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English P.1

7/December/2022

*To Kill a Mockingbird* and its Connections to Social Hierarchy in Society

In the book *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, it becomes exceedingly clear that the residents of Maycomb exist within a very prevalent caste system. This hierarchy drastically changes certain aspects of life, both positively and negatively, depending on how high or low one stands within the system. By reaching further within the chapters, one finds that that same caste system seems to only negatively affect certain people, specifically black people, those living in poverty, and women.

In roughly the first third of the book, one can tell that Scout primarily focuses on how the impoverished are affected by social hierarchy. This makes sense, as she is only around six years old at this point in the book, and topics like poverty are much easier to grasp as compared to heavier subjects like racism and sexism. The first example of this specific focus occurs when families like the Ewells and Cunninghams, two of the most destitute families within the town of Maycomb, are mentioned. The first of this notice occurs when Scout’s teacher, Miss Caroline, asks why one of the students doesn't have lunch with them, to which Scout responds that "he’s a Cunningham" (Lee 22). When Miss Caroline offers him a quarter, Scout informs her that "You’re shamin’ him, Miss Caroline. Walter hasn’t got a quarter at home to bring to you, and you can’t use any stovewood (Lee 24). Both of these quotes portray how the town views those who are impoverished. While they’re not treated horribly, the poorest families tend to be rather notorious, and the very idea of offering them money is seen as a source of shame. The poorer families are also seen as untrustworthy, as evidenced when Scout says to "not hand something to a Cunningham"(Lee 33). This mantra is so common that Scout proclaims it with absolute certainty, revealing the town’s low sentiment towards certain aspects of the family. The townspeople are not only suspicious of thievery; they *expect* it. Later, when Miss Caroline wonders why one of the students is no longer in class, Scout tells her that the student is "one of the Ewell’s, ma’am" (Lee 30). Poorer families are not expected to live up to their more well-off counterparts or provide themselves with positive activities, such as attending school and the like.

Further exploring the pages, one begins to notice how other characters interact with Scout and their commentary on her gender. The readers can spot the first of this from Jem, who, when speaking with Scout, claims that "sometimes you act so much like a girl it’s mortifyin." (Lee 42). The word choice is particularly discernible; Jem believes that behaving like a woman is a negative personality trait, which connects to the idea of social hierarchy, namely that those closer to the top of the hierarchy–in this case, men–refuse to associate or act like those they view as below them, i.e., women. Far later in the story, when Scout asks why kindhearted people like Miss Maudie cannot be a part of the jury for Tom Robinson’s case, she is told that "For one thing, Miss Maudie can’t serve on the jury because she’s a woman." (252). This quote depicts social hierarchy in a slightly different light; while women are still viewed as inferior, the treatment that results from this shifts from discrimination to protection. Men feel that they must take the "hard" or "scary" jobs, as they believe that women are simply too frail to properly complete the tasks.When Scout later talks to Jem, she says that Alexandra told her that "I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches; when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn’t supposed to be doing things that required pants." (108). Two ideas can be extracted from this quote, the first of which is one of conformity. Women are expected to uphold certain standards—in this case, wearing a dress. Women who don’t conform to these ideals are deemed less by their peers. There is a social hierarchy that exists *within* the social hierarchy, and due to the fact that Scout is a girl, she is expected to wear a dress in order to uphold the values that she has been given. The second extractable idea comes from the latter half of the quote, when Aunt Alexandra reinforces the argument that Scout cannot wear pants by saying that Scout shouldn’t be doing anything that would require pants anyway. Further strengthening the evidence given in the previous quote, women are not expected to be given hard jobs, which would require pants.

Finally, there is the most prominent and obvious case of those who are treated negatively within Maycomb. The mistreatment and prejudice of black people is one of the main ideas of this novel, to the point where almost all of the events that occur revolve around it. The first example arises when Scout and Jem are walking home together and cross the path of Miss Dubose, who tells them that their father Atticus is "no better than the n\*\*\*\*\*\* and trash he works for!" (Lee 135). This quote provides insight into the inner workings of the hierarchy, namely how the interactions between those at the top and those at the bottom of the caste system function. As stated earlier, those at the top of the hierarchy refuse to act like or associate with those at the bottom, but this quote provides a reason as to why: those higher up are viewed as less by their peers for doing so. The opposite is also shown within the text, as evidenced when Jem and Scout go to Calpurnia’s church, to which one of the people there asks, "why you bringin’ white chillun to n\*\*\*\*\* church?" (Lee 158). As with those on top, those closer to the bottom of the system dislike and even refuse to associate with their more privileged counterparts, creating an ideology within Maycomb that promotes segregation. The main conflict within *To Kill A Mockingbird* is the court case of Tom Robinson, which is filled to the brim with perfect examples of how black people are treated due to the hierarchy within Maycomb, such as when Reverend Sykes tells Jem that he "ain’t ever seen a court rule in favor of a colored man over a white man." (Lee 279). Pointing out the systematic abuse that takes place in legal settings, it's extremely common for black people to be unfairly prosecuted by their peers, both within Maycomb and in real life. This is further conveyed when Scout notices that at least two of the people on the jury are related to the Ewells, the family that called for the prosecution of Tom Robinson, making a large part of the jury already biased. Finally, there is a moment where Scout and Dill go outside after Dill begins to cry due to the mistreatment of Tom Robinson, and have a talk with Dolphus Raymond, a man who is looked down upon by his white peers for having a relationship with a black woman and having mixed children—yet another example of how those at the top are affected by associating with those at the bottom of the hierarchy. During this conversation, Dolphus says that one day Dill "won’t get sick and cry. Maybe things will strike him as being—not quite right, say, but he won't cry." (Lee 269). This quote is one of the few insights into how adults react to discrimination versus children. Whereas children tend to have a more emotional response, adults treat the prejudice as at least somewhat normal due to being desensitized from past experiences. This is woefully common both among the characters in *To Kill A Mockingbird* and in real life. It also gives insight into why the social hierarchy within Maycomb has gone on for so long; it's simply the only thing that everyone living there has ever known.

All in all, Maycomb is a town that survives off of the normalization of segregation and class systems, which helps it thrive, even if it's at the cost of most of its residents’ well-being. The population acknowledges this, but never does anything about it, as they are too busy living within the comfort that similarity provides them. The only people that even *hold* the power to change the social hierarchy are those who are benefited by it. As a result, nothing will ever be done to tip the scales, and Maycomb residents will be forced to live within this system for the rest of their lives.

Works Cited

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird.* Harlow, Longman. 1960.