

FAST FACTS

Author's Works and Themes: *To Kill a Mockingbird*

"Author's Works and Themes: *To Kill a Mockingbird*." Gale, 2019, www.gale.com.

Writings by Harper Lee

- *To Kill a Mockingbird* (novel) 1960
- *Go Set a Watchman* (novel) 2015

Major Themes

The central thematic concern of *To Kill a Mockingbird* addresses racial prejudice and social justice. Atticus Finch represents a strongly principled, liberal perspective that runs contrary to the ignorance and prejudice of the white, Southern, small-town community in which he lives. Atticus is convinced that he must instill values of equality in his children, counteracting the racist influence. Lee makes use of several images and allegories throughout the novel to symbolize racial conflict. The children's attitudes about Boo, for example, represent in small scale the foundation of racial prejudice in fear and superstition. The rabid dog that threatens the town has been interpreted as symbolizing the menace of racism. Atticus's shooting of the rabid dog has been considered by many critics as a representation of his skills as an attorney in targeting the racial prejudices of the town.

The central symbol of the novel, the mockingbird, further develops the theme of racial prejudice. For Christmas, Scout and Jem are given air rifles by their father, who warns that, although he considers it fair to shoot other birds, he views it a "sin to kill a mockingbird" because they "don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us." The mockingbird represents victims of oppression in general, and the African-American community more specifically. The unjust trial of Tom Robinson, in which the jury's racial prejudice condemns an innocent man, is symbolically characterized as the shooting of an innocent mockingbird. Toward the end of the novel, Scout realizes that submitting Boo to a trial would be akin to shooting a mockingbird--just as the prejudice against African Americans influences the trial of Tom Robinson, the town's prejudices against the white but mentally disabled Boo would likely impact a jury's view.

The concept of justice is presented in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an antidote to racial prejudice. As a strongly principled, liberal lawyer who defends a wrongly accused black man, Atticus represents a role model for moral and legal justice. Atticus explains to Scout that while he believes the American justice system to be without prejudice, the individuals who sit on the jury often harbor bias, which can taint the workings of the system. Throughout the majority of the novel, Atticus retains his faith in the system, but he ultimately loses in his legal defense of Tom. As a result of this

experience, Atticus expresses a certain disillusionment when, at the conclusion of the book, he agrees to conceal Boo's culpability in the killing of Ewell, recognizing that Boo would be stereotyped by his peers. Atticus decides to act based on his own principles of justice in the end, rather than rely on a legal system that may be fallible.

Paper Topics

- Examine the theme of prejudice in *To Kill a Mockingbird* by comparing the children's attitudes about Boo Radley to the racist views of the white townspeople.
- Discuss how justice was dispensed during the course of the novel. Why did Atticus's belief in the justice system change?

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