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To Kill a Mocking Bird-Harper Lee

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Critical analysis on To Kill a Mockingbird

To Kill a Mockingbird is primarily a novel about growing up under extraordinary circumstances in the 1930s in the Southern United States. The story covers a span of three years, during which the main characters undergo significant changes. The story is narrated by the main character, a little girl named Jean Louise "Scout" Finch. Scout Finch lives with her brother Jem and their father Atticus in the fictitious and sleepy town of Maycomb, Alabama. Their father, Atticus, is the local lawyer and as a single parent tries to raise his children with honor and respect to their individualism. Atticus is greatly helped in this task by his kindly neighbors and a black housekeeper named Calpurnia. With the Depression on times are hard, and there is no money to be found anywhere in town. One summer, Jem and Scout befriend a boy named Dill, who has come to live in their neighborhood for the summer, and the trio acts out stories together. Eventually, Dill becomes fascinated with the spooky house on their street called the Radley Place. The house is owned by Mr. Nathan Radley, whose brother, Arthur (nicknamed Boo), has lived there for years without venturing outside. To amuse themselves Scout, Jem, and Dill begin a relentless campaign during their summer

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times to get Boo Radley to come out of his house. They concoct endless schemes and even go so far as to create a play that details Boo's life. Atticus forbids them to have anything to do with Mr. Radley, urging them to let the poor man be.

Scout is a tomboy who prefers the company of boys and generally solves her differences with her fists. She tries to make sense of a world that demands that she act like a lady, a brother who criticizes her for acting like a girl, and a father who accepts her just as she is. Scout goes to school for the first time that fall and detests it. So, she ends up gaining her most valuable education on her own street and from her father.

She and Jem find gifts apparently left for them in a knothole of a tree on the Radley property. Dill returns the following summer, and he, Scout, and Jem begin to act out the story of Boo Radley. Atticus puts a stop to their antics, urging the children to try to see life from another person's perspective before making judgments. But, on Dill's last night in Maycomb for the summer, the three sneak onto the Radley property, where Nathan Radley shoots at them. Jem loses his pants in the ensuing escape. When he returns for them, he finds them mended and hung over the fence. The next winter, Jem and Scout find more presents in the tree, presumably left by the mysterious Boo. Nathan Radley eventually plugs

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the knothole with cement. Shortly thereafter, a fire breaks out in another neighbor's house, and during the fire someone slips a blanket on Scout's shoulders as she watches the blaze. Convinced that Boo did it, Jem tells Atticus about the mended pants and the presents. to the consternation of Maycomb's racist white community, Atticus agrees to defend a black man named Tom Robinson, who has been accused of beating and raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell. Most of the county is convinced immediately that Tom is guilty of the crime, and begin to look at Atticus in a very negative way for actually defending him and trying to do right by him. Scout and Jem begin to get tormented over their father at school, and Atticus begs them not to get riled up over the town's prejudice. Atticus insists on going through with the case because his conscience could not let him do otherwise. He knows Tom is innocent, and also that he has almost no chance at being acquitted, because the white jury will never believe a black man over a white woman. Despite this, Atticus wants to reveal the truth to his fellow townspeople, expose their bigotry, and encourage them to imagine the possibility of racial equality. Other children taunt Jem and Scout for Atticus's actions, calling him a "nigger-lover". Scout is tempted to stand up for her father's honor by fighting, even though he has told her not to. Tom Robinson's trial begins,

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and when the accused man is placed in the local jail, a mob gathers to lynch him. Atticus faces the mob down the night before the trial. Jem and Scout, who have sneaked out of the house, soon join him. Scout recognizes one of the men, and her polite questioning about his son shames him into dispersing the mob.

Atticus does not want Jem and Scout to be present at Tom Robinson's trial. No seat is available on the main floor, so by invitation of Rev. Sykes, Jem, Scout, and Dill watch from the colored balcony. Atticus establishes that the accusers—Mayella and her father, Bob Ewell, the town drunk—are lying. It becomes apparent to Scout and Jem that there is no way that Tom Robinson could have beaten and raped Mayella Ewell, as his left hand is crippled. In fact, Mayella propositioned Tom Robinson, was caught by her father, and then accused Tom of rape to cover her shame and guilt. Atticus provides impressive evidence that the marks on Mayella's face are from wounds that her father inflicted; upon discovering her with Tom, he called her a whore and beat her. Yet, despite the significant evidence pointing to Tom's innocence, the all-white jury convicts him. The innocent Tom later tries to escape from prison and is shot to death. In the aftermath of the trial, Jem's faith in justice is badly shaken, and he lapses into despondency and doubt. After

