

## **An Eternal Classic:**

A Literary Review of Harper Lee's

*To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a masterpiece, relevant to all humans on all levels. The tale of a child who grows up in a sleepy, Southern town, which becomes rocked by issues of race and morality, this book contains meaning in so many layers. The numerous themes addressed in this work, innate to everyone, make it possible to be instantly reached and understood.

Written in the late 1950s to early 1960s, when the Civil Rights Movement was at its height, the novel is an exemplification of tensions in America regarding race. Harper Lee herself followed the notorious Scottsboro Trial, in which several young black men were tried for raping two white women. Indeed, there are many parallels between Lee's childhood and her novel, from Lee's father, a lawyer to Truman Capote, Lee's longtime friend.

The novel commences by using a modified frame-story technique, with the main character, Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, beginning to tell the story of her maturation. Set in Maycomb, Alabama, and narrated by Scout in the first-person, it starts by detailed, event-by-event accounts of Scout's childhood. These include numerous humorous anecdotes, by which Scout introduces the readers to the townsfolk of Maycomb, from Miss Maudie, a morally, just widow, to Bob Ewell, a mean, unemployed drunkard. According to Jem, her brother, "it

began the summer Dill came to [them], when Dill first gave [them] the idea of making Boo Radley come out" (Lee 7). The Radleys are a peculiarity to the rest of Maycomb, hardly ever coming out or making contact, and unfamiliarity produces fear. Thus, Scout, her brother, and Dill, a small boy from Mississippi who befriends them, compose legends and myths about their reclusive neighbor.

Several years later, it is found that Atticus Finch, Jem and Scout's father, has chosen to defend Tom Robinson, who has been accused of raping Mayella Ewell, the daughter of Bob Ewell. This is the main event in the book. The entire town, uncomfortable with the town's best lawyer defending a black, divides. One part lashes out against Atticus and his family. Jem and Scout become the object of whispers throughout the streets of Maycomb. The others, numbering much fewer than the first, choose not to speak for their alliance, but choose instead to let the absence of criticism be their voice. During the trial, it is demonstrated that Mayella had lured Tom Robinson into the house and pulled him into a kiss, and, upon her father's finding out, had been beaten severely. Despite the evidence for Tom Robinson, the jury returned a guilty verdict.

Atticus was not surprised, saying that, although there is "no reason for [him] not to try to win", they were "licked a hundred years before [he] started" (Lee 80), referring to the rampant racism in Maycomb. Jem laments the lack of justice in the world, and Scout is shocked by the human evil in a town she has lived in all her life and has grown to love.

Meanwhile, the town has been shaken due to Atticus's solid defense of Tom Robinson. Bob Ewell, incensed that Atticus had proven Robinson innocent, swears revenge. The following Halloween, Scout participates in an agricultural pageant, dressed up as a ham. The scene is light, but darkens considerably when the pageant ends. As Jem and Scout head home, they are attacked. This is the climax of the novel. As Scout's costume trips her and she falls to the ground, she hears a frightening crunch as Jem's arm breaks. Horrified, she gets up and runs. Under the streetlights, she notices a man carrying Jem back to her house. Relieved that Jem is only unconscious, not dead, Scout begins retelling the story. Looking towards the man who is standing in the corner, she finally realizes that it was Boo Radley that saved them.

This book is an excellent work. It stands out from the others, remaining an enjoyable read after more than forty years, and I expect it to be enjoyable for much, much longer. This is what truly defines a classic: a masterpiece that reaches out and is understood by all people, no matter who they are, no matter how old they are, no matter when they read it. There is nobody who cannot relate to *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

It has also reached its goal as a social commentary piece. Subtly, it shows the injustice, the hate, the anger that humans are capable of. It showcases racism, commenting on it from the eyes of an unbiased child. It shows the reaction to themselves and to each other. It is a realistic, wonderful depiction of a small, rural, Southern town.

Finally, it has done superbly as a coming-of-age novel. Scout very evidently matures from a child, the trial of Tom Robinson being the clear mark of her transition into adolescence. However, although the trial can be used as a rough turning point, it was, in reality, a gradual change. For instance, she became mature enough to back down from Cecil Jacob's taunt ("Scout Finch's daddy defended niggers" (Lee 79)). For another example, she became mature enough not to continue to entertain wild fantasies about Boo Radley. In the end, she eventually develops a perspective that lets her see human goodness without ignoring human evil.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* deals with contrasting, universal themes, such as love and hate, tolerance and prejudice, innocence and guilt, black and white. Clearly, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a novel that lives up to its claims as "the classic, unforgettable novel about growing up in the South, and the human values and rights that belong to us all" (Lee, Back cover).