

Lukas

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee. Essays for studying

To Kill a Mockingbird. Forever.

Why is the book, written 60 years ago about the events that happened 90 years ago in a patriarchal town Maycomb, the most remote part of Alabama, is still absorbing and inspiring a reader, remaining an unchangeable bestseller (for example, in Amazon's top-100)?

The world has changed from the time of its creation. Digital and communications revolutions almost wiped out the white spots in geography, as well as in private lives. It is not easy to find patriarchal principles now.

But there are still in a human world Mockingbirds and Mad Dogs. Everything that happens when they meet bothers people even nowadays.

This book was published on 11 July 1960 and since then it has been translated into 50 languages and had an addition of more than 40 million copies, an author became a millionaire, and it has stayed in the 10 most significant books of the 20th century according to various ratings and lists. Historians and sociologists

named the year 1960 as “the year of Africa and the USA” as it was marked by an increase of racial conflicts that were expressed in the works of American writers and in a rip-roaring triumph of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In 1961, in just a year after *To Kill a Mockingbird* had been published, Harper Lee won the Pulitzer for it. Hollywood shared a general excitement about the book, in 1962 the film with the same name appeared on the screens gaining not less love and popularity than the original book. The main role of the lawyer Atticus Finch played Gregory Peck, and he received Oscar and Golden Globe award for the role.

Atticus Finch holds the first position in a list of the most positive cinematographic characters of the 20th century made by the American Film Institute in 2003.

There is an interesting connection between the book and life. It is clear that Scout Finch is Harper’s alter ego (a similar detail — Harper is called Hell at home), and the main heroine’s childhood is very similar to the author’s childhood.

The name of the author’s father was Amasa Coleman Lee. He was also a lawyer, as well as an accountant, a newspaper editor and a politician — a member of the House of Representatives of the state. Amasa Lee had a similar situation when he defended

two black men charged with murder. He lost, his clients were sentenced to death and hung. It was in 1919 and, presumably, he stopped his law practice after this fiasco. But unlike noble Atticus, a real lawyer Lee was a quite stereotyped white racist who supported segregating.

A future writer Truman Capote was a neighbour and childhood friend of Harper Lee. He can be recognized as a friend Dill in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It seems that their childhood relations managed to grow together with them and form a professional cooperation. It is a known fact that Lee took part in the preparation of Capote's book, *Cold Blood*, and Capote kept saying that he had inspired Lee in every possible way to write (it was a hard process for her; she had been sitting for hours in front of a blank page) and even "organized money" (convinced some wealthy friends to make her such a gift) she had for a living while she was finishing the first variant of a novel (it started with several separate scenes written from her childhood memories.)

Generally, the idea to "rewrite" an unhappy childhood is rather therapeutic. It's unlikely that Harper Lee suffered so much that she could not write anything. Why would she waste herself on other books if she wrote her main one? It would only make sense providing she enjoyed the process of writing, that she

enjoyed it on its own. Apparently, it is not like this...

Probably, that is why the narration style of the author is so original: the story is told by a heroine, eight-year-old Jean Louise, and all the events are shown through the perception of a child — busy, observant, with independent judgment, an ordinary naive child.

From time to time, casually interrupting the girl, a grown-up Jean Louise — a clever, mischievous woman who clearly did not lose her independent judgment, joins the story. This “flexible” angle sight allows the writer, without applying to the worn out modern novel method of “different narrators”, to go outside the framework of the child’s perception and, at the same time, to talk about the most serious and amusing things, preserving the charming ingenuousness.

Besides, the novel has wonderful sketches of the provincial life that could be independent novellas. Let us just mention a story about a rare event in the life of south Maycomb — a snowfall that Jean Louise saw for the first time.

With special sympathy and love, H. Lee describes black citizens in her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. There are no bad or evil people — on the contrary, she gives an impression that all the evil things and injustice happen because of the white people. This fact allowed some American theorists of literature to see “peculiar to

many white writers of America and not always justified idealization of African Americans and their natural kindness” and to name this tendency “the black racism of white southern writers”. However, this definition may be disputed from the writer’s position, clearly expressed in the novel: all people are born to be free and with equal rights regardless of skin colour, to defend diminished and aggrieved is a task for real people and there are many of them.

The father of Jean Louise and Jem — Atticus Finch, a lawyer and the main character of the narration, makes this novel a book for adults.

But if you look at his appearance and actions, there is nothing from a superhero. He is a calm overweight widower in his late 40s, always a little tired, sitting in his armchair in the evenings with a newspaper or a book, “unable to do anything” compared to other fathers as his daughter sadly commented. However, introducing her father to readers, Jean Louise says shortly and clearly: “Jem and I thought our father was not bad: he played with us, read to us and was always polite and fair.”

Actually, Atticus Finch is a kind of people who, clearly because of a great number of substitutes, are usually called “true”.

He is endowed with the highest qualities of mind and heart, and at the same time — here the artistry and artistic limits of Harper Lee are tested — the reader is

not oppressed by it at all. We quickly feel drawn to Atticus and sympathize with his fate, full of vicissitudes and surprises (mostly unpleasant), of a father of two cutest offsprings that have too much energy and imagination.

Only once Atticus had to shoot a rifle — there was a mad dog in the street, and at that moment it was found, that in spite of bad sight, Finch used to be the best shooter in the town. Only once in his professional life, Atticus Finch agreed on a case with almost no chance for success, and he knew it would make worried not only him but his children as well. He did not look for this experience nor he avoided it.