

To Kill A Mockingbird notes

T H E M E S

The Coexistence of Good and Evil

- The most important theme of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the book's exploration of the moral nature of human beings. — that is, whether people are essentially good or essentially evil.
- The novel approaches this question by dramatising Scout and Jem's transition from a perspective of childhood innocence, in which they assume that people are good because they have never seen evil, to a more adult perspective, in which they have confronted evil and must incorporate it into their understanding of the world.
- As a result of this portrayal of the transition from innocence to experience, one of the book's important sub-themes involves the threat that hatred, prejudice, and ignorance pose to the innocent: people such as Tom Robinson and Boo Radley are not prepared for the evil that they encounter, and, as a result, they are destroyed.
- I. one who is "half white, half coloured" - is "real sad" because they do not belong anywhere. Jem astutely explains, coloured folks won't have 'em because they're half white; white folks won't have 'em 'cause they're coloured, so they're just in-betweens, don't belong anywhere."
- Even Jem is victimized to an extent by his discovery of the evil of racism during and after the trial. Whereas Scout is able to maintain her basic faith in human nature despite Tom's conviction, Jem's faith in justice and in humanity is diminished.
- The moral voice of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is embodied by Atticus Finch, who in the novel has experienced and understood evil without losing his faith in the human capacity for goodness.
- II. "They've done it before and they'll do it again and when they do it -- seems that only the children weep. Good night."
- Atticus understands that, rather than being simply creatures of good or creatures of evil, most people have both good and bad qualities. The important thing is to appreciate the good qualities and understand the bad qualities by treating others with sympathy and trying to see life from their perspective.
- He tries to teach this ultimate moral lesson to Jem and Scout to show them that it is possible to live with conscience without losing hope. In this way.
- Scout's progress as a character in the novel is defined by her gradual development toward understanding Atticus's lessons, culminating when, in the final chapters, Scout at last sees Boo Radley as a human being.

The Existence of Social Inequality

- III. "We know all men are not created equal in the sense some people would have us believe—some people are smarter than others, some people have more opportunity because they're born with it, some people are born gifted. But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal, where the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution, gentlemen, is a court." - "proved wrong in the result of trial"
- Differences in social status are explored largely through the overcomplicated social hierarchy of Maycomb, the ins and outs of which constantly baffle the children.
- The relatively well-off Finches stand near the top of Maycomb's social hierarchy, with most of the townspeople beneath them. Ignorant country farmers like the Cunninghams lie below the townspeople, and the white trash Ewells rest below the Cunninghams.

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- But the black community in Maycomb, despite its abundance of admirable qualities, squats below even the Ewells, enabling Bob Ewell to make up for his own lack of importance by persecuting Tom Robinson.
- IV. If it is known that a person has even one person of Negro ancestry in his or her lineage, that person is condemned to live in the nether-land of the "mixed child;" belonging nowhere.
- Tom's experience suggests that African-Americans in Maycomb have a whole additional set of fears to those of the white residents.
- These rigid social divisions that make up so much of the adult world are revealed in the book to be both irrational and destructive .Lee uses the children's perplexity at the unpleasant layering of Maycomb society to critique the role of class status and, ultimately, prejudice in human interaction.

M O T I F

Gothic Details

- The forces of good and evil in *To Kill a Mockingbird* seem larger than the small Southern town in which the story takes place.
- Lee adds drama and atmosphere to her story by including a number of Gothic details in the setting and the plot. In literature, the term Gothic refers to a style of fiction first popularised in eighteenth-century England, featuring supernatural occurrences, gloomy and haunted settings, full moons, and so on.
- Among the Gothic elements in *To Kill a Mockingbird* include: are the unnatural snowfall, the fire that destroys Miss Maudie's house, the children's superstitions about Boo Radley, the mad dog that Atticus shoots .Small-Town Life
- Counterbalancing the Gothic motif of the story is the motif of old-fashioned, small-town values, which manifest themselves throughout the novel. As if to contrast with all of the suspense and moral grandeur of the book,
- Lee emphasises the slow-paced, good-natured feel of life in Maycomb.

