

EXTENDED ESSAY

ENGLISH B

“How is the issue of Southern racism in the 1920’s and 1930’s implemented in Harper Lee’s novel To Kill A Mockingbird”

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Abstract:

The purpose of this essay is to analyse how Harper Lee has portrayed “black racism” in the late 1920s and 1930s in the southern part of America. This essay reflects how racism is depicted in the social environment of Maycomb County, Alabama and the effects of being dark skinned in an era filled with segregation. It also examines how Harper Lee has portrayed each character's perspectives towards racism to create awareness of human behavior in both kindness and in cruelty. Harper Lee explores the situation in which the defender of a black man is, in a society filled with racial prejudiced views from the perspective of Scout, the young daughter of Atticus Finch, the defender. Lee lets the reader ponder upon the issue of racism and how Scout and Jem grow throughout the process of the trial of Tom Robinson and how they gain perspective of the world around them in matters of racial segregation.

With courage, pride and belief in himself Atticus Finch defends the truth with his heart by going against the racist perspectives of the time. An idea that one ponders upon while reading “To Kill A Mockingbird” is if justice will overcome the discrimination in the case of the trial. The penetrating theme of racism clearly shows the impacts of which racial segregation had in Southern USA.

After the civil war, the situation of African Americans in the South have exacerbated. Racism has gotten into its peak and the white society has had many prejudices about their former slaves. Harper Lee portrays these prejudices in each character and illustrates the seclusion of the African Americans throughout the plot of the novel.

Word Count:273

Introduction:

If democracy stands for equality, it should be color blind in the means of racism, however in the 1930's and 1920's of Southern America one struggles to see the tranquil atmosphere of integration. Harper Lee compassionately describes this environment from the eyes of Scout, a young adolescent, in an innocent matter. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a revolutionary novel at the point of which it is “*a poignant depiction of the slow and painful emergence of the New South from the ashes of its slave-holding past*”¹. This particular quote meticulously defines the core points of the novel which will be discussed in this essay. To depict the environment that the segregation has caused in a very unbiased matter, Harper Lee has chosen to portray it from the eyes of Scout Finch. From a child's point of view can we clearly see what is truly in front of us in an unprejudiced way.

Living in Maycomb, in the midst of a conservative society of the 1930's and 20's Southern America Scout Finch is an extraordinary child. She is in fact extraordinary from various perspectives. She differs from the rest of the children with her brother because of the way that they are being brought up. Scout and Jem's father, Atticus Finch is a modern viewed broad perspective lawyer who believes in integration and equality. It can defiantly be said that the standpoint which Scout has towards the issue of racism is affected by the education that she receives from her own household. Another point that is needed to be stressed is how the society, including the children of each family is prejudiced on the matter of 'Negros'. Atticus Finch

¹ Goldwin Phelps, Teresa “The Margins of Maycomb: A Rereading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*” (Article). [TED ANKARA COLLEGE], [ANKARA], [TR]. 6 December 2010.
<<http://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/bamalr45&div=35&id=&page=>>

describes the individuals views for African American's which is pinpointed as "Maycomb's disease" (Lee, 117) with

"Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don't pretend to understand...I just hope that Jem and Scout come to me for their answers instead of listening to the town. I hope they trust me enough" (Lee, 117)

With the quote above, Atticus Finch indubitably states the towns' animosity against integration and against all matters involving African American's. This essay will firstly be discussing how Scout Finch and the Finch family perceive the African American's and the Maycomb "folk", then discuss how the society in Maycomb regard the African American's and their attitudes towards racism as well of their discern of the Finch family.

1.1 Analysis of Scout Finch's Understanding of Racism:

Childhood surroundings and environments are the building blocks of our future perception of the world. While creating this foundation the human being apprehends from family, friends and society. The child, early in life, faces multiple situations which forms his/her individuality. Disputes and conflicts that pursue in the eyes of the child helps him/her to gain a conscience and make his/her own decision and face the consequences of the decision that he/she has made. Social status, culture and family play key roles as well, in the gaining of one's own identity.

“To Kill A Mockingbird” examines the development of Scout Finch from a naïve and innocent child of three, to a conscious individual in-depth in the means of how the word “racism” and “social prejudice” is formed with the concurrent events ongoing in the society. Each human being conceives the outer world in a distinguishable matter, since the story is told from the eyes of Scout; the reader comprehends Scout's views of Maycomb society in an enhanced way. Scout's encounters are the basis which creates the foundation of her views.

