

Prejudices, Social Class Divisions, and Racial Injustice in a Best Seller from the 1960s

What would one expect to be the personality of a little girl who is unexpectedly punished by her teacher on her first day of school for knowing how to read and write? In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee, the reader is given a glimpse into the daily life and struggles of a family living in the small town of Maycomb, Alabama during the 1930s. Through the eyes of the protagonist, Jean Louise 'Scout' Finch, the reader sees the social class divisions, prejudices, and racial injustice that were ever present in the United States South.

Scout's description to miss Caroline, her first-grade teacher on the first day of class, about the classification of Cunninghams and Ewells- two of the poorest white families in Maycomb- reveals the social divisions in the town. The Cunninghams are good, honest, hard-working people who are struggling to make ends meet, as Scout describes: "The Cunninghams never took anything they can't pay back—no church baskets and no scrip stamps. They never took anything off of anybody, they get along on what they have. They don't have much, but they get along on it." (50) . The Ewells, on the other hand, are shiftless, lazy, and dishonest. They are known to be the town's "white trash" and are looked down upon by the other residents, the book describes them as "Whole school's full of 'em. They come first day every year and then leave. The truant lady gets 'em here 'cause she threatens 'em with the sheriff..." (69). Also, the book through multiple anecdotes emphasizes black people are segregated from whites and are not treated as equals, for example, Calpurnia, the Finch's housekeeper, has to sit in the kitchen when she eats with the family. Even the book mentions Calpurnia is one of the four people who know how to read in the entire town, yet she is not given the same opportunities as whites. On the other hand, The Finches are one of

the town's most respected families. Atticus, Scout's father, is a successful lawyer and is held in high esteem by the community. However, even the Finch family is not immune to the prejudice and racism that is so prevalent in the South.

Prejudices are preconceived notions or judgments about people that are often based on stereotypes, in the novel, prejudice is shown in many different ways. One of the most repetitive arguments is about Radley, the man who never leaves his house. The kids in the neighborhood have made up all sorts of stories about him, and because they do not know him, they are afraid of him. Their prejudices about Radley are based on their fears and ignorance, the book describes "Radley Place was inhabited by an unknown entity the mere description of whom was enough to make us behave for days on end." (11). Another example of prejudice is about foreign people, as Dill, Scout's best friend from out of town, is treated differently because he is from the North. The kids in the neighborhood make fun of him and call him nicknames. In the same way, Scout perceives herself as treated as a boy by most of her classmates because she is tomboyish.

Racial injustice is also a big theme in the novel and the most representative part of the story. In the novel, Tom Robinson, a black man, is accused of raping a white woman, despite no evidence supporting the claim. Atticus agrees to defend Tom, even though he knows he will not win the case. During the trial, it becomes clear that Tom is innocent, but the all-white jury convicts him anyway. Scout is treated as a "nigger-lover" at every place, the book describes the situation as "...now he's turned out a nigger-lover we'll never be able to walk the streets of Maycomb again. He's ruinin' the family, that's what he's doin'" (237). Eventually, Tom is killed while trying to escape from prison. His death highlights the injustice of the United States legal system, which was stacked against black defendants.

The novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a story that demonstrates the importance of understanding and tolerance. Through the eyes of Scout Finch, the reader can see the social class divisions, prejudices, and racial injustice that were ever present in the American South. Harper Lee's novel is a timeless classic that speaks to the human condition, and it is a representation of the United States' dark past.