical value of a mockingbird representing innocence in the characters within the story and how it is a sin to kill a person's innocence. Bibliography Lee, H.

(1960). *To kill a mockingbird*. New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing