
To Kill A Mockingbird: Symbolism Of A Mockingbird

'Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.'

Harper Lee's 'To Kill A Mockingbird' takes place in the town of Maycomb, told through the eyes of Scout Finch - the narrator and protagonist of the story. She describes the town in which she grew up, "Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it", this emphasises the slow pace of the town, situating the imagery of Maycomb being a sleepy Southern town in the readers mind. The text depicts a microcosm of what a portion of the United States was like in that era. In 'To Kill a Mockingbird' is Miss Maudie warns Scout that mockingbirds should not be killed or hunted as they represent those who are innocent and kind. 'To Kill a Mockingbird' has a very literal connection to the plot of the text. Characters such as Jem Finch, Tom Robinson, Arthur "Boo" Radley and Mayella Ewell are identified as mockingbirds; innocents who have been injured or destroyed through contact with evil, or ignorance.

All the children in the town of Maycomb are considered mockingbirds, however, Jem can be seen as the predominant mockingbird who is a child, he is not only innocent but has a good heart. Jem ages from 10 to 13 over the course of the text, which is a period of time that has a great impact on any child at that point in their life. The changes which he undergoes are narrated and seen from the point of view of his younger sister, Scout, giving an insight into his unique growth as a brother, son and friend. Jem represents the concept of bravery in 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and how his definition of bravery changes over time. When the story begins Jem's idea of bravery is by touching the side of the Radley house, only because "in all his life, Jem had never declined a dare", which characterises Jem proving his bravery in every chance he can. However, as the story advances, Jem learns from Atticus facing a mad dog, from Mrs Dubose's fight with addiction, and from Scout's confrontation with the mob at the jail which are some of the events which aid Jem in learning what bravery really is. Along the way he goes from a boy who drags his little sister along with him, to a young man protecting Scout and tries to help her grasp the implications of the events surrounding her. One event which describes Jem as a mockingbird occurs in his attempt to keep piece between Walter and Scout. Walter Cunningham refuses to take the money which Miss Caroline has offered to him to buy lunch since he did not have any. Scout attempted to explain the tradition of the Cunningham's of not accepting anything in which they cannot pay back. Miss Caroline by this time had, had enough of Scout and decided to punish her, she gave her six pats on the hand with her ruler and sent her to stand in the corner. Scout was obviously upset that her defence of Walter Cunningham had accumulated in her punishment. Therefore, Scout had held Walter responsible for the suffering which she had experienced and decided that she wanted vengeance. For this reason, she decided to rub "his nose in the dirt". Jem intervened and stopped her from bullying, to which he invites Walter over to their house for dinner to make up for Scout's unfair actions. Jem can be described as somewhat of a mockingbird but unlike Arthur 'Boo' Radley and Tom Robinson, who are the true mockingbirds of the story, it takes some time for Jem to mature into one. In the beginning of the text, Jem takes part in the Boo Radley game which consists of the children acting out scenarios of what they think Boo's life is like and is also used by Jem to

prove his bravery, unaware of the harm which he may be doing to people in the Radley house. He also chops down Mrs Dubose's camellias, symbolises the Old South in being racist. Mrs Dubose explains to Jem that he must learn to pull the camellias out by the roots to get rid of them, symbolising the need to be-rid the racism in the town at its roots. Nathan fills the tree hole used by Boo Radley to be able to talk and relate to the children, Jem cries as he realises how important that hole was to Boo. He also reads to Mrs Dubose to make up for almost destroying her garden, and later discovers that it helped her overcome her morphine addiction. When he and Scout sleep outside on the patio, Scout wanted to kill a roly-poly bug. Jem stops her and explains that "they don't bother [her]". The roly-poly bug symbolises innocence and to Jem, the insect was like Tom Robinson – a normal African American man, who was unfairly charged for a crime which he did not commit. Tom's innocence and freedom would be taken away from him, which is what happened when Tom was shot whilst attempting to escape from jail. One of the most important events which occurred for Jem to symbolise a mockingbird is when he protects his sister when they get attacked by Bob Ewell. Jem finds himself having to adapt at an early age to develop an adult moral outlook on life, from the evil which he is exposed to. His disheartening experience at Tom Robinson's trial occurs and makes Jem understand that justice does not always prevail, which leaves him vulnerable and confused. However, he admirably upholds his commitment to justice that Atticus has instilled in him and maintains it throughout the text. In 'To Kill a Mockingbird' Jem can be personified as "a young mockingbird about ready to leave the nest" when the text ends.

