

To Kill a Mockingbird

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To Kill a Mockingbird

“...but remember, it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.”

“Your father’s right,” she said. “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. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird” (Lee, 103).



Biography



- Harper Lee was the youngest child of Amasa Coleman Lee and Francis Finch Lee
- Amasa Lee was an attorney and newspaper publisher
- Francis Finch Lee taught piano
- The Lees lived in Monroeville, Alabama
- Harper Lee graduated from the University of Alabama, and studied at Oxford University during summer session
- In 1950, she entered law school, but quit after one year
- She moved to New York City and worked as a reservation clerk for Eastern Airlines and British Overseas Air

Biography

- Harper Lee wrote a few published articles before *To Kill a Mockingbird*; she wrote nothing afterwards
- Lee spent 2-1/2 years writing *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Although she never wrote another novel, she traveled with her friend, Truman Capote, as he researched material for his crime novel *In Cold Blood*
- Truman Capote is believed to be the template for the character of Charles Baker Harris, otherwise known as “Dill”



Biography



- The novel was adapted into a movie in 1962, starring Gregory Peck, Mary Badham, Philip Alford, Frank Overton, Paul Fix, and then unknown actor Robert Duvall
- Gregory Peck won the best actor Oscar for his portrayal of Atticus Finch
- The novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1961
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* was voted as the best novel of the 20th century by the American Librarians Association
- Harper Lee was awarded the Presidential Medal of Honor in 2007

Themes

The novel makes use of a number of themes, including:

- The growth and development of Scout and Jem
- The importance of friendship
- The role of family
- The role of community
- Courage and honesty
- Racial prejudice
- The role of the lawyer in society



A dried leaf and stem are positioned on the left side of the slide, extending vertically. The leaf is dark brown and pointed, while the stem is thin and dark. The background is a light, textured surface with some faint, larger-scale patterns.

Themes

The growth and development of Scout and Jem

- In some respects, the novel tells about the coming of age of Jem, and to a lesser extent, Scout
- Scout and Jem are raised by their father, Atticus, after the death of their mother
- Calpurnia, their black cook and housekeeper acts as a mother-figure to the two – this is seen most vividly when Calpurnia takes Scout and Jem to the Negro church
- Miss Maudie acts as a guide, and conscience to Scout, Jem and Dill
- Dill's parents are in contrast to Atticus—their indifference is meant as a counterpoint to Atticus' caring

Themes

The growth and development of Scout and Jem

- Jem's reading to Miss DuBose is a life-lesson, and serves as a means for Jem's entry into adulthood
- Scout's defense of her father during the mob scene in town shows that she understands Atticus' teaching



A dried leaf and stem are positioned on the left side of the slide, extending from the top left towards the bottom center. The leaf is dark brown and curled, while the stem is thin and dark. The background is a light, textured surface with some faint, larger-scale patterns.

Themes

The growth and development of Scout and Jem

- Aunt Alexandra is rejected by Scout and Jem because she believes that the quality of a person is determined by their pedigree and not their character
- Atticus explains that family extends beyond the immediate – it extends to the surrounding neighborhood and beyond, as he reminds Scout before the start of the trial: “But remember this, no matter how bitter things get, they’re still our friends and this is still our home” (Lee, 87).

Themes

The importance of friendship

- Scout and Jem befriend “Dill” the boy whose family seems to have forgotten him
- Jem befriends Miss DuBose, albeit grudgingly, and learns to respect her courage
- Atticus makes it clear that he is a friend to all decent people. In the courtroom, after the guilty verdict was read, Scout notices that the people in the balcony “... were standing. All around us and in the balcony on the opposite wall, the Negroes were getting to their feet. Reverend Sykes’s voice was as distant as Judge Taylor’s: ‘Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father’s passin’” (241).

Themes

The importance of friendship

- After the trial, the grateful black people brought food to Atticus and family as a way of reinforcing their thanks and common bond
- Reverend Sykes tells Scout and Jem when they attend church with Calpurnia that: “This church has no better friend than your daddy” (Lee, 140).
- Perhaps the most touching example of friendship is that of “Boo” Radley saving the lives of Scout and Jem—this man, who was feared and reviled, saved the lives of the children who originally sought to torment him



Themes



The importance of friendship

- “His lips parted into a timid smile, and our neighbor’s image blurred with my sudden tears.