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the trial has died down Bob Ewell, Mayella's father, begins threatening Atticus for embarrassing him in court, and resolves that he'll get him back one way or another. Atticus is convinced that he's all talk, and passes it off as such. . Finally, he attacks the defenseless Jem and Scout while they walk home on a dark night after the school Halloween pageant. One of Jem's arms is broken in the struggle, but amid the confusion someone comes to the children's rescue. The mysterious man carries Jem home, where Scout realizes that he is Boo Radley. The sheriff arrives at the Finch house to announce that Bob Ewell has been found dead under the tree where the children were attacked, having fallen on his own knife. By this time, Scout realizes that the stranger is none other than Boo Radley, and that Boo is actually responsible for killing Ewell, thus saving her and Jem's lives. In spite of Atticus' insistence to the contrary, the sheriff refuses to press charges against Boo. Scout agrees with this decision and explains her understanding to her father. Boo sees Jem one more time and then asks Scout to take him home, but rather than escort him home as though he were a child, she has Boo escort her to his house as a gentleman would. As she walks him back home, she realizes that all this time he was

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watching them from his front porch windows, and just for a little while she is able to stand in his shoes.

To Kill a Mockingbird explores the questions of innocence and harsh experience, good and evil, from several different angles. Tom Robinson's trial explores these ideas by examining the evil of racial prejudice, its ability to poison an otherwise admirable Southern town and destroy an innocent man, and its effect on young Jem and Scout. Because the point of a trial is to discover guilt or innocence, Tom's trial serves as a useful mechanism for Lee to lay out the argument against racial prejudice in a dramatic framework suited to the larger themes of the novel. Additionally, because a trial is essentially about the presentation of facts, it serves as a laboratory in which the extent of the town's prejudice can be objectively measured. Atticus presents a solid case that leaves virtually no room for doubt. Tom Robinson is innocent, and if he is found guilty, then it is only because of the jury's racism. The black community in Maycomb is quite idealized, especially in the scenes at the black church and in the "colored balcony" during the trial. Lee's portrayal of the black community isn't unrealistic or unbelievable; it is important to point out, however, that she emphasizes all of the good qualities of the community without ever pointing out any of the bad

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ones. The black community is shown to be loving, affectionate, welcoming, pious, honest, hardworking, close-knit, and forthright. Calpurnia and Tom, members of this community, possess remarkable dignity and moral courage. But the idealization of the black community serves an important purpose in the novel, heightening the contrast between victims and victimizers. The town's black citizens are the novel's victims, oppressed by white prejudice and forced to live in an environment where the mere word of a man like Bob Ewell can doom them to life in prison, or even execution, with no other evidence. By presenting the blacks of Maycomb as virtuous victims—good people made to suffer—Lee makes her moral condemnation of prejudice direct, emphatic, and explicit. The novel deals with justice and prejudice throughout. The title basically captures the whole theme of the book: it is a sin to kill a Mockingbird. Atticus tells his children this. The reason—mockingbirds do nothing bad—they just sing. There are a couple of "mockingbirds" in the story—Boo, Tom Robinson. Both these men are innocent victims of the town.

A few brave people try to do the right thing. Atticus seeks justice for Tom by opting to defend him in court (Tom is being tried for a rape he did

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not commit). The jury convicts Tom because they essentially believe the white woman who accused him.

Boo is in part a victim of his father's idea of what is just. Instead of being sent to a state school, his father keeps him under house arrest--a punishment that last Boo's entire life.

Boo risks everything when he saves Jem and Scout. When he stabs Bob Ewell (Mayella's abusive father), it is the right thing to do--he saves Jem's life. However, if justice were served according to the letter of the law, Boo would have gone to jail for what he did.

Both Heck Tate (the sheriff) and Atticus decide to lie to save Boo from the consequences of his action. Atticus lies and says that Jem did it (knowing Jem is still too young to stand trial) and Heck Tate lies and says that Bob Ewell "fell on his knife". This means that both of the men who are sworn in one capacity or another to uphold the law are willing to bend it to protect a vulnerable person. So there is humanity in the justice in the book. It shows that there is a type of justice that goes beyond the courts, and that sometimes the "right" thing is not upheld by the law.

. An underlying theme in this book is that we as humans are responsible for acting according to our conscience. We should try to use the law when we can, but we also have a higher imperative--we have to follow our

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conscience. And if a child such as Scout living in a 1930s society can learn to overcome such deeply held prejudices and come to understand the individual worth of a person then surely people living in today's society can too.