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Analysis of the social evils portrayed in the literary masterpiece "To Kill A Mockingbird" by Harper Lee

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Abstract:
Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* explores the deep-rooted social evil of racial discrimination in America. The gravitas of Lee's novel comes from the fact that she draws inspiration from events around her. This paper is an analysis of the social evils this book portrays, and how the characters constructed double standards to defend their actions and condemn others. The novel features characters that firmly believe in the supremacy of whites over African-Americans. Their discriminatory attitude shines through every sentence they utter.

Keywords: Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, racial discrimination, prejudices, courtroom, hypocrisy.

Introduction

About the Author –

The author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Nelle Harper Lee, is an American novelist best known for the aforementioned book. She published the book in 1960 and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She also won the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2007 for her contribution to literature. She only published one more book, *Go Set a Watchman*, in 2015, which turned out to be the first draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Like Jean Louise Finch, Harper Lee was born and raised in Alabama, and her father was a lawyer.

Published when the country was rife with racism, the book became controversial, particularly with segregationists and other opponents of the Civil Rights Movement. This criticism crossed the threshold when, in 1966, an area school board in Richmond, Virginia, attempted to ban *To Kill a Mockingbird*, terming it "immoral literature."

The characters in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* are loosely based on her family, friends, and neighbors, incidents, and events of her childhood, which helps paint a more

realistic and vivid picture of the people and environment of the 1930s South for the masterpiece's newer audiences.

Social Evils Portrayed

The book covers a wide range of social issues such as racial prejudice against African Americans, gender roles, mental health, etc. It does so from the point of view of an innocent child who looked at the world with fresh eyes, free from any stereotypes or prejudices that the adults had developed to exhibit their supremacy over everyone different.

The book's main issue is the racial prejudice prevalent in 1930s America. However, to lighten the novel's atmosphere, the author uses the adventures and anecdotal incidents in Scout's childhood and Jem Finch's. It addresses racial prejudice through the trial of Tom Robinson, a Black man who was falsely accused of rape. Tom Robinson was a twenty-five-year-old hardworking young man with a wife and three children to care for. When he was a little boy, he got his left arm caught in a cotton gin, and the resulting injuries rendered it useless. A kind-hearted man, Mr. Link Deas, employed him on his property all year, engaging him in many jobs so that he and his family would have food on their plates throughout the year despite his disability. Even after Tom's untimely demise, Mr. Deas employed his wife, Helen, as his family's cook so that she and her children would not starve.

The book presents a grave picture of a country rife with racial prejudice but simultaneously shows a stark difference by depicting such heart-warming acts of kindness. The extent to which racism was deeply rooted in people's minds was so overwhelming that everyone, even Atticus, knew that a jury consisting of white men only would never give a decision in favor of a Black man. Despite this, Atticus knew that all he could do and what his conscience asked him to do was defend Tom Robinson to the best of his ability, to give him a fighting chance in the face of inevitable defeat, because he knew that no one would believe a Black man's view that contradicted two whites' testimony.

At the novel's beginning, one does not see even a tinge of racism because it does not exist in the world of the Finches. The Finches adored their helper, Calpurnia; she was a mother figure to Scout and Jem and loved them dearly. She even disciplined them when required, which is why, when his sister asked him to let go of Calpurnia, saying that he had let things go on for too long—as if she were a part of their family—and that they needed her no more, Atticus lashed out at her and told her that Calpurnia was not leaving the house till she wanted to, that he would not have gotten along without her all those years, and that she was a faithful member of the Finch family. Alexandra would have to accept things the way they were. He also made it clear that, in his view, Scout and Jem did not suffer at all from her having brought them up. She imparted her values and wisdom and was harder on them in some ways than a mother would have been. She had never let them get away with anything because she

never indulged them like other colored nurses, and Scout and Jem loved her. All this was enough for Atticus never to let Calpurnia go because she was not just an employee but a part of the Finches' family.

