Bloom's Literature

How to Write about To Kill a Mockingbird

History of To Kill a Mockingbird

Few books throughout history have been as beloved as To Kill a Mockingbird. Few have been as controversial. It speaks to Lee's achievement that the book is able to wrap us in a world at once familiar, comforting, and starkly, startlingly wrong. What do we know about Lee's process in conceiving and writing it and then revising the manuscript for publication? What has the American (and international) love/hate relationship with To Kill a Mockingbird really entailed?

Within a few weeks after the publication party in New York in July, To Kill a Mockingbird hit both the New York Times and the Chicago Tribune lists of top ten bestsellers. Reviewers for major publications—who would generally cast a skeptical eye on tales about virtue standing up to evil and peppered with homespun verities about life—found themselves enchanted by To Kill a Mockingbird. (Shields Mockingbird 182)

Even Lee seems reluctant to garner even more notoriety from a novel that has become more of a cultural movement than a mere book. Where does To Kill a Mockingbird fit on the spectrum of literature, when first published as well as more recently? Why is it so often a part of the curriculum in American high schools?

It is appropriate and even necessary, when studying a phenomenon like To Kill a Mockingbird, to look outside the book itself and investigate the circumstances of its production and reception through the years.

Strategies

This section of the chapter addresses various possible topics for writing about the history of To Kill a Mockingbird as well as general methods for approaching these topics. These lists are in no way exhaustive and are meant to provide a jumping-off point rather than an answer key. Use these suggestions to find your own ideas and form your own analyses. All topics discussed in this chapter could turn into strong, effective papers.

Sample Topics:

1. **Revisions:** What changes did the To Kill a Mockingbird manuscript undergo before publication?

   It is fascinating to think about the changes that Lee and her editors made to the novel before its publication. We know that early in the review process, editors felt that "on the one hand, her 'characters stood on their own two feet, they were three-dimensional.' On the other, the manuscript had structural problems: it was 'more a series of anecdotes than a fully conceived novel' " (Shields Mockingbird 115). Then we read that for the second revision "[t]here were dangling threads of plot, there was a lack of unity" (qtd in Shields Mockingbird 116) and that "All [Lee] hoped for was a 'quick and merciful death at the hands of reviewers' " (Shields Mockingbird 175). How do we regard the novel differently after learning the details about its revision process? Do we see Lee's literary choices as more deliberate and painstaking, rather than the easily found results of a writing genius?

2. **Censorship:** Why has To Kill a Mockingbird so often been censored in some way?

   In 1966, citizens of Hanover, Virginia, argued that the book contained inappropriate subject matter (an alleged rape), and the school board removed it from the county's school libraries, inciting public debate. Since then a number of schools and organizations have protested the book for the following reasons: "the portrayal of conflict between children and their elders, or children questioning the wisdom of their elders; profanity or questionable language; ungrammatical speech by characters; use of black dialect; references to the supernatural or witchcraft; depictions of violence; references to sex; negative statements about persons in authority, the United States, or American traditions; the lack of portrayal of a family unit as the basis of American life; and unfavorable presentations of blacks" (Johnson 15). Is To Kill a Mockingbird currently on any
3. **Critical reception:** How have reviewers and the reading public in general responded to *To Kill a Mockingbird* over the years?

The critical reception of *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been evolving through the years, though in general it has been relatively positive—so positive, in fact, that we have to wonder if some of the negative reception has been written simply for the sake of finding a new critical platform from which to speak. There are several fascinating questions to ask. For example, Why do the first reviewers barely mention the social context of the novel's release? The late 1950s and early 1960s were a time of great changes, adjusting to life after World War II and the beginnings of the civil rights movement, among many other things. So why do early reviewers not seem to be reading the novel in that context? It is also interesting to note that much criticism of the novel is by lawyers rather than literary scholars. Why? Certainly there are many books with lawyers as characters that have not attracted the attention of the legal profession in such a way.

4. **Popularity:** How is it that a novel that has been so controversial, written by a woman who shuns the spotlight, has become and remained so popular?

We know that "One year after its publication in 1960, it had gone through 500,000 copies and had been translated into ten languages…. In an 80-year period, from 1895 to 1975, TKM was the seventh best-selling book in the nation, and the third best-selling novel. By 1975, 11,113,909 copies of the book had been sold, and by 1982, over 15,000,000" (Johnson 13). What is it about this book that has captured readers' imaginations for 50 years?

5. **The canon:** Is *To Kill a Mockingbird* officially considered part of the literary canon? Why or why not?

The literary canon is the collection of literature considered influential in shaping culture. There can be a cyclical or reciprocal relationship between the creation of the canon and the literature most often taught in schools. Is the work taught in schools because it is in the canon, or is the work in the canon because it is most often taught in schools? It is clear that the novel was immediately taught in schools, because "since its publication in 1960, the novel has appeared on secondary school reading lists as often as any other book in English…. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the fourth most frequently required book in secondary schools" (Johnson 14). Five thousand respondents to a 1991 "Survey of Lifetime Reading Habits" said that *To Kill a Mockingbird* "was second only to the Bible in being 'most often cited as making a difference' “ (Johnson 14). Does this indicate that the novel is influential in shaping culture? Why or why not?

**Further Information**


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