In Chapter 10 of 'To Kill A Mockingbird', Atticus gives Scout and Jem air-rifles, he instructs then not to kill mockingbirds, as "it is a sin to kill a mockingbird" because they merely sing and do not harm anyone. The mockingbird becomes a symbol of the innocent who do not harm anyone, such as Boo Radley. Arthur Radley, also known as Boo, is "a recluse who never sets foot outside of the house". He lives in Maycomb County, in the same street as the Finches in which Jem, Scout and Dill are obsessed with. Boo Radley symbolises goodness, but the children characterise Boo as a 'carnival-freak-show-type' of person. Boo is depicted as a dormant creature who lurks during the night in the children's neighbourhood. He becomes a receptacle for the town's fears and superstitions. When in fact the character is an intelligent and quiet man tired of his cruel father who isolates him from the outside world. His only way of communicating with the outside world is through leaving little presents such as spelling medals, coins, gun and dolls in a knot hole in the Oak Tree at the Radley Place, symbolising Boo Radley attempting to gain the trust and friendship of Scout and Jem. Boo can be characterised as a mockingbird as he is a good person, injured by evil which he has suffered. Boo's kindness towards the children is expressed through leaving treats for them in the knothole of a tree, he places a blanket around Scouts shoulders during the fire, and in the end saves Jem and Scout from death at the hands of Bob Ewell. Although he had some issues in his past relating to his parents and older brother, he is isolated as he has been forced to live that way, "I'm beginning to understand why Boo Radley's stayed shut up in the house all this time... it's because he wants to stay inside". Jem and Scout believe absurd tales about Boo, such as the rumour that he kills neighbours' pets. Boo's character does not change over the course of the novel, but Scout and Jem's perception of Boo develops from a monster to a hero and establish empathy.

Boo genuinely cares and is protective of the children and protects them when Atticus underestimated the threat which Bob Ewell poses to Atticus' family. Within the context of the novel, Boo functions as more of a ghost than an actual character. He only appears in the final chapters of the novel to where even then; he only speaks once but his presence is felt throughout. Symbolically, Boo represents both Scout's childish understanding of the lives of

those around her, as well as the genuine risks and dangers which children face as they grow up in the world. Boo being somewhat of a ghost like figure also symbolises Maycomb County's past, such as inequality, prejudice and slavery.

The town prefers to keep the bad or less admirable aspects of its past out of the sight of others, like Boo, however, like Boo, the town's past or 'ghosts' continues to inform the community's present.

Tom Robinson can be seen as a mockingbird who has been wrongfully accused of assaulting and raping Mayella Ewell on the evening of November 21. He was innocent yet assumed guilty, ultimately due to his race. When Tom was accused of raping Mayella Ewell, it wasn't just his innocence which was taken, but also his reputation and security. Harper Lee, through Tom Robinson portrays the "underdog" or "victim" being destroyed because of the colour of his skin, "Tom was a dead man the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth and screamed", meaning that no matter what Tom did or didn't do, just being alone with a White woman meant that he had crossed the line which separated black from white in the town of Maycomb. "It's a sin to kill a mockingbird" refers to intentionally and pointlessly destroying something which does no harm. "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." Killing a mockingbird serves no purpose and is therefore an act of an unnecessary evil. When the jury convicts Tom Robinson of rape, despite there being no physical evidence or Atticus' fascinating defence. The town of Maycomb generally and specifically the jury destroy a good person who has never done harm and is simply because of his skin. Atticus proves in court that Tom is crippled in his left arm and Mayella was beaten on the left side of her face, so he couldn't have beaten or raped her. Tom is a gracious black man who is wrongfully convicted and executed for a crime he did not commit. He was a caring and noble person who was concerned for Mayella Ewell's wellbeing although she was white. Tom does not physically push Mayella away when she approaches, but rather he chooses to run away in order to not harm her in any way. Disregarding Tom's caring personality, the town were blinded by their racial discrimination. What happens to Tom in the end is the act of slaying a mockingbird – he was compassionate and did not deserve to lose his life, only because of society's prejudice over his ethnicity. Boo Radley and Tom Robinson share many similarities in spite of the fact that one man is white and the other black. By juxtaposing these two characters, Lee proves that justice and compassion reach beyond the boundary of colour and human prejudices. The novel's title is a metaphor for both men, each of whom is a mockingbird.

Mayella Ewell symbolises a mockingbird "killed" by society's discrimination towards those who are in a lower social class. Mayella is a helpless white girl judged by society and who suffers under her father's abuse. She is considered a mockingbird throughout the text as she is portrayed as defenceless, vulnerable and in need of protection. Despite her malicious attitude during the trial, Mayella grew up in an unstable home with an abusive and alcoholic father. In Scout's opinion, "Mayella is the loneliest person in the world", as in her testimony she is able to realise that she lives in an isolated existence, surrounded by her brothers and sisters, but with no one her age to talk to. It is apparent her innocence was robbed from her, leaving her in poverty and neglect, making Mayella a victim of society's prejudice - a mockingbird. Unlike Boo Radley and Tom Robinson, Mayella was deformed by Maycomb's bias and spite. She is a mockingbird who had been deprived of the chance to "sing her heart out" and get noticed in a pit of despair.

In this case however, one mockingbird is shot, the other is forced to kill. The mockingbird in Harper Lee's 'To Kill A Mockingbird' symbolises how even the most innocent of people can be destroyed by racism, prejudice, assumptions and accusations. The mockingbirds uncover the sense of morality in people, "They're certainly entitled to think that, and they're entitled to full respect for their opinions... but 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." Harper Lee effectively uses the mockingbird to symbolise and illustrate torn souls who have been undeservedly destroyed by societies judgement. The close-mindedness of the town destroyed three symbols of good being; Jem Finch, Arthur 'Boo' Radley and Tom Robinson, while Mayella was robbed of living a full life of success. "Shoot all the blue jays you want if you can hit'em, but remember, it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."