Atticus also told Alexandra that "anything fit to say at the table's fit to say in front of Calpurnia. She knows what she means to this family." Calpurnia learned how to read and write from Mrs. Buford with the help of the books Scout and Jem's grandfather gave her when she used to work at Finch's Landing. She taught it to her son Zeebo when there were no schools around, and Calpurnia was the one who taught Scout how to write even before she started school. This is why Atticus placed his faith in Calpurnia and her values; he knew she would raise the kids right.

In stark contrast to the Finches' lack of racial prejudice, the writer slowly introduces the Tom Robinson case to the readers. Firstly, it is only mentioned as a case Atticus is working on, and Scout and Jem could not be less bothered by it. However, slowly, the town's vitriolic racism comes out in short, significant instances. The first instance was when Cecil Jacobs announced in the school that Scout's father defended "niggers," which infuriated her because it made her feel like Atticus was doing something wrong—because if not, then why was he being condemned and criticized publicly? When she asked Atticus about this, the first thing he asked her to do was to stop using the common parlance of "nigger" to refer to Negroes.

The day after this incident, Cecil Jacobs again tried to provoke her by telling her that his parents said Atticus was a disgrace and the Negro he was defending should be hanged publicly. Then, at Christmas, when the Finches went to Finch's Landing to celebrate with the family, Atticus's sister Alexandra's grandson, Francis, told her that his grandma said it was bad enough that he could not control his children, but now he turned out to be a "nigger-lover" and was ruining the family name with his acts. Hearing this term used for her father again—although she did not know the exact meaning—she was wise enough to gather from context that this was not used in a good sense, and Scout punched Francis for his remark.

Next, even elders started behaving so. Mrs. Dubose said to Scout and Jem that the world had come to such a state that a Finch was "lawing" for niggers, and told them that their father was no better than the niggers and trash he worked for. Having lived with kind, wise people like Atticus and Calpurnia, the children could not understand why people were so against Atticus for defending a Negro when, in their routine life, they took the help of the colored folks countless times. Even Mrs. Dubose, who called Atticus and Negroes trash, had no one beside her except for her attendant Jessie, a Negro who assisted her in every activity since she was too old and sick to do anything on her own.

Having such a grave necessity and dependence on colored folks, why the townsfolk despised the idea of Atticus defending one of them was beyond the understanding of the children, but

still, they were pricked by such harsh words being used for their father when he did nothing wrong. Most of the townsfolk, with a few exceptions, felt the same way about Atticus Finch, and this antagonized the children.

However, when Calpurnia took them with her to church, they witnessed how the entire congregation stood together with Tom and Helen Robinson and tried to help them however they could. Reverend Sykes told them the church had no better friend than their father. He told them no one would hire Tom's wife, even when she did nothing wrong. Even though Tom did nothing wrong, that did not matter in their world. When Scout told Atticus about their trip to Calpurnia's church, he seemed amused by the incident, but Alexandra was grave. When Scout asked for his permission to visit Calpurnia sometime in her neighborhood, she knew that Atticus would surely permit her. However, upon hearing all this, Alexandra could not contain her rage and refused to let Scout go to Calpurnia's house.

The day before Tom Robinson was to be moved to the county jail, we see a crowd in front of the Finch residence but are glad to realize that all hope was not lost. As in a world built to reinforce the superiority of the whites, there were still some rational-minded individuals who knew that the Ewells were not to be trusted at all, and they believed that the hardworking Tom would never in a million years commit such a heinous crime like rape. They were concerned about his safety if he were to be shifted to the county jail. They said the "Old Sarum bunch," i.e., the Cunninghams, could go after Tom in drunken rage.

When questioned by Link Deas about why he took such a case—a case he had nothing to gain from, with everything at stake—Atticus answered that even if Tom were to go to prison, he would do so after telling his truth to the world. The next night, when Atticus left the house, Jem was worried that Atticus might get hurt because he knew that his father was a righteous man and he would try to protect his client till the very end. So, the children followed Atticus and saw him in front of the county jail surrounded by a mob of the Cunninghams, who asked Atticus to move aside as they were there for Tom, not for him. In the end, the mob was dispersed when Scout spoke to the conscience of her classmate Walter Cunningham's father.