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SYMBOLS

Mockingbirds

- The title of *To Kill a Mockingbird* has very little literal connection to the plot, but it carries a great deal of symbolic weight in the book.
 - In this story of innocents destroyed by evil, the “mockingbird” comes to represent the idea of innocence. Thus, to kill a mockingbird is to destroy innocence.
- V. “It's A Sin To Kill A Mockingbird. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.”
- Throughout the book, a number of characters (Jem, Tom Robinson, Dill, Boo Radley, Mr. Raymond) can be identified as mockingbirds—innocents who have been injured or destroyed through contact with evil. (Jem’s views of humanity and justice after the trial)
 - This connection between the novel’s title and its main theme is made explicit several times in the novel: after Tom Robinson is shot, Mr. Underwood compares his death to “the senseless slaughter of songbirds,” and at the end of the book Scout thinks that hurting Boo Radley would be like “shootin’ a mockingbird.”

Boo Radley

- As the novel progresses, the children’s changing attitude toward Boo Radley is an important measurement of their development from innocence toward a grown-up moral perspective.
- At the beginning of the book, Boo is merely a source of childhood superstition
- . At the end of the novel, he becomes fully human to Scout, illustrating that she has developed into a sympathetic and understanding individual.

VI. Jean Louise "Scout" Finch: Mr Tate was right

Atticus Finch: What do you mean ?

Jean Louise "Scout" Finch: It would be sort of like shooting a mockingbird, wouldn't it ?

- Scout implies that turning Boo Radley in would be like killing a mockingbird as he only protected the children and if he were turned over the legal system might fail him.
- Boo, an intelligent child ruined by a cruel father, is one of the book’s most important mockingbirds; he is also an important symbol of the good that exists within people. Despite the pain that Boo has suffered, the purity of his heart rules his interaction with the children. In saving Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell, Boo proves the ultimate symbol of good.

GENRE

Southern Gothic

- *To Kill a Mockingbird* is primarily an example of Southern Gothic fiction in that it takes place in the South, contains both dark and comedic elements, uses Southern vernacular, features exaggerated characters, and references the supernatural.

Courtroom Drama

- This book is also one of the most famous courtroom dramas in American literature, as much of the action takes place during a criminal trial, and the ethical issues raised by the case heighten the story’s drama.

Bildungsroman

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- Finally, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a bildungsroman, in that it traces Scout's development from innocent child to aware member of her community through the experience of witnessing Tom's trial and being rescued by Boo Radley. A bildungsroman, which means "novel of education" in German, describes one character's (often the narrator) passage from youth into adulthood.

STYLE

- The style of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is generally humorous and conversational, but also deceptively sophisticated, which reflects the mix of straightforward story-telling and complicated ideas.
- The contrast between what people say and what they mean is echoed by the style of the story itself, which conceals adult subjects in the apparently simple story of children.

POINT OF VIEW

- *To Kill a Mockingbird* is written in the first person, with Jean "Scout" Finch acting as both the narrator and the protagonist of the novel.
- Scout is only six years old when the novel begins, and eight years old when it ends, she has an unusual perspective that plays an important role in the work's meaning.
- In some ways, because she is so young, Scout is an unreliable narrator. Her innocence causes her to misunderstand and misinterpret things.
- Scout's innocence makes her more trustworthy as a narrator than an adult might be, in that she lacks the sophistication to shape her story or withhold information for her own benefit.
- The use of a child narrator enables the reader to see the action through fresh eyes, but Scout's age also limits the narrative, especially in its treatment of race. While she understands Tom's conviction is unfair, Scout accepts much of the institutionalised racism of the town.

FORESHADOWING

Because the book is narrated by an older Scout looking back on her childhood, there are many instances of foreshadowing throughout the book:

Jem's accident

- On the first page, Scout says that her brother, Jem, broke his arm when he was almost thirteen, then adds, "I maintain that the Ewells started it all, but Jem, who was four years my senior, said it started long before that."
- He said *it all* began the summer Dill came to us, when Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out." The phrase "it all" indicates that the story behind Jem's accident is complicated, and the roots of the accident are open to interpretation. Scout also mentions several characters—the Ewells, Dill, and Boo Radley— who are important to the story.

Boo Radley

- Boo Radley's function as a hero of the book is foreshadowed throughout.

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- While Scout, Jem, and Dill happily believe Boo is a dangerous. Atticus's reaction to their games implies Boo has been miscast in the eyes of the town.
 - When the children suggest Boo is kept chained up in the house, Atticus says "there were other ways of turning people into ghosts."
 - Atticus's sympathetic attitude towards Boo foreshadows Boo's role as protector of the children when he later saves them from Bob Ewell.
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Is justice achieved in *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