Hey Boo, I said” (Lee, 310).

“Boo and I walked up the steps to the porch. His fingers found the front doorknob. He gently released my hand, opened the door, went inside, and shut the door behind him. I never saw him again” (Lee, 320).

Themes

The role of family

- Atticus teaches Scout and Jem that family is more than a pedigree
- As Scout relates, she had been taught that “Fine Folks were people who did the best they could with the sense they had, but Aunt Alexandra was of the opinion, obliquely expressed, that the longer a family had been squatting on one patch of land the finer it was” (Lee, 147).
- Family life in Maycomb is stratified; the Finches live at the top end of the spectrum, followed by the middle-class whites, then the lower class whites like the Ewells, then the black people. At the very bottom are the people like Dolphus Raymond



Themes

The role of family

- Navigating among the layers of society is difficult, but Atticus is one person who appears capable of doing so. Miss Maudie remarks to Scout that Atticus is the same, no matter where he goes – “Gracious child, I was raveling a thread, wasn’t even thinking about your father, but now I am I’ll say this: Atticus Finch is the same in the house as he is one the public streets” (Lee, 51).
- Ultimately, by standing in someone else’s shoes, they become part of you, part of your family, as Scout learns after she walks Boo home – “Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough” (Lee, 321).

Themes

The role of community

- Before the trial starts, Atticus warns Scout and Jem that it might be difficult for them from time to time. Prior to the trial, a group of residents visits Atticus at his house. After the men left, Jem asks Atticus why they came to the house and if the men wanted to “get” Atticus. Atticus replies: “No son, those were our friends. . . .we don’t have mobs and that nonsense in Maycomb. I’ve never heard of a gang in Maycomb” (Lee, 166 - 167).
- After the trial, Scout and Jem are downcast; they question why the trial was lost, and why Atticus was selected to defend Tom Robinson. Miss Maudie provides an answer: “We’re so rarely called upon to be Christians, but when we are, we’ve got men like Atticus to go for us” (Lee, 246).

Themes

Courage and Honesty

- Atticus emphasizes that it is important to empathize with other people – “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view. . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it” (Lee, 33).
- Atticus sets an example for Scout and Jem, one that he takes seriously. When Scout asks Atticus why he took Tom Robinson’s case, Atticus replies: “The main one [reason] is, if I didn’t I couldn’t hold up my head in town, I couldn’t represent this county in the legislature, I couldn’t even tell you or Jem not to do something again” (Lee, 86).

Themes

Courage and Honesty

- Atticus tells Scout and Jem that personal integrity is important, and that a person needs to live with his/her conscience: “. . .but before I can live with other folks I’ve got to live with myself. The only thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience” (Lee, 120).
- When Jem complains about the treatment he receives from Miss DuBose, Atticus tells him about her addiction to pain medication, and her determination to rid herself of that addiction: “I wanted you to see something about her—I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It’s when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what” (Lee, 128).

Themes

Courage and Honesty

- After the trial Aunt Alexandra revisits Atticus and his family. Alexandra complains that Atticus has been asked to do too much for the town, and that his actions are not appreciated. Miss Maudie responds as follows—“Whether Maycomb knows it or not, we’re paying the highest tribute we can pay a man. We trust him to do right. It’s that simple” (Lee, 269).
- As Scout and Jem wonder why their father was selected to represent Tom Robinson at the trial, and why he accepted the assignment, Miss Maudie responded by saying: “I simply want to tell you that there are some men in this world who were born to do our unpleasant jobs for us. Your father’s one of them (Lee, 245).



Themes

The role of the lawyer in society

- Initially, Atticus does not want to take Tom Robinson's case, as he explains to Scout. But, ultimately, he must place the needs of his client above his own needs, and as a result, the case becomes more personal to him: "Scout, simply by the nature of the work, every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. This one's mine, I guess" (Lee, 86-87).
- As Atticus sums up his case at the trial, he tells the jurors about a way in which men are created equal: "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" (Lee, 233).