Then we witness the trial that was doomed from the very beginning. Everyone, including Atticus, knew that Tom would not win because it came down to a Black man's word against two white folks. However, still, the whole town came to witness the trial. Some came because they knew that Atticus Finch was the only person who could give Tom a fighting chance against this unfairness, and others simply came to see a Negro get punished, being the bigots they were.

The only thing the prosecution had was circumstantial evidence. The Ewells did not have Mayella's medical examination done. The only thing they had to prove it was the rickety circumstantial evidence that Tom Robinson was in the Ewells' residence during the time of the alleged crime, established so by the witness testimony of Mr. Ewell. Even his testimony

lost

its credibility when Atticus established that Mayella was punched on the right side of her face and Mr. Ewell was left-handed, whereas the accused was crippled in his left hand—it was useless to him.

After proving the witness's testimony as erratic during cross-questioning, Atticus helped Tom get his side of the story out into the world—how all he ever did was help out a poor girl he saw struggling with caring for her father and seven siblings. The only crime he committed was acting kindly out of pity for her miserable life and having Mayella Ewell misconstrue that kindness as something more. He told the court about how she lured him into her house on the pretext of fixing the door hinges and jumped him. He tried to fight her off without harming her, and when he saw Mr. Ewell at the window, he fled because he knew what kind of world he lived in; no matter what had happened, the world would blindly believe a white man's lies rather than accept his truth.

The jury, which consisted of white males only, took a long break and returned with the verdict "guilty." Everyone might have known this would be the result, but it still felt surreal—maybe because people could see through the Ewells' lies, but it was not enough to suddenly change the world.

However, Atticus and the readers get a glimpse of the way ahead and the changes that will take place to make the world a better and egalitarian place when, after listening to how Scout and Jem were both heartbroken to see an innocent man condemned for something he did not even do, Atticus says that if the jury consisted of Jem and eleven other boys like him, Tom Robinson would have walked out of that courthouse a free man.

Atticus was also infuriated by this unfair treatment. He told Jem: "As you grow older, you will see white men cheat Black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don't you 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."

We also witness how this defeat made Tom lose faith in the country's legal system. He felt hopeless about ever being able to go back home to his family. So, Tom tried to make a run for it during the prison's exercise period. The jail guards fired a few warning shots in the air, and then they shot to stop the escaping prisoner.

Atticus was heartbroken that he was dead, but the fact that the guards shot him 17 times made it heart-wrenching. They did not see him as Tom, a person, but only as an escapee, and they inhumanely shot him seventeen times. Atticus gloomily said, "I guess Tom was tired of white men's chances and preferred to take his own," acknowledging that he had been telling Tom that they had a good chance with the appeal, but that was all it was—a good chance. Tom knew that no matter what he or Atticus did, his fate was sealed and the law would never be in his favor, and that was the price he had to pay for being a Black man in a white man's world.

The book also treads on the issue of stereotypical gender roles through the incidents where Atticus Finch was questioned on how he raised his children, and Jean Louise was criticized for not being like other girls her age. Others, who had no connection to the Finches, deemed themselves worthy to judge a single father who was merely trying to raise his children to the best of his abilities and doubt his methods. Atticus' sister, Alexandra, on numerous occasions, complained to Atticus about Jean Louise's tomboyish behavior. She often scolded Jean Louise for going around in overalls instead of wearing dresses like girls were supposed to, and that she could not hope to be a lady if she continued to go around in pants. When Jean Louise argued that she could not do anything in dresses because they constricted her movements, Aunt Alexandra told her that she was not supposed to do the activities that required pants.

Further, women were not even allowed to be part of a jury. Her aunt envisioned Jean Louise's childhood as consisting of playing with stoves and tea sets and going around wearing the pearl necklace she had gifted Jean Louise when she was born. Moreover, to bring her spirits down even more, Aunt Alexandra went so far as to say that Jean Louise was supposed to be a ray of sunshine in Atticus's lonely and dull life, but she constantly put her father in a bind with her antics and that she was born good but grew progressively worse every year.