- Justice is an important theme in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which Scout confronts difficult truths about bias and racism within her community. She learns that while the courts can be a potential source of justice, there are also other ways of achieving justice outside the courtroom.
- This lesson is especially important when she discovers that the legal system does not always return the morally right verdict. In his closing remarks during Tom Robinson's trial, Atticus tells the jury, "Our courts have their faults, as does any human institution, but in this country our courts are the great levellers, and in our courts all men are created equal." In this idealised vision, a jury would deliver justice by issuing a decision guided by reason rather than passion. Their judgment would treat all individuals equally, regardless of their race or social circumstance, because equality and lack of prejudice are essential preconditions to justice.'
- However, the jury finds Tom Robinson guilty even though it was physically impossible for him to commit the crime he's accused of, which shows that the system is *not* equal. The failure of the legal system to provide an equal trial suggests that characters must look for other ways to achieve justice.
- The novel carefully distinguishes between justice and revenge.
 - Revenge.
 - 1) When their cousin makes a negative comment about Atticus, Scout starts a fight with him
 - 2) When their elderly neighbour Mrs. Dubose insults Atticus for representing Tom Robinson, Jem tears up all her camellia bushes.
 - Justice
 - However, Atticus teaches the children that these acts of revenge do not actually achieve justice. Instead, he insists that Jem apologise to Mrs. Dubose by reading aloud to her every day. Atticus implies that Jem's apology and penance make up for the destruction of Mrs. Dubose's flowers, which suggests that **justice is achieved when the guilty person does penance**, not when the wronged party returns the negative action as revenge.
- The most obvious victim of injustice in *Mockingbird* is Tom Robinson, who is wrongfully convicted for the rape of Mayella Ewell. Although Atticus has hopes for his appeal, Tom is shot and killed while trying to escape prison. His death ensures that he will never receive justice through the legal system. The question of whether justice is served in the death of Bob Ewell after Boo Radley kills him to protect the children is open to interpretation.
- In one sense, Bob's death serves as punishment for his crime of attacking Scout and Jem, and for his responsibility in Tom Robinson's death. As the sheriff tells Atticus, "There's a black boy dead for no reason, and the man responsible for it's dead. Let the dead bury the dead this time, Mr. Finch." He decides not to prosecute Boo Radley because he was simply trying to rescue the children, and although Boo would most likely be found innocent, the sheriff does not think justice would be served by bring a shy man so much attention.

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Q U O T E S

- “It's A Sin To Kill A Mockingbird. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.”
- Jean Louise "Scout" Finch: Mr Tate was right
Atticus Finch: What do you mean ?
Jean Louise "Scout" Finch: It would be sort of like shooting a mockingbird, wouldn't it ?
- Scout implies that turning Boo Radley in would be like killing a mockingbird as he only protected the children and if he were turned over the legal system might fail him.
- “As you grow older, you'll see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don't you forget it— whenever a white man does that to a black man, no matter who he is, how rich he is, or how fine a family he comes from, that white man is trash”
- Cements Atticus's views and opinions.
- “Before I can live with other folks I've got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience.”
- “They've done it before and they'll do it again and when they do it -- seems that only the children weep. Good night.”
- “We know all men are not created equal in the sense some people would have us believe- some people are smarter than others, some people have more opportunity because they're born with it, some men make more money than others, some ladies make better cakes than others- some people are born gifted beyond the normal scope of men. But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal- there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution, gentlemen, is a court.”
- “Some negroes lie, some are immoral, some negro men are not be trusted around women - black and white. But this is a truth that applies to the human race and to no particular race of men.”
- Boo was our neighbor. He gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives.”
- one who is "half white, half colored" - is "real sad" because they do not belong anywhere. Jem astutely explains,
 - "colored folks won't have 'em because they're half white; white folks won't have 'em 'cause they're colored, so they're just in-betweens, don't belong anywhere.”
 - This observation expresses the virulent racism that permeates southern society at that time. A person is classified and judged by the color of his or her skin, and it works both ways, with a black child unable to be accepted in white society, and a white child unable to be accepted in black society. The lines delineating the racial divide are unyielding; they are a fact of life, and are difficult, if not impossible, to breach.
 - The racism that Jem describes actually goes beyond skin color. Scout notes that one of the mixed-race Raymond children looks no different than a child who is all-black, and Jem tells her that "you just hafta know who they are." Jem says, "...around here once you have a drop of Negro blood, that makes you all black.”
 - If it is known that a person has even one person of Negro ancestry in his or her lineage, that person is condemned to live in the netherland of the "mixed child;" belonging nowhere.

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- Jem hints that the racism and strict divisions along color lines are lessening in other areas beyond the Deep South. Mr. Raymond has sent two of his children up north, where "they don't mind [mixed children]" as much (Chapter 16).