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Race And Gender Roles: To Kill A Mockingbird

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Abstract: If you are interested in social issues that the world is facing today, you are not alone. Many people share your curiosity and may have taken steps to address these issues. One of the common ways in which people have responded to social problems throughout history is by writing about them. Some writers choose to use works of fiction to interpret these problems. A great example of this is the novel "To Kill a Mockingbird," a famous work that comments on social issues prevalent in the Southeastern region of the United States in the mid-1900s. Harper Lee uses her book to address the social problem of race and racism in the Southern USA. However, her commentary on race is more nuanced than it may appear, and she also frequently comments on another social problem of gender roles in the Southern USA in her novel.

RACE AND GENDER ROLES: TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

The commentary on racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is much more specific in what it is in reaction to than it may seem, and it even incorporates elements of commentary on events that take place after the novel's setting in the 1930s. Harper Lee wrote the novel in the 1950s, as the African-American Civil Rights Movement began to pick up steam. One real-life event she indirectly mirrors in the novel is the Emmett Till Trial. The trial was of two poor white men accused of the murder of Till, and the two men were acquitted after a very short jury thought. There are many parallels between the trials and other events regarding Till and Tom Robinson. Poor white men caused the downfalls of both men; both juries that tried them consisted entirely of white men, and both Till and Robinson were mutilated after being murdered. In addition, most highly to the message Lee was trying to give through the novel, both Till and Robinson were victims of racism because they allegedly made advances towards white women. Patrick Chura explains further how making Robinson's trial a rape case is social commentary: "Gunnar Myrdal's exhausting 1947 study of southern culture had asked white southerners to choose among six categories in gauging what they believed blacks most desired by asserting their civil rights. First in ranking came "intermarriage and sex intercourse with whites". By her making it clear in her writing that Tom is innocent of raping Mayella Ewell, Harper Lee tries to make the point that not all black men are immediately guilty when they are accused of misdoings against white women. By commenting on the Emmett Till trial in her novel, Harper Lee specifically remarks on the racism of her time.

Harper Lee's aim in including commentary relating to recent events in her novel was for Southern readers to notice that perhaps men like the ones who murdered Emmett Till were not justified in their views on race. In addition to plot points such as Tom's apparent innocence, she uses plain language to get this point across. Atticus, the defender of Tom Robinson and the moral centre of the book, remarks: "Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything relating a Negro comes up is something I don't pretend to understand". By using the diction of the word "reasonable", Lee states that even with prejudiced views, Southern readers of her book can still be good people. By making Atticus' tone more of confusion than of arrogance.

The commentary in *To Kill a Mockingbird* often deals with physical disability and its connection to race relations. Tom Robinson's disability itself is a reference to racism. Scout comments on Tom's disability during his trial: "His left arm was fully twelve inches shorter than his right, and hung dead at his side. It ended in a small, shrivelled hand". Maycomb's African-American pastor, Reverend Sykes, then explains to her that he was "caught in a cotton gin" and "tore all the muscles loose from his bones". Many enslaved people had disabilities gained through injuries sustained during agriculture that were similar to Tom's disability. These disabilities were caused by brutal white masters or, like Tom's disability, by accidents. Lisa Miller infers in her analysis of this point that: "Tom's injured arm, disabled in a cotton gin accident, should be read an injury like that of chattel slavery that highlights Maycomb's unwillingness to part with a history so deeply rooted in a white supremacist hierarchy". Lee making Tom disabled because of an agricultural accident is a comment on how the South had not advanced far from the time of slavery and on how African-Americans still did agricultural work. Lee tries to convince Southerners that stopping racism would lead to African-Americans having fewer gruesome injuries like Tom's and, therefore, would be a positive development. The case is made in *To Kill a Mockingbird* that Southern white people should rethink race relations in agricultural jobs and as a whole due to disabilities that African Americans often sustained while working as farmers.

Harper Lee argues in her novel, through Tom Robinson's State of Affairs, that having dark skin in the 1930s was more of a "disability" than an actual physical disability. Tom Robinson becomes a convicted rapist and then a dead man because of a case held in a racist society. If he had light skin but still a disabled arm while living in this society, he would have most likely become neither a convicted rapist nor a dead man. White disabled people would be overly pitied at the time, and any white person with a disabled arm would likely face some prejudice in this way. However, white disabled people would not be even considered suspects in a rape case, as they would be thought of as too weak. Tom's disabled arm proves to be a quality that Atticus often uses to defend him, and it is even mentioned in the lawyer's closing statement. Despite these facts, Tom is not free from judgment caused by his disability, as Jem calls him "crippled". However, Tom faces harsher and more prejudiced words than "crippled" because of his race, as, for example, a boy Scout's age is told by his parents that Tom is a "nigger" who "oughta hang from the water-tank". Some parents in Maycomb are so racist that they openly tell their young children that a man should die because of unproven allegations against him that are racially motivated. This fact shows that being black is a quality that can easily lead to a loss of reputation in the town. Therefore, being dark-skinned is sadly more of a "disability" that impaired people's options socially in Maycomb than actual disabilities. People in the town who lose their reputations due to their race could quickly lose their jobs, families or, like Tom, their lives. Harper Lee's novel makes the point to Southern readers that race being more of a disability than actual physical disabilities is an unfair reality in the South that needs to be undone.