In Maycomb society, the usage of expressions which carry an underlying meaning of assaulting African American's is very conventional. Therefore, Scout Finch, at early age is acclimatized to expressions such as “*nigger talk*” and “*nigger lover*”. Aside from the orthodox usage of expressions, Scout's first acquaintance with the society's prejudice is derived from her scholarly experiences. Her preliminary acquaintance occurs when Cecil offends Scout, by stating that her father is “*runnin 'a still*” (Lee,100). This expression evokes Scout that her father is affiliated with illegal activities and that defending an African American is such an activity. There

is an inflexible attitude in the society towards Atticus's choice. This judgment is seen to be inevitably probable in the late 1920's and 1930's of Alabama and the southern states of America.

The situation is reinforced when Francis articulates that Atticus "*mortifies the rest of the family*" and that the family, because of Atticus's behavior will "*never be able to walk the streets of Maycomb again.*" These precise protents expose the seclusions that the Finch family has to face during the trial of Tom Robinson.

Another incident which Scout confronts is when the trial of Tom Robinson actually commences. As Scout depicts it, the courthouse is divided; there is a ruptured balcony in which the "colored" people sit. In the 1920s and 1930s Southern states this form of segregation is very orthodox. However, in the eyes of Scout Finch this "segregating act" of having a *separate balcony* is nonchalant. "*The colored balcony ran along three walls of the courtroom like a second-story veranda, and from it we could see everything*" (Lee, 219) With the usage of the words "*we could see everything*" Scout even attributes a positive definition to the discriminative act of the society.

In the novel, Jem has extensive influence on Scout and on her character development. Scout often reaches out for the hand of Jem while trying to elucidate her quotidian problems. "*Perhaps Jem could provide the answer .Jem understood school things better than Atticus*" (Lee, 330) That is why Scout approaches Jem when she has a question about "Mr. Walter" .With the pursuing dialogue between Jem and Scout the reader has a clear understanding on Scouts perceivence of the world and her escape from the prejudices created by the society regarding racial discrimination and all forms of discrimination. "*Naw, Jem, I think there's just one kind of folks. Folks.*" (Lee, 304)

With the above quote of a simply structured sentence, the author conveys Scout's way of apprehending her environment. This sentence reinforces Scout's differences from the society and the prejudice created by the other members of the society.

Scout's interpretation of events is very objective and the subtleties in her acts clearly represent her self-identity. The incidents that she faces ,the seclusions that are made against Scout during the trial process of Tom Robinson all form Scout Finch's being as an individual .The child of three that has been portrayed in the beginning of the novel, with the trial of Tom Robinson gains perspective of the world and believes in the integration of all "*folks*".

1.2 Analysis of Atticus Finch's Understanding of Racism:

Our surroundings shape the answer we give to the question who we are. The society in which we live in have deep effects in the formation of our personality .The buttressed idea of racial prejudice is dominantly seen in the people of Maycomb. The average person delineated in Maycomb County such as the Cunninghams, the Ewells and Miss Rachel are prejudiced in racist matters. However, Atticus Finch differs from the rest of the society in his own being. He refuses to be a part of the discrimination. Harper Lee portrays Atticus to be the backbone of the understanding of justice and morality in the novel.

Human beings seize to do what they believe is right, and defend what they truly believe. For some, morality and ethics play key roles in life, the acts of Atticus Finch throughout the novel display his personality and point of view towards morality and ethics .Atticus believes that every man has the right to be defended and that there shouldn't be any racial prejudice in legislature, in the quote below, Atticus justifies why he believes that he needs to defend Tom Robinson, an African American citizen of Maycomb County.

“The main one is, if I didn't I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent this country in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again” (Lee,100)

In Atticus's point of view the legislations apply for everyone of every sex, of every color of every citizen. However the society of Maycomb, assert that Atticus has “*turned out to be a nigger-lover*”(Lee,110) .Atticus is a very prominent character in the society because of his varying views from the rest of Maycomb.

Atticus does not abide the towns' conventional thoughts and is able to interpret events in an objective form of understanding. In the novel he clearly states what is known by the town but in fact not often asserted, that the country they live in then, the 1920s and 1930s USA is created equal for everyone and is a democracy, reflecting the equality of each citizen.

“But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal... (...) Our courts have their faults, as does any human institution, but in this country our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts all men are created equal” (Lee, 274)

Atticus Finch displays great morality and unbiased views despite the general orthodoxy of the town. Even though he and his family are in some matters secluded and scorned by the society because of the Tom Robinson trial, Atticus retains his judgment. For Atticus, the reasoning process in one's mind needs to be very objective and without any interference. If a person has clear judgment then, they will have no prejudiced views on any race.

