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## **HUMANITY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN THE EXAMPLE OF HARPER LEE'S "TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD"**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores humanity and social issues in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Focusing on the experiences of Scout and Jem Finch, the study analyzes how moral development, empathy, and social awareness emerge in a racially segregated and socially stratified community. The paper examines the role of key characters, such as Atticus Finch, in teaching moral principles, and highlights how childhood curiosity and experience shape understanding of justice and ethical behavior. By analyzing examples from the text, the study demonstrates how Lee addresses racial prejudice, class distinctions, and the challenges of maintaining integrity in an unjust society.

**Keywords:** Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Humanity, Social issues, Morality, Empathy, Racial prejudice

### **INTRODUCTION**

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the most influential novels in American literature, exploring themes of morality, human dignity, and social inequality. Set in the small, racially segregated town of Maycomb, Alabama, during the 1930s, the novel tells the story of the Finch family through the eyes of Scout Finch, a young girl, and her older brother, Jem. While the novel is often celebrated for its portrayal of racial injustice, it also emphasizes the broader human condition, illustrating how morality, empathy, and social awareness develop within a community shaped by prejudice and tradition.



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The story is narrated by Scout, who recounts her childhood experiences with honesty and insight. Through Scout and Jem, Lee examines the process of growing up in a morally complex world. The narrative captures the innocence of childhood while also highlighting the harsh realities of social inequality, making it a rich source for analyzing humanity and social issues.

## **METHODS**

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to explore themes of humanity and social issues in the novel. Key episodes and character interactions were selected to demonstrate moral development, social awareness, and ethical reasoning. The research focuses on:

Atticus Finch's role in teaching ethical principles.

The moral and social growth of Scout and Jem Finch.

Representations of racial prejudice and class hierarchy.

The impact of community and family on moral development.

Analysis was conducted through close reading of narrative events, dialogue, and character behaviors, allowing for the identification of patterns related to empathy, justice, and social critique.

At the heart of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the exploration of humanity. Characters' choices and actions demonstrate the importance of empathy, moral courage, and integrity. Atticus Finch, the children's father, represents these ideals most clearly. He consistently teaches Scout and Jem to see the world from others' perspectives, telling them, "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." This lesson forms the moral foundation of the novel and exemplifies the importance of empathy in understanding human behavior. Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman, illustrates the challenge of maintaining humanity in the face of widespread social prejudice. Despite knowing that the town's racial biases make victory unlikely, Atticus commits to defending Tom to the best of his ability. Through his example, Harper Lee suggests that humanity is not merely a passive virtue but requires action, moral courage, and adherence to ethical principles even when faced with adversity. Scout and Jem learn the nuances of humanity through everyday



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encounters with neighbors, townspeople, and strangers. These experiences highlight that understanding humanity requires observation, reflection, and engagement with others, rather than simple instruction.

Jem Finch's character illustrates the development of morality and social awareness in a child. His curiosity about the world often leads him to questions and reflections that reveal his growing understanding of human nature. For example, when Jem experiences snow for the first time, he asks, "Would it keep up? Jem had never seen snow either, but he knew what it was." His wonder about snow, paired with the excitement of walking and playing in it, demonstrates a child's eagerness to explore and understand unfamiliar phenomena.

At the same time, Jem is learning to navigate social norms and the expectations of the adult world. When Mr. Avery scolds Scout and Jem for supposedly causing the unusual snow—claiming that "bad children like you makes the seasons change"—Jem must reconcile his playful curiosity with the judgments and superstitions of adults. These experiences teach Jem the importance of personal responsibility and the influence of society on individual actions. Jem's moral development is also evident in his reaction to the trial of Tom Robinson. Initially, Jem struggles to understand how a community that appears so decent can permit injustice. He expresses anger and disbelief at the verdict, demonstrating his emerging sense of fairness and empathy. By the end of the novel, Jem shows a deeper awareness of human complexity, recognizing that individuals can be both good and flawed, and that social structures often shape behavior in ways beyond personal control.

## **RESULTS**

A major theme in the novel is the pervasive social inequality and racial prejudice in Maycomb. African Americans, such as Tom Robinson, face systemic discrimination that limits their opportunities and endangers their lives. Lee illustrates this through Tom's trial, in which evidence clearly proves his innocence, yet the jury convicts him because of racial bias. This injustice exposes the moral failures of society and underscores the challenges of upholding humanity within an unfair system. The novel also examines class distinctions and social hierarchy beyond race. Families in Maycomb are categorized by wealth,



ancestry, and social status, influencing their interactions and shaping community dynamics. For example, the Finch family, though respected, maintains a moderate social position, while the Cunninghams and Ewells occupy the lower tiers. These distinctions affect how characters behave, make decisions, and judge one another. Harper Lee uses these examples to illustrate how societal structures can perpetuate injustice, encourage prejudice, and complicate moral decision-making. Through the lens of Jem's experiences, readers observe the impact of social inequality on a young mind. Jem witnesses the unfair treatment of individuals based on race or class and begins to question the ethics of his community. This process of questioning forms a crucial part of his moral development and mirrors the broader struggle to cultivate empathy and justice in a biased society. Empathy emerges as a key theme, not only in Atticus's teachings but also in the way Scout and Jem navigate their world. Encounters with characters like Boo Radley, Mrs. Dubose, and Tom Robinson challenge their understanding of morality and social expectations. Boo Radley, initially perceived as a frightening recluse, ultimately becomes a symbol of kindness and protection, teaching the children that outward appearances and rumors do not define a person's humanity.

## **DISCUSSION**

Jem, in particular, learns to combine observation with ethical reasoning. His reflection on the injustices he witnesses encourages critical thinking and moral discernment. He starts to understand that people are shaped by their circumstances, fears, and upbringing, which helps him navigate complex social realities. These lessons are reinforced through both everyday life and extraordinary events, such as standing guard outside the jail to protect Atticus or witnessing the trial's outcome.

Scout, too, grows in understanding, learning that empathy requires active effort. By "climbing into another person's skin," she recognizes that social prejudice and human weakness can distort judgment, yet individuals still have the power to act morally. Harper Lee's narrative demonstrates that empathy is not innate; it is learned through experience, reflection, and moral guidance. Family and community serve as critical influences on moral development in the novel.



Atticus's parenting style emphasizes reasoning, fairness, and compassion, guiding Scout and Jem through complex social and ethical situations. By allowing the children to explore, question, and learn from their surroundings, Atticus encourages independent thought and moral courage. The community of Maycomb, with all its flaws and virtues, also provides context for understanding social issues. From the superstitions of Mr. Avery to the kindness of Miss Maudie, the children observe diverse behaviors that teach them lessons about justice, prejudice, and personal responsibility. Harper Lee uses these contrasts to show that moral growth often occurs in dialogue with society, rather than in isolation.

## **CONCLUSION**

To Kill a Mockingbird is not only a critique of racial injustice but also a profound reflection on human morality, empathy, and social responsibility. Through the experiences of Scout and Jem Finch, Harper Lee demonstrates how children learn about humanity, fairness, and compassion in a flawed world. Jem's curiosity, observations, and reactions provide insight into the process of moral development, illustrating the importance of empathy, ethical reasoning, and engagement with social realities.

The novel ultimately conveys that understanding and upholding humanity requires courage, reflection, and the willingness to act against injustice. By portraying the complexity of human behavior and the impact of social structures, Harper Lee encourages readers to consider their own moral responsibilities and to strive for a more just and compassionate society.

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