Although *To Kill a Mockingbird* is heralded as a classic in the literature regarding race relations, it is not as profound in its call for racial equality as it may seem. First off, although the book does strongly criticize racism as morally wrong, it does not directly criticize segregation or advocate for racial reconciliation and integration. In their everyday lives, Scout and Jem rarely interact with the black community in Maycomb, and they only visit the community when Calpurnia takes them to her church while Atticus is away. For most of the novel, Calpurnia leads "a modest double life," an existence outside the Finch household that is entirely "separate". It is, therefore, no wonder that Scout states the at first glance strange remark of "after all, he's just a Negro" when Dill criticizes the poor treatment of Tom during his trial. Scout, although she is taught to be tolerant by her father, has never had an African-American friend around her age and has been in a culture filled with segregation for her entire life. Her lack of complete understanding about being a person of colour and her closeness to a large number of racist people make it very possible that she holds African Americans in slightly lower regard than whites. In her novel, Lee does not make it clear to chastise this largely tolerant but still sometimes patronizing attitude, and her slight prejudice shows. This prejudice is evident in some of Atticus' statements during the novel. For example, he thinks that the word "nigger" is terrible because it is the speech of ordinary people and not because it is simply racist, and he makes the false assertion that "The Klu Klux's gone...It'll never come back". He has fallen into a lack of understanding of the complete picture of racism against African Americans. He cannot realize the total negative effect a word such as "nigger" can have on a person's psyche. He also does not see that some of the white people he interacts with every day at least have ties with the Klan, a group that harasses, injures, and even kills African Americans and needs to be stopped before more innocent people are

harmed. The slight prejudice in Harper Lee's plot and characterization proves that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not a radically progressive book regarding racial equality.

It is not a stretch to say that *To Kill a Mockingbird* comments on many other subjects besides race relations. Lee herself has expressed this point of view: "My book has a universal theme, it is not a "racial" novel. It portrays an aspect of civilization. I tried to show the conflict of the human soul reduced to its simplest terms...universal in the sense that it could happen to anybody, anywhere where people live together". It can be quickly drawn from Lee's statement that the "conflict of the human soul" in the novel regards challenging social issues that everyone has some experience in living through or studying. These issues include racism but also sexism, classism, and discrimination against people with disabilities. They do not just refer to being accepting of people of other races.

The second most prominent type of social commentary in *To Kill a Mockingbird* regards gender roles, as the novel deals extensively with how women in Maycomb are encouraged to conform to their gender's traditional place in society. Traditional gender role norms expected women in the 1930s to work inside the home and care for the house while bearing and raising children. These expectations applied especially to middle and upper-class women, who did not need to work outside the home to keep bread on the table. Conformity to these expectations is particularly significant because they function as Scout's mother figures". Calpurnia, a poor black woman, works as a domestic servant for the Finches in order to conform while still making a living. The other two women are wealthier and do not have jobs at all. These adult women being unable to work outside domestic life is a subtle social commentary by Lee, as Scout realizes the lack of opportunity for these women through observing and learning from them. Calpurnia, even though she did not go to school, is well-educated for a black woman, as she was taught how to read and write well by Miss Maudie's aunt using the Bible and Blackstone's Commentaries. She could have quickly been hired for a job as a secretary or teacher at the time if racism and sexism were not in play. Miss Maudie could have also quickly landed a job outside of a house for her gardening or cooking skills if sexism was not rampant in Maycomb. Scout must feel disheartened because these role models cannot use their talents to make a living.

Scout is the character in *To Kill a Mockingbird* who most strongly defies traditional gender norms. Lee uses much of her story to comment on popular societal views regarding tomboys. Scout is a tomboy, as she often plays with her brother Jem and their friend Dill instead of staying inside as a conforming girl would. She has fun and some coming-of-age experiences while playing with the two boys. The three get themselves dirty and in trouble by rolling in tires, making mock plays about the life of Boo Radley, and trying to invade Boo's privacy. Scout still engages in these behaviours when she begins her schooling, angering Aunt Alexandra, who thinks it best for Scout to start "playing with small stoves, tea sets, and wearing the Add-A-Pearl necklace she gave". Aunt Alexandra often scolds Scout for her "unladylike" behaviour. She even decides to move in with Scout's family to help the young girl conform when her relationship with her husband sours. Scout's aunt's devotion to the traditional gender norms of the time is a social commentary by Lee that criticizes these norms. This statement is true because Alexandra's devotion to the norms and how this devotion rubs off on Scout shows how conforming can hurt tomboys. Scout slowly conforms to Alexandra's expectations by going to Alexandra's tea parties. She is negatively affected by them as she becomes less friendly with Jem and is introduced to the racist views about Africans expressed by many of her aunt's friends. It makes sense for Lee to comment on how being a tomboy is a positive trait that can be retained as a girl: "Although nineteenth-century culture held somewhat positive views towards tomboys, society still emphasized gender stereotypes in the notion that tomboys could not continue beyond adolescence". Lee hopes to show young Southern girls that being a tomboy could be an acceptable alternative to being a "ladylike" girl through Scout's insightfulness and adventures. In addition, she warns those of these girls who happen to be tomboys that mother figures who want them to conform to traditional gender norms might not hold moral views. Evidence Lee adds to the text that backs up this warning includes the racist views of Aunt Alexandra and her friends. In her classic novel, Harper Lee comments on contemporary gender relations by discussing Scout's tom-boyism and how Scout is affected by a challenge from her aunt.

Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a social commentary criticising race relations and racism in the Southern USA during the mid-1900s. The author uses various means to comment on race, such as the Emmett Till trial and also explores the relationship between race and physical disability. However, it is worth noting that the novel does not advocate for complete racial integration. Additionally, the novel comments on gender roles, explicitly

reacting to traditional expectations that women should not work outside the home and should not remain tomboys once they reach adolescence. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is an essential example of a novel with a straightforward but important theme on the surface, with equally crucial specific commentary hidden deep inside. When reading classic novels, it is worth considering what specific commentary can be applied to current social problems.

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