Atticus was her rock—he supported her no matter what, because he knew that he had raised his children right. To Alexandra's critical remarks, he told Jean Louise that there were enough sunbeams in the family and she should go about her business as usual. He did not mind her much the way she was, so she did not need to change a thing.

When Alexandra hosted her society meetings in the house and called Jean Louise in for an introduction before the ladies, she was often embarrassed about her being mud-splashed or covered in sand from playing outdoors. She blamed Jean Louise's insolence and impudence on Atticus's faulty upbringing. She blamed him for neglecting to tell the children about their family and for failing to instill any pride into his children about their being a well-respected family in Maycomb. She lambasted Atticus for all this, making him feel like he had done a bad job in bringing up his children.

In turn, Atticus tried to discipline them, but seeing his children utterly confused about his volte-face, Atticus realized that he was trying to raise prudent, rational beings, and he had done his best in instilling good values into them. So, he decided to trust his instinct and let things go the way they were, because he knew that his kids had a significant moral compass and were already more rational and prudent than most adults in the town. Atticus put his faith in his upbringing and, above all, in his children, and decided not to take to heart others' comments about how he raised his children.

These stereotypes were not just limited to individuals' gender roles; the adults in Maycomb had a stereotype about most families in the town. The Radleys were recluses, the Haverfords

were imprudent idiots, death from heart attacks ran in Scout and Jem's mother's family, the Cunninghams were country folk who never took anything they couldn't pay back, the Ewells were the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations. They were people who lived like animals and had never done an honest day's work in their lives. People believed a morbid streak in the family caused the young Sam Merriweather's suicide. Penfield women were considered flighty.

Hearing all this made Scout comment, *"Everybody in Maycomb, it seemed, had a streak: a drinking streak, a gambling streak, a mean streak, a funny streak."* It led to sayings that only those native to Maycomb could comprehend, such as: *"No Crawford minds his own business," "Every third Merriweather is morbid," "The truth is not in the Delafields," "All the Bufords walk like that,"* etc.

This predisposed notion of how a person of a particular family is supposed to be is also a stereotype, as they try to limit a person's actions and behavior according to their last name. Alexandra was always disappointed in Scout because she did not act like a lady or show the wisdom and poise of someone belonging to a well-respected family in Maycomb. Scout despised this, as her father never put a limit on what she could do or be. Alexandra even felt that Atticus was ruining the family by defending a Negro.

Another issue the book covers with subtlety is mental health. It does so through the children's fascination with Arthur "Boo" Radley, their reclusive neighbor whom they had never met. Their interest was piqued by the various canards concocted by the townsfolk. Their neighbor, Miss Maudie Atkinson, clarified all their stories about him as mere works of imagination. She told them that Mr. Arthur did not kill squirrels and cats or feast on their raw flesh. It was all fiction—that his hands were bloodstained, his teeth yellow and rotten, his eyes popped and he drooled most of the time. Nor was he chained up in his house by his father. She said she had not seen Boo in decades, but he was not dead—he just did not leave the house.

Miss Stephanie Crawford, the neighborhood tattler, told the children that Arthur Radley only ventured out in the dark, and once she woke up in the middle of the night and found him staring at her through her window. Jem described him as a malevolent phantom, saying people's flowers froze in a cold snap because he had breathed on them, that any stealthy crimes committed in Maycomb were his doing, and that the pecans from the Radley tree were poisonous. The children even developed a play based on the various incidents and fables they were told.

When Scout was scared to participate in this mockery of Boo Radley, Jem assured her that he was sure Boo was dead—that he died years ago and his family had stuffed him up the chimney. This perception began to change with the bubblegum incident. At first, Jem was furious at Scout for eating something she found in the Radleys' yard. However, the next time, when they found the pennies, their fascination grew.

Miss Maudie told them the stories contained no truth. Arthur Radley just stayed in the house. She asked them, *"Wouldn't you stay in the house if you didn't want to come out?"* She told them what Arthur was like as a child, that he always spoke nicely, no matter what people said he did. People said that Arthur had befriended a few Cunninghams, and they formed a gang of sorts. Once, they were arrested for causing a nuisance in town. Mr. Radley assured the judge that Arthur would never cause trouble again—and no one saw him after that.