Themes

The role of the lawyer in society

- Mr. Raymond, a white man who lives with a black woman, tells Scout, Dill and Jem at the trial that they don't fully understand what Atticus is doing: "I don't reckon it's—Miss Jean Louise, you don't know you're pa's not a run-of-the-mill man, it'll take a few years for that to sink in—you haven't seen enough of the world yet. You haven't seen this town, but all you gotta do is step back inside the courthouse" (Lee, 229).



Themes

Racial Prejudice

- Tom Robinson made the mistake of pitying a white girl whose life was miserable. Tom's pity led him to help her with various household tasks that needed to be done. When Tom spurned the advances of Mayella, Tom was doomed—he dared to pity a white girl. When Tom, on questioning by the prosecuting attorney, answered that he helped Mayella because he “. . .felt right sorry for her, she seemed to try more'n the rest of 'em,” his fate was sealed. “**You** felt sorry for **her**, you felt **sorry** for her?” (Lee, 224) asked Mr. Gilmer, the prosecuting attorney.



Themes

Racial Prejudice

- Although the results of the trial were disappointing, Miss Maudie talks about the effect of Atticus' taking on the case: "It was no accident [that Atticus was assigned the case]. I was sittin' there on the porch last night, waiting. I waited and waited to see you all come down the sidewalk, and as I waited I thought, Atticus Finch won't win, he can't win, but he's the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that. And I thought to myself, well, we're making a step—it's just a baby step, but it's a step" (Lee, 246).

Themes

Racial Prejudice

- Atticus explains to Jem the importance of dealing fairly with all people and warns 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 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.”

Themes

Racial Prejudice

- Miss Maudie explains to Aunt Alexandra why it is so important that Atticus defended Tom Robinson, it's for "The handful of people in this town who say that fair play is not marked White Only; the handful of people who say that a fair trial is for everybody, not just us; the handful of people with enough humility to think, when they look at a Negro, there but for the Lord's kindness am I" (Lee, 270).

Fifty Years Later

Harper Lee receives the Presidential
Medal of Freedom Award



“It’s better to be silent than to be
a fool”



Harper Lee receives the National Medal of Arts Award

Fifty Years Later

- More than thirty (30) million copies of the book have been sold worldwide
- The book has been translated into over forty (40) languages
- Harper Lee has been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Medal of the Arts and Humanities, the Pulitzer Prize and countless other awards
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* was listed as a banned book; it was also named the best novel of the twentieth century by the American Librarians Association

Critical Response

While *To Kill a Mockingbird* has received critical acclaim, it has its share of detractors

- Flannery O'Connor dismissed the book as being “all right for a children’s book”
- Carson McCullers claimed that Harper Lee was “poaching on my literary preserves”
- Numerous critics have noted that its portrayal of blacks and poor white characters (such as the Ewells) is rudimentary and one dimensional
- Some see Atticus Finch as being too good and not believable

Kate Barker

I have More
respect for Atticus
Then anyone I have
ever met And hes not
even real!

Perhaps the best way to appreciate the impact of this book is to question it.

