

To Kill a Mocking Bird: A Literary Analysis of 'Prejudice' in the Novel

Humans are born with prejudice, as it is our way to remain on top of the social hierarchy, a modern-day version of survival of the fittest. A great example of this is given in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, written in 1960. The memorable quote, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin", is the basic message of the entire novel, to get to know a person rather than to pre-judge and discriminate based upon race or class. Using "*To Kill a Mockingbird*", Harper Lee explores prejudice using common discourses associated with race and class, context and characterization to help her readers encapsulate the very essence of her own anti-racist ideology.

The story is set in the 1930's, an era of great racial injustice, in the deep south of Maycomb, Alabama. It has been more than seventy years since the Southerners lost to the Yankees in the Civil war and yet the people of the South still resent the Yankees of the North as they believe the Northerners are hypocrites for freeing the slaves. Greater than their resentment towards the North is their hatred towards the colored people. Up until seventy years before, the blacks were slaves to the whites and even though the blacks were freed, they are still considered to be the lower class. This creates many clashing ideologies in the small town, creating issues between the townsfolk, as in order to stay on top of the social hierarchy, they must neglect lower classes and see those beings as beneath them in order to survive themselves. Harper Lee created this setting to reflect the town that she grew up in, to be able to put more understanding into her writing in order help her readers gain a greater perspective of the prejudice during that era. She also creates a plot based on the events and ideologies of the time.

In the book, the white upper-class people of Maycomb fall subject to ethnocentrism. They believe that they are normal, superior, and anything else is strange; even if they haven't met them, they pre-judge the different and condemn them to a lowly life. This is their way of staying on top of the social hierarchy, because if they did not pre-judge other classes, their position as the highest class would be in jeopardy and the lower classes would rise up and take their place. An example of this is the way Tom Robinson helped Mayella Ewell, a girl from the least trusted white family in the town. When the two were caught together, Mayella accused Tom of rape, and only because it was considered abnormal that a black man should help and feel sorry for a white woman. When the case went to trial, Tom was found guilty because the white upper class of Maycomb would rather believe that a black man raped a girl and put him in jail than accept the given physical evidence that suggested that Tom was there to help Mayella, and set him free, because if this was allowed, black and white would interact and the status quo would change. Although Tom didn't win his case, at least one person in the

town of Maycomb sees the consequences of racial bias in the courtroom. "There's nothing more sickening to me than a white man who'll take advantage of a Negro's ignorance. Don't fool yourselves – it's all adding up, and one of these days, we're going to pay the bill for it." -Atticus Finch (pg 233-234) Lee created this as part of the novel's storyline to show that even with people such as the character of Atticus Finch, this system of pre-judging and discriminating is apparent all over the Earth and can be dated back to the beginning of time, not only in recent years. Humans feel a compulsive need to be at the top of the social hierarchy, whether it be killing off the competition, such as in the days of the cavemen, or using prejudice to neglect another class to stay on top. It is part of our mindset, that to stay on top, we need to beat the rest. Also, many characters in the novel were created to reinforce the major plot.

Jean Louise Finch, who is most often referred to by her nickname "Scout", is the first-person narrator and protagonist of the novel. Her mother died when she was two years old, so Calpurnia, the black servant of the family, raised her, giving Scout a very uncommon sense of trust towards coloured people. Scout has a learning experience affiliated with the trial of Tom Robinson. On the day of the trial, Jem Scout and Dill snuck into the courthouse and sat on the coloured people's balcony to remain out of Atticus' sight. They were caught watching just before the jury was dismissed to discuss their sentencing. Atticus let the children stay for the verdict because they had already seen the whole trial and seemed to be quite interested in what would become of Tom Robinson. Atticus proved Tom to be innocent and yet, he was still convicted, only because he was black. Although Tom was convicted, the jury took a long time to reach their decision, showing that they may have considered stating him innocent. Scout could not understand why he was convicted if Atticus proved him innocent but she later learned that this happened because he is a black man. "There's something in our world that makes men lose their heads- they couldn't be fair if they tried. In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins. They're ugly, but those are the facts of life." – (Atticus, pg 220). This quote is from a conversation between Jem and Atticus, but with Scout listening closely. To her distaste, Scout learns that come what may, whites will always remain superior to blacks. It can be assumed that Lee created Scout to be the focal point of her novel because as the narrator of the story, Scout gives the telling an essence of innocence which brings the reader's understanding down to a child's perception, which, in turn, will show the reader the full impact of prejudice in a small town such as Maycomb.

Prejudice is found in many forms all around the world, it always has been and it always will be. It is set in our minds from the moment we are born, that in order to stay on top, you have to somehow eliminate the competition. This is shown in many forms in "To Kill a Mockingbird", using discourses of race and class to invite the reader to see and

explore the consequences of prejudice. Prejudice is about the way we, as people, foreground the ideology of 'different is bad' whilst marginalising the truth of human existence in order to remain above others, and whether we choose to or not, we will always make it so in our eyes we, as the 'upper class' remain at the peak of the social hierarchy, because it is human nature, an instinct beyond our control.