Throughout the story, many people hint that Mr. Radley might be the reason for Arthur's reclusive behavior. Calpurnia described him as *"the meanest man ever God blew breath into."* When Scout asked Miss Maudie if Arthur was crazy, she told her that if he wasn't crazy back then, he should be by now—and that one never knows what happens behind closed doors. This points to the fact that perhaps Arthur was subjected to inhumane practices to "discipline" him.

The children slowly began realizing that perhaps they had misjudged him. Scout heard laughter from the Radley house when she fell from the tire, like a child's. When Jem found his trousers sewn and folded under the fence after his previous attempt to deliver a letter to him, he knew Boo had anticipated his return. They also received soap dolls resembling them from the tree, a rusty medal, and a pocket watch. They wanted to express their gratitude, but before they could, Mr. Nathan Radley filled the knothole with cement and justified it by saying the tree was sick.

Even though Arthur had suffered so much at the hands of his father, he was a good person at heart, just as Miss Maudie recalled. When her house caught fire and Scout and Jem were waiting outside in the cold, Arthur came out, put a blanket on Scout, and returned unnoticed. Instead of imagining him as a monster, Scout began to imagine him as a friendly neighbor sitting on his porch. She would walk by and say hello, and he would smile and talk to her.

Finally, she meets her neighbor when he saves Jem and her from Mr. Ewell. She observed that his hands were pale and white, clearly never exposed to sunlight. He was gaunt and timid. Even though it was their first meeting, both felt they had known each other a long time. She offered to lead him to the porch and sat beside him. She saw how awkward he felt outside, unsure of how to behave. She took him to say goodbye to Jem and then led him to the door, where, in a quiet, childlike voice, he asked her to take him home.

Jean Louise did so, and while she stood on the Radleys' porch, she saw what Arthur would have seen: the street, the children, the neighborhood. Even though he never stepped outside his home, he was a part of their lives. He saw all the funny and foolish things they did, how he cared for and adored the children, left them gifts, helped them in the cold, and came to their rescue when no one else did. Boo Radley was not crazy. He was Arthur Radley—misunderstood, kind, and scared of the world outside because of his past trauma.

Conclusion

In this term paper, we discussed the social evils depicted in the 1960 book *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We saw how the writer addresses racial prejudice, gender roles and stereotypes, mental health, and other pressing social issues through the incidents illustrated in the book. What is truly commendable is that Harper Lee chose to write about such delicate issues at a time when they were unmentionable in public spaces. She strongly denounces acts of racial prejudice, the stereotyping of individuals into certain roles, and the mistreatment society inflicts on those with mental illness.

Although a long time has passed since the 1960s, many of these social evils still persist. The mistreatment and police brutality by white officers against innocent and unarmed African Americans became a global concern with the death of George Floyd. His tragic death sparked the Black Lives Matter movement, leading to protests, agitations, and rallies across the United States. This shows that while the world may have progressed in healthcare, technology, and other fields, it has yet to fully eliminate the archaic mindset of racism.

As far as stereotypes and mental health are concerned, the progress remains slow. People still hold prejudiced views about what roles men and women are supposed to play in society and within family structures. Mental health continues to be treated as a taboo topic—something to be whispered about behind closed doors rather than discussed openly. One can never truly know what goes on inside another person's mind. Often, those who appear cheerful on the outside may be silently suffering, but hesitate to express themselves for fear of ridicule or judgment.

We may have come a long way together as a society, but there is still a long road ahead. African Americans may have earned equal rights and legal status, but the way they are perceived still requires transformation. America is their homeland too—it was built on the blood and sweat of their forefathers—so they do not deserve to be treated as criminals or inferiors. Change will only come when people begin to shift their outlook. Awareness around mental health has grown, yet the willingness to engage with it sincerely still lags behind.

Let us hope to create a utopian world for future generations—one that is free from prejudice, inclusive of all, and a place where everyone can live with dignity and joy.

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