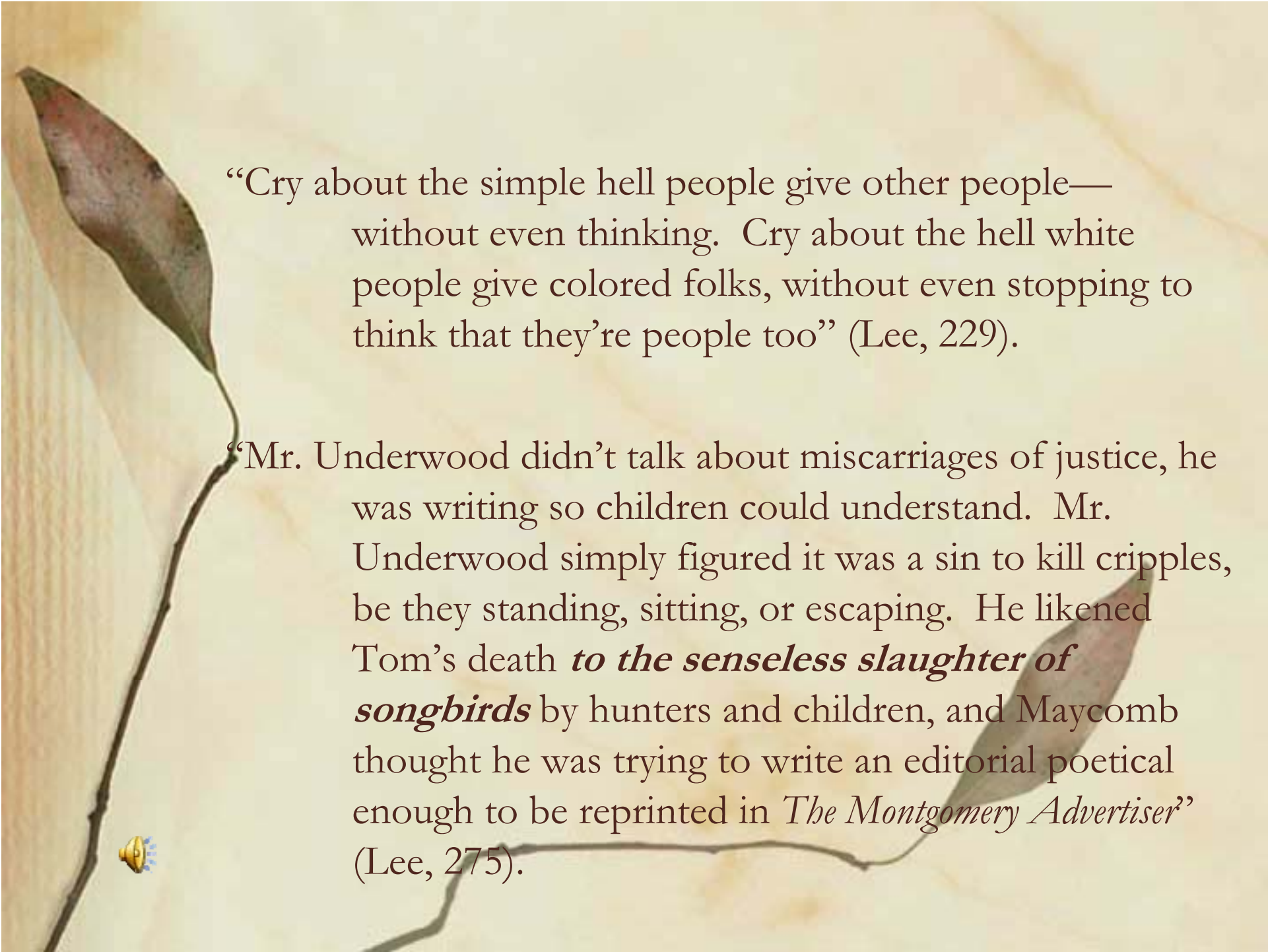
So ask your self a question – would you feel better knowing that there were people like Atticus Finch in the world?



A dried, pressed leaf on a stem, positioned on the left side of the frame. The leaf is dark brown and elongated, with a pointed tip. The stem is thin and dark, extending from the leaf towards the bottom left. The background is a light, textured surface, possibly paper or fabric, with subtle variations in tone and some faint, darker spots.

Now ask your self another question:

—How can **YOU** become another Atticus
Finch?



“Cry about the simple hell people give other people— without even thinking. Cry about the hell white people give colored folks, without even stopping to think that they’re people too” (Lee, 229).

“Mr. Underwood didn’t talk about miscarriages of justice, he was writing so children could understand. Mr. Underwood simply figured it was a sin to kill cripples, be they standing, sitting, or escaping. He likened Tom’s death *to the senseless slaughter of songbirds* by hunters and children, and Maycomb thought he was trying to write an editorial poetical enough to be reprinted in *The Montgomery Advertiser*” (Lee, 275).



Works Cited

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