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Sample Student Essay and Annotated Bibliography

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To Censor a Mockingbird

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* has garnered as much opposition as it has support since its publication a few years ago. It sold half a million copies in its first year, and it already occupies a popular place on school reading lists all over the country. However, there are calls by southern conservatives to ban the book because of its profanity and poor language, the depiction of violence and rape, as well its poor treatment of blacks and its reliance on stereotypes. Critics from the East and Midwest are now also objecting to the novel on the grounds of racism and immorality. The founders of the United States of America intended that free

speech and free press were a guaranteed right when they drafted the American Constitution in 1791 but, their intentions including those related to the censorship of printed materials have been interpreted in many ways. A question today in 1965 is whether Harper Lee has the right to share her story if critics find it offensive.

Calls to ban *To Kill a Mockingbird* have spread and opposition to the novel, especially to its inclusion on school reading lists, is becoming difficult to ignore. Those calling for its ban claim that themes and events in the novel are inappropriate. Specifically, they deem that the profanity,

poor language and black dialect of characters, depiction of violence and rape, unfair treatment of blacks, as well as the overall stereotyping of 1930s societal norms make this novel unsuitable for children. The novel is full of examples of poor grammar and at times, vulgar speech: “‘There ain’t no need to fear a cootie, ma’am. Ain’t you ever seen one? ... What fer, missus?’” (Lee 26) Another example is on page 128: “‘d you bring me a book? ‘d you know Aunty’s here?’” There are numerous examples of profanity: “‘Report and be damned to ye! Ain’t no snot-nosed slut of a schoolteacher ever born c’n make me do nothin’! You ain’t makin’ me go nowhere, missus.’” (28) Bob Ewell’s recount of the violent rape of Mayella also depicts sex and violence. “He stood up and pointed his finger at Tom Robinson. ‘–I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin’ on my Mayella!’” (173) True to her characters, Lee writes words of blacks in their black dialect: “‘I say where the chillum?’ ... ‘an, she says – she was laughin’, sort of – she says they all

gone to town to get ice creams. She says, ‘took me a slap year to save seb’m nickels, but I done it. They all gone to town.’” (193) Much of the novel revolves around the violent rape of a white woman by the accused black man, Tom Robinson. Lee describes the rape which critics complain depicts more violence. “‘...you say she was mighty banged up. In what way?’ ... ‘she was pretty bruised up when I got there, and she had a black eye comin’ ... ‘her arms were bruised, and she showed me her neck. There were definite finger marks on her gullet ... and all around her throat.’” (168-169) The text illustrates the racial tension and segregation that existed in the South in the 1930s: “‘Stop right there, nigger.’ ‘You ain’t got no business bringin’ white chillum here – they got their church, we got our’n. It is our church, ain’t it, Miss Cal?’” (119) Opponents to *To Kill a Mockingbird* are also angered by stereotypes in the novel: the poor, illiterate and violent black man in Tom and the black man versus white woman illustrated in the rape of

Mayella. The rape incident itself is a sensitive issue due to its similarity to events judged in the ongoing Scottsboro Trials.

Critics of *To Kill a Mockingbird* must read more carefully and consider the context of the society in which they have grown up, and in which the novel was written. Lee does use stereotypes in writing about the treatment of black characters. But, she also uses stereotypes to challenge conventional thought and thereby set positive examples for young readers. The illiterate black man is replaced by the literate black housekeeper Calpurnia, who also speaks correctly, and who teaches her own son to read. Tom Robinson, the poor black man accused of raping a white woman, is not a violent person. Instead of feeling hatred and reacting with violence, he feels sorry for the woman accusing him. Atticus Finch, Tom's lawyer, is a courageous white man defending a black man in a southern court. Boo Radley, initially perceived to be cruel and violent, becomes a compassionate hero. All readers watch the novel's

protagonist, Scout, learning right from wrong, so why should young readers not be allowed to learn themselves with help from the novel's accurate depiction of life in the South?

Lee's writing of the novel was greatly influenced by social tensions of the times and so too has been the reception of the novel a decade later. By now, economic depression and the Scottsboro Trials of the 1930s, war and recovery of the 1940s, and social unrest and racial upheaval never before seen in the 1950s have been consuming and controversial. The past has led to extraordinary social change. The civil rights movement is in full - at times violent - swing in the south. Desegregation in parts of everyday public life is taking hold thanks to Mrs. Parks and the Birmingham bus boycott, and Pollie Ann Myers and Autherine Lucy's application and admission to University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. Of course this great change has been preceded by violent protest and the controversy has not settled. Many readers remain on edge. Adult readers including

critics have grown up in a world described at times as racist. In the pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus teaches Scout not to let ignorant people harass her for his defense of a black man. All readers can benefit from lessons of morality to better themselves and the world. Atticus' defense of an innocent black man was morally the right thing to do. Readers must act regardless of social status, colour and race in the interests of justice and equity. *To Kill a Mockingbird* illustrates the outcomes of the clashes between Maycomb's blacks and whites and the unfair treatment and attitude towards an innocent man. There are many lessons to take from these fictional situations.