“When that crew went away, they didn't go as reasonable men... There's something in our world that makes men lose their heads... In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's the white man always wins.” (Lee, 295)

Despite the fact that Atticus himself is a white person grown in Maycomb society, he shows very unprejudiced views and acts very ethical and morally correct. In a country where equality is seen in the constitution, Atticus questions why “white men cheat black men everyday” (Lee, 295) and struggles a fight for democracy and for what he believes is right in a very closed society filled with racist viewed people. Atticus, himself, is aware that the fight he

gives by defending an African American and by these means he's not abiding the conventional ways of Maycomb.

Another point that Atticus makes, further reinforces his role as the backbone of morality in the novel. Atticus states the fact that African American's are seemingly *ignorant* on judicial matters than the white men who seek opportunities to take advantage of the ignorance of the African American's. "*There's nothing more sickening to me than a low-grade white man who'll take advantage of a Negro's ignorance.*" (Lee, 296) Atticus, as a character is portrayed by Harper Lee to profess what is morally correct. Atticus teaches his children, Jem and Scout to criticize the world in their own perception. With Atticus as a parent, Scout is taught to "*criticize the persuasive social attitudes she witnesses*" In the novel, overall, Atticus Finch has helped the growth of the townspeople of Maycomb County in the means of commitment to social justice after the trial of Tom Robinson.

1.3 Analysis of the Society's Understanding of Racism:

The society that each individual lives in shapes their view on the way they apprehend the world around them. The society that each individual lives in shows correlations within itself. Maycomb County, if generalized, has a prejudiced view on the matter of black and white segregation, racism is dominant to the society's views.

Even though the United States of America, is regarded as a democracy and that in it's constitution it is stated that "*all men are created equal ,that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*"²

However, in the 1920's and 1930's, among many others, in Maycomb society, all men were not treated equal and were not seen equal ,as it is depicted in the novel by Harper Lee. Even when it came to judicial matters, the "white men" were found to be innocent against the word of a "black man". "*There's something in our world that makes men lose their heads... In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's the white man always wins.*" (Lee, 295) These are the words of Atticus Finch, an educated man, who has a clear against view on racism; Atticus Finch with his words illustrates the conventional views of the society in just a sentence.

The same view is given by an African American citizen in the society , Reverend Sykes, during the trial of Tom Robinson, states the same views as Atticus Finch to Jem. "*I aint't ever seen any jury decide in favor of a colored man over a white man...*" (Lee, 279)

² "In Congress, July 4, 1776 The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America" (Declaration). [TED ANKARA COLLEGE], [ANKARA], [TR]. 6 December 2010. < <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/>>

The people of Maycomb, have strict views on the issue of racism .A common way of segregation, seen in Maycomb society as well as many other societies of the time, is the segregation in courts. There are separate seatings for each “color” of persons. There is a separate balcony in which the “colored “people are seated. Also, the segregation in seatings doesn’t end here, there also is a separate church for “black people “ and “white people” .If all men are created in equal in the constitution, then shouldn’t it be applied for all?

However, even the entrance of “white people” into “nigger church” causes disruption in the society. *“I wants to know why you bringin’ white chillum to nigger church.”(Lee, 158)*

Another point that needs to be made is the common understanding of “nigger”. When the “white people” in the society think of the word “nigger” and the African American citizens living in the society, they have given African American’s synonyms as well. They believe that an African American, even if he/she is married, lives a decent life, regularly goes to church can never be classified as a good person because *“the nigger always comes out in them” (Lee, 322)* On the contrary, if a man has not done anything decent throughout his whole life, but *is a white man*, he does not have to do anything in order to prove that he is innocent against a *black man*. Maycomb County is blind to the truth when it comes to racial cases, and this is also what Atticus Finch ponders about in the novel as well as stated below.

“Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don’t pretend to understand...”(Lee,117)

In the society, everyone repeats the phrase “equal rights for everyone”, even in the schools the teachers teach these principals without believing or questioning what they mean. Miss Gates, Scout Finch’s teacher, during her lesson time is shown to support “democracy” and

“equality” however, as soon as Tom Robinson’s trial had ended she is shown to have no understanding of the concepts that she teaches during school hours. Outside the school hours, she is seen to have orthodox view on racism.

*“I heard her say it’s time somebody taught ‘em a lesson, they we’re getting’
way above themselves, an’ the next thing they think they can do is marry us”
(Lee,331)*

Even the school teachers, who are supposedly teaching the principals of the constitution and the country, have no understanding of what they teach in the schools, and the schools are where the education begins, and where we get our first glance into the society. Therefore, the scholarly education that one receives plays a key role in their understanding .If Miss Gates, teaches something that she does not believe and if she herself has racist views, then the children are taught to have racist views as well.

