

To Kill a Mockingbird Theme of Race

To Kill a Mockingbird goes beyond the simple message "racism is bad" to attempt a more complex examination of how racism works. All forms of racism are not the same: some are born of hate, some of fear, some of laziness, some of self-righteousness, some of all these combined. What all racisms have in common in this book, however, is a failure of imagination: the inability to see that even someone who looks, and talks, and acts very different from oneself is fundamentally the same as every other human being. The history of race in the novel, as in America, is based on drawing distinctions solely for the sake of discrimination.

Questions About Race

1. How does the novel portray its African-American characters? Are there elements of racism in these portrayals?
2. How is the African-American community similar to the white community in Maycomb? How is it different? How might these similarities and differences affect how the two communities see each other?
3. How might Maycomb, and the events of the novel, be different if there were more than two races represented in the town?

Race Quotes

Find at least 5 good quotes dealing with race or racism in the novel. Be sure to include who said it.



Chew on This

Choose **one** of the following statements. Plan and write a speech in which you defend the statement. Be sure to include a sentence outline.

- The African-American characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird* appear only to contribute to the development of the white characters, rather than as individuals in their own right.
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* suggests that racism is learned, and therefore can be unlearned.

To Kill a Mockingbird Theme of Justice and Judgment

To Kill a Mockingbird presents a judicial system that doesn't practice what it preaches. Ideally, a jury of one's peers dispassionately determines guilt or innocence based on the facts; but in practice, according to the novel, what actually happens is that a group of white men not influential enough to get out of jury duty give a verdict they had decided on before they even entered the courtroom. Is there any way for a justice system to overcome the unjust biases of the individuals who carry it out?

Questions About Justice and Judgment

1. Does Tom Robinson receive a fair trial under the law? Why or why not?
2. According to the novel, is it ever justified to act outside the law in order to ensure justice? If so, when is it justified? If not, what do you do when the law allows injustice?
3. What's the novel's take on the American legal system? What are its strengths, and what are its weaknesses?

Justice and Judgment Quotes

Find at least 5 good quotes dealing with Justice and Judgment in the novel. Be sure to include who said it.



Chew on This

Choose **one** of the following statements. Plan and write a speech in which you defend the statement. Be sure to include a sentence outline.

- *To Kill a Mockingbird* suggests that the criminal court system is broken, but that it's still the best chance for justice.
- *To Kill a Mockingbird* contrasts two kinds of justice – that of the courts and that of individuals – to show that they both have strengths and weaknesses.

To Kill a Mockingbird Theme of Morality and Ethics

Are morals a matter of community standards or individual conscience? Where do the rights of the community end and the rights of the individual begin? *To Kill a Mockingbird* examines the conflict between the individual and the community when each has a different standard of right and wrong. On the one hand, the individual who stands up for his or her personal belief gets grief from everyone else. But on the other, such solitary stubbornness might drag the whole community in a more satisfactory direction – a community's morals are, after all, the sum of what its individuals believe.

Questions About Morality and Ethics

1. What do individual characters in the novel base their ideas of right and wrong on?
2. How does the community work to enforce collective standards of morality? Where do those collective standards come from?
3. What moral principles does the novel suggest are desirable? Does anything in the novel undermine these moral principles?
4. Does Bob Ewell have bad morals or no morals? What's the difference?

Morality and Ethics Quotes

Find at least 5 good quotes dealing with Morality and Ethics in the novel. Be sure to include who said it.



Chew on This

Choose **one** of the following statements. Plan and write a speech in which you defend the statement. Be sure to include a sentence outline.

- Atticus presents himself as morally consistent – the same at home as on the streets – but really he has two moral systems: one for himself based on strict rectitude, and one for others based on sympathetic understanding.
- While the novel in general presents honesty as a virtue, it also suggests that honesty is not always the best policy.

To Kill a Mockingbird Theme of Women and Femininity

Being called a girl is about the worst thing possible – or so thinks Scout, the female protagonist of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Girls wear frilly pink dresses, and don't get to play outside, swear, or pretty much do anything fun. Even less appealing to the tomboy Scout, at least at first, is the thought of growing up into a lady, and being plunged into a confusing world where no one says what they mean. As the novel progresses, however, so do Scout's views on femininity, as she realizes that being a lady requires skill, and sometimes even courage.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Why does Scout take being called a girl as an insult?
2. What effect does their lack of a mother have on Jem and Scout?
3. What models of femininity do the different female characters in the novel demonstrate for Scout?

Women and Femininity Quotes

Find at least 5 good quotes dealing with Women and Femininity in the novel. Be sure to include who said it.



Chew on This

Choose **one** of the following statements. Plan and write a speech in which you defend the statement. Be sure to include a sentence outline.

- *To Kill a Mockingbird* suggests that questioning the "polite fiction" of "Southern womanhood" (15.39) has the potential to undermine not just gender attitudes, but racial ones as well.
- Scout's reluctance to be feminine both asserts and denies her maturity, and is a way for her to try to grow up on her own terms.

To Kill a Mockingbird Theme of Family

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, family is destiny. Within the confines of a small town where the same people have lived for generations, no one can escape...becoming their parents. Either the parents raise their kids to be like them, for good or ill, or the pressure of community expectations that a person live up, or down, to their family is too much to resist. While on the one hand, this attitude creates a comfortable familiarity and a cozy predictability, it also makes progress, both for the individual and the community, very difficult.

Questions About Family

1. What's the effect of having the Finch children call their father by his first name? What does that suggest about their characters? About his? Their relationship?
2. Why is Aunt Alexandra so obsessed with Old Family and Finch pride? What does she hope to accomplish by making Scout and Jem feel that as well?
3. How does family intersect with class in the novel?
4. What do the examples of good and bad parents in the novel suggest about the best way to raise kids?
5. How does Maycomb's African-American community think about the idea of family?

Family Quotes

Find at least 5 good quotes dealing with family in the novel. Be sure to include who said it.



Chew on This

Choose **one** of the following statements. Plan and write a speech in which you defend the statement. Be sure to include a sentence outline.

- *To Kill a Mockingbird* suggests that depending on the family a person is born into, s/he may be doomed from the start: personal merit can't overcome a poor inheritance.
- The way family is used in the novel suggests that characters find it easier to think about people as groups rather than as individuals.

To Kill a Mockingbird Theme of Compassion and Forgiveness

How do you manage compassion for people when they are undeserving? This is a central question in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The answer? A little goodness, a little humility, and a lot of imagination. While from the outside a person may seem vile, stupid, or just plain incomprehensible, imagining what it's like inside that person's head can do wonders for understanding them. Of course, there's also the danger that you'll be wrong about just how nasty that person really is, but that's the risk of being a good person.

Questions About Compassion and Forgiveness

1. Is there anyone who the novel suggests isn't deserving of compassion and forgiveness? Who, and why?
2. What does whom a character feels sorry for reveal about that character?
3. Is compassion learned or innate in the novel? Or both?
4. Why does Atticus refuse to pity Mayella?

Compassion and Forgiveness Quotes

Find at least 5 good quotes dealing with Compassion and Forgiveness in the novel. Be sure to include who said it.



Chew on This

Choose **one** of the following statements. Plan and write a speech in which you defend the statement. Be sure to include a sentence outline.

- By having Atticus be a figure associated both with justice and with compassion, the novel suggests that the two ideas are not mutually exclusive.
- Tom's compassion for Mayella and Atticus's compassion for Ewell both get them into trouble, suggesting compassion can sometimes be dangerous.