The founders of the United States of America wanted a democratic society which requires the free exchange of information and ideas. In a debate about censorship, questions arise: what if the exchange offends, and can an author write what he or she wants without consequence? The biggest consequence of Lee's depiction of the treatment of blacks in

To Kill a Mockingbird is positive. That is, such treatment was unfair and discriminatory. At the centre of the debate to ban this novel is the question of whether morals should be taught in schools and if so, whose values? Social change since the 1930s shows that the values of those who misjudged and mistreated blacks in Maycomb are not the values Americans want to live by. Values shared by Atticus' including, "...all men are created equal..." (205), guide social change. Stories such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* are evidence of errors and their lessons provide tools to guide change to make the world safe, moral and fair. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a product of our times. It is our story and one we best not forget, as to forget might lead us to repeat.

Annotated Bibliography

Bernard, Catherine. *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird*. N.p.: Lucent Books, 2003. Print.

Understanding Great Literature.

This is a book that summarizes why *To Kill a Mockingbird* is an important novel study and includes overviews of Harper Lee's life, the novel's historical background, as well as its plot, characters and themes. What I found most helpful was a chapter devoted to describing, in detail, some important historical events such as the economic depression in the South, the Jim Crow laws, the Scottsboro Trial, and Brown vs. Board of Education. I would not recommend this book to a student writing an essay or editorial on a specific topic related to *To Kill a Mockingbird* as the book is very much an overview and would be more useful as a general novel study helper.

Durst Johnson, Claudia. *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994. Print.

This source is a book comprising five readings by Claudia Durst Johnson. The readings analyse themes and concepts in the novel that contribute to making it so popular. I found the author's discussion of the literary and historical context in which *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written, very helpful. I also relied greatly on the author's clear summary of reasons for early opposition to the novel. This book is credible because Claudia Durst interviewed Harper Lee about the context in which Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* and her opinions about the novel's reception. Ms. Durst Johnson is quoted and commended by other literary critics in many other essays on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She is an English professor at University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa (where some of the most violent and intense demonstration to social change took place) which Harper Lee also attended. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in knowing more specific

details about the reception of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and about why the book has made such an immediate and great impact.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Warner Books Edition ed. New York: Warner Books ed., 1982. Originally published 1960. Print.

Luther King, Martin, Jr., X, Malcolm, and Carmichael, Stokely. "Chapter 3L Black Power and Civil Rights in the Mid-1960s." *American Social Movements Series*. Ed. McConnell, William S. N.p.: Greenhaven Press, 2004. 90-114. Print.

This is a book made up of different types of writing pieces such as essays, book excerpts, speeches, newspaper articles, each about a topic related to a social movement. Because I was writing an editorial on a 1960 publication and from the perspective of its reception in the 1960s, I thought that it would include opinions and information that would help me understand the social context (especially the racism and racial tension) of the decade. The topics covered were far too broad and so were the perspectives of the authors/speakers for what I needed. I would not recommend this book to someone studying *To Kill a Mockingbird* as there are other much better sources that describe what was going on and being felt in the 1960s.

O'Neill, Terry, ed. *Readings on To Kill a Mockingbird*. San Diego, CA: The Greenhaven Press, n.d. Print. Literary Companion Series.

This source is a compilation of critical essays on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A few times in its introduction, it is written that *To Kill a Mockingbird*, despite its popularity, has not received much scholarly attention. I disagree with this point and so I felt a bit skeptical. However I found

the brief biography included at the beginning of the essays on Harper Lee's life very interesting as it highlighted the context of her surroundings as she wrote the novel. What is most interesting about this book is that it presents opposing opinions in successive essays. The Greenhaven Series are written for young readers and at their level so the opinions expressed were easy to understand. I would recommend this book to a student interested in opposing opinions especially about characters and writing techniques used by Lee.

Wilson, Charles E., Jr. "Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Exploring Social Issues Through Literature*. Westport, CT: United States of America: Greenwood Press, 2005. 25-36. Print.

This is a book of essays about social issues in literature, including one essay about *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This essay started with a very clear plot synopsis that I found interesting because it showed how another reader interpreted characters and put emphasis on different events of the novel. Other than for this plot synopsis, it was not very helpful for writing on a specific editorial topic as the information included about the historical context is described better in other sources. I believe the source to be credible as the series editor is Claudia Durst Johnson (see above). There are several other novel studies by Wilson included in this book and he has also published two other publications, both novel critical companions.