Another factor that affects and shapes the views of children are, their parents and their families. In the society of Maycomb, the elderly have a tendency of combusting their views to their children .What the parents of the child speaks of ,is what forms the children’s knowledge .Scout and Jem therefore are bound to be scorned by the society and the children.

*“The adults of Maycomb never discussed the case with Jem and me; it
seemed that they discussed it with their children, and their attitude must
have been that neither of us could help having Atticus for a parent ,so their
children must be nice to us inspite of him.”(Lee, 326)*

The children of Maycomb also possess the same racist views that their parents possess as it is described in the novel To Kill a Mockingbird.

On the contrary, apart from the vast majority of the Maycomb County, there is also one part of the society which does not believe in the segregation of *white* and *black*. Some citizens of Maycomb possess views correlated with Atticus Finch's. One of which is Miss Maudie, who enlightens Scout Finch on the matter that, the people in the town with *background* do not feel the same about racism as though the conventional thoughts of the society.

“The handful of people in this town who say that fair play is not marked White Only...the handful of people in this town with background, that's who they are”(Lee,316)

Taking the general views of the society into consideration, it can be added that the African American were not given any political recognition and the white race was in an advantageous position in all aspects of the society. Leslie G. Carr, portrays this understanding with the quote

*“Calling a people a race is a way of defining the people in question as beneath political recognition. Race was the term of choice for White nationalists because it defined the contradiction between White and African American in the way that was most advantageous to White. Thus, there was a nation, understood to be White, that had a race problem.”*³

The society of Maycomb also portrays the same understandings pointed out by Leslie G. Carr in the ways of which the African American citizens of the society are not given any recognition in any aspects of the society, Tom Robinson's trial displays a first in the recognition of the African American race in the society of Maycomb. Another point that needs to be recognized is the

³ P. 23 Carr, Leslie G. “Color Blind Racism”, 1997. (Online Book). [TED ANKARA COLLEGE], [ANKARA], [TR]. 6 December 2010.
<<http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=gbquQlq5D6QC&oi=fnd&pg=PP11&dq=racism+in+the+1920s&ots=fRG5Zmu0yl&sig=pb-qWrVmDy8gZQdG5MZcJsorvxM#v=onepage&q=racism%20in%20the%201920s&f=false>>

geographical importance of Maycomb County. Maycomb County is set in Alabama, one of the Southern states of the United States of America. The formerly recognized slaves, the African American people of that time, with a label of “Negro”, were discriminated especially in the South, after the civil war. The racist views were most commonly seen and were idealized.

“After the civil war, various class forces contended in the South an between the South and the rest of the country to determine the status of former slaves... During this time, at the peak of Western colonialism, evolutionary “racist” ideology became dominant ideology on the subject of race throughout the capitalist world”⁴

The conventional views of the town of Maycomb as it is being depicted in Harper Lee’s novel To Kill a Mockingbird, show correlation to that of the rest of the societies in Southern States of America. The masses in the town portray a prejudiced racist views against the African American citizens of their County.

⁴ P.31 Richard,Grahams.” ‘Race’, Racism and Psychology”.Routledge,1997.

Conclusion:

The implementations of racism are dominantly depicted in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Through the words and the point of view of Scout Finch, Lee has portrayed a conventional society to be seen at the 1920's and 1930's southern states of America. The author actualizes the imagery of the society and its understanding of racism with all its prejudices in many factors, of three which have been analyzed in this essay. The concept and understanding of racism has been portrayed by the views of Scout Finch, Atticus Finch and the generalized understanding of the society of Maycomb County.

The views of Scout Finch depict an un-orthodox view upon the issue of racism. The novel, being told by Scout, is an in depth analysis of her perception of the world. Lee, while analyzing Scout's perception also details Scout's understanding of the concept "racism". Throughout the novel we get the understanding that for Scout, *there is only one kind of folks*.

The second point is how Atticus perceives the issue and how he shapes the views of others as well overall one understands the conclusion that Atticus is depicted as the "ethical backbone" of the society and the novel itself.

The third point which has been analyzed is the perceiving of the society regarding the concept of racism. The society's views are seen to be generalized by Harper Lee to depict the fact that they are a conventional state, of their time and portray the orthodox behavior and understanding as of the rest of the southern states in America that could be further analyzed.

All in all, while reading and analyzing the book *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, one sees many implementations to racism and the book itself can be perceived as a criticism to the prejudiced and biased views towards racism in the 1920's and 1930's southern states of America. As stated by Thomas Russel Garth “ *racial differences are skin deep only and are due entirely to environment and opportunity and not heredity*” .

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