

Sample Answer – Theme of Prejudice

Select a novel or short story you have studied which has an interesting theme.

- (i) Outline the theme of the text you have chosen.
- (ii) As the theme develops, why does it interest you?

Answer

i) The novel I have studied for my Junior Certificate is Harper Lee's classic 'To Kill a Mockingbird'. Set in the sleepy town of Maycomb, Alabama during the Great Depression of the 1930s the novel is narrated by Scout Finch who lives with her widowed father Atticus and her brother Jem. The theme that I found particularly interesting is that of prejudice.

The most obvious sort of prejudice we see in the novel is that of racial prejudice. At that time in the Southern States of America, there were laws in place which ensured that black people were treated as an inferior race by their white neighbours, and the majority of the white community believed that it was only right and proper that black and white people should be segregated from one another. Atticus sees the ugliness of racism: he refers to it as 'Maycomb's usual disease'.

When Tom Robinson is arrested and charged with the rape of Mayella Ewell, the people in the town think that it is perfectly correct and assume that he is guilty simply because he is black. Indeed, Tom is found guilty despite an almost total lack of evidence. The fact that he is even allowed a trial infuriates some of the white people, who would prefer to see the black man lynched by a mob. Because Atticus defends Tom, he and his children are subject to hateful abuse. Their neighbour, Mrs Dubose, tells Scout and Jem 'Your father's no better than the niggers and trash he works for!'

Racism is not the only sort of prejudice in Maycomb, however. There is also prejudice against those of a lower social class. The Ewells are at the bottom of a complicated class hierarchy in Maycomb. Near the top are the Finches as they are quite well-off and educated. Everybody in Maycomb feeds into the system. The townspeople are seen as superior to the farmers. Below the farmers are people like the Cunninghams, who are farming land but are deeply in debt since the Wall Street Crash, and are desperately poor. Aunt Alexandra tells Scout not to play with Walter Cunningham because 'he is trash'. Below even the Cunninghams are people like the Ewells who add ignorance and violence to their degrading poverty. Most shockingly of all, however, black people are below the Ewells simply because they are black. When Mayella Ewell is assaulted, most of the white community of Maycomb readily accept the highly unlikely story that Tom Robinson raped her, because to them, a black man is naturally inferior, even to a violent drunkard like Bob Ewell.

ii) As the theme of prejudice developed in the novel, I found it very interesting to see how people's prejudice against others became a self-fulfilling prophecy. They expected to see those they considered their inferiors behaving in a certain way, and they never saw that by labelling and limiting others in this way they were actually creating the sort of people and the sort of society they despised. I also found it fascinating, if a little depressing, to see how we still struggle to defeat the same prejudices today as did the characters in a novel set over eighty years ago.

I believe that the way the Ewells are regarded in Maycomb is the starting point for much of the racial hatred and prejudice that leads to tension, hostility and ultimately murder. It amazes me that even someone as educated, kind, rational and intelligent as Atticus could so easily dismiss the Ewells as 'the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations'. He tells Scout that it is pointless

to expect Burris Ewell to attend school and goes so far as to say that 'it's silly to force people like the Ewells into a new environment.' I found this prejudice interesting but also disheartening. By simply allowing the Ewells to continue living in ignorance and squalor, the people of Maycomb unwittingly allow a situation to develop in which the lonely, abused Mayella causes Tom Robinson's wrongful imprisonment and death.

As the novel progresses, we see that the vast majority of the white community in Maycomb will rally around the Ewells in the court case even though they are 'trash'. The reason for this is that if they were to accept Tom Robinson's story then they would have to accept that a white woman had sunk so low as to seek the company and affection of a black man. Acceptance of such a thing would be a judgement on all of Maycomb's white community and would show how badly they had – in their eyes – failed the white people in Maycomb by allowing the Ewells to sink below the black people. I found it both disturbing and compelling to see how far the white community was willing to go in its effort to maintain the racial prejudice in the town.

Tom Robinson's greatest sin in the eyes of the white community is his pity for Mayella Ewell. I found it very sad but also deeply interesting that a community could be so blinded by prejudice that they would take offence at what they considered to be an inferior person – a black man like Tom Robinson – feeling in any way superior to a white woman, even one as lowly and miserable as Mayella Ewell.

The outcome of the court case is deeply depressing, but hardly surprising. Tom Robinson sealed his own death warrant when he told the court that he 'felt right sorry' for Mayella Ewell. The town may have accepted the Ewell's inferior status compared to the rest of the white population, but they are

angry at the thought that a black man might equally see their poverty and degradation and pity them for it.

Looking back on the novel as a whole, what I found most interesting about the theme of prejudice is that even though individual characters – such as Scout – may have learned that it is never acceptable to judge another person without knowing a great deal about them or until you ‘stand in his shoes and walk around in them’, I am still left with the feeling that there are many people who do not want to have their prejudices exposed as false. Perhaps, however, someone like Scout represents a new and more enlightened generation. That is something that is as relevant and necessary now as it was in the 1950s, when this book was written.