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BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

The Role of Small Town in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Role maloměsta v díle *Jako zabít ptáčka* od Harper Lee

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2020

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V Praze dne 20. 7. 2020

### **Poděkování**

Ráda bych touto cestou z celého srdce poděkovala PhDr. Tereze Topolovské, PhD. nejen za veškerou odbornou pomoc a cenné rady, ale především za její nekonečnou trpělivost, ochotu a pochopení, za neutuchající podporu a vstřícnost při vedení této bakalářské práce, bez kterých by nebyla vznikla. Zároveň bych zde ráda vyjádřila své díky a vděčnost především mému příteli Vojtěchu Ješinovi za jeho obětavou toleranci, shovívavost a podporu v čase tvorby této práce, stejně tak jako všem mým přátelům a rodině, kteří snad více než já věřili v mé schopnosti a úspěch.

## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá rolí maloměstského prostředí a jeho hodnot v díle americké autorky Harper Lee *Jako zabít ptáčka* a jejich vlivem na příběh, osobnosti a činy jednotlivých postav. Teoretická část této práce popisuje důležitost maloměsta pro americkou společnost a zakotvení a vývoj maloměstské literatury v Americe. Dále definuje charakteristické rysy amerického maloměsta a zabývá se především vymezením otázky spravedlnosti, rovnoprávnosti, stereotypního jednání a předsudků v rámci amerického jihu, který je pro pochopení prostředí jižanského maloměsta zásadní. Praktická část této práce se soustředí na uchopení jednotlivých charakterických maloměstských rysů vnímání spravedlnosti a rovnosti popsanych v teoretické části v příběhu a jednání jak jednotlivých postav, tak maloměstské komunity jako celku. Kromě toho se tato práce pokouší poskytnout také vhled do podstaty maloměstské jižanské spravedlnosti.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

Harper Lee, americká maloměstská literatura, maloměsto v americké literatuře, maloměsto, stereotyp, předsudek

## **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor's thesis deals with the role and the influence of a small-town environment and its values on the story, identities and actions of individual characters in the work of an American author Harper Lee *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The theoretical part of the thesis focuses on the importance of small town for the American society as well as on the development and position of the American small-town literature in American literary canon. The theoretical part establishes definitions of the characteristic features of the American small town and primarily focuses on questions of justice, equality, stereotypical thinking, and prejudices in the scope of the American south which is essential for understanding the southern small-town environment. The practical part attempts to characterise the typical small-town features of justice and equality described above within the narrative of the novel itself and through the actions and personalities of individual characters and the community as a whole. Apart from that, the thesis attempts to provide an insight into the essence of southern small-town justice.

## **KEYWORDS**

Harper Lee, American small-town literature, small town in American literature, small town psyche, stereotype, prejudice

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## 1 Introduction

The first work of the only two novels Harper Lee had ever written *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) became the classic of the American literature and also “one of the most beloved and most taught works of fiction ever written by an American” (Grimes). It addresses the issues of the Great Depression American small town concerning the question of southern justice and morality and is closely connected with Lee’s personal experience with provincial life and also her familiarity with law and justice. Moreover, *To Kill a Mockingbird* examines the depths of human nature, the indisputable influence of rooted prejudices and stereotypical perception of reality and also the hardship of fighting the long-established biased system as well as the ability of an individual to transform and learn to comprehend the world in its complexity.

When I first opened the book and dived into its story, I was deeply touched by the underlying issues of the small-town social disparities and the omnipresence of utter unfairness. As the question of equality, justice and, of course, freedom is close to my heart, the story of *To Kill a Mockingbird* induced me to delve deeper into the spheres of morality, equality and justice of the American south, or rather the lack of it. As I find those matters still relevant and sadly very present in the contemporary world, I decided to scrutinize the human sense of morale and how it is formed by the environment we live in and address the question of discrimination in the scope of the distinctive American provincial south. Moreover, I am certain that understanding the reasons behind the oppressive behaviour and its consequences which cannot be limited exclusively to the American south, might help us condemn such phenomena.

After careful research, I learnt about the distinctiveness of the American south, southern justice and the characteristic features and importance of the American small town within American society creating a broader picture of the origins of the local tendencies to discriminate and oppress. The American small town may be said to have two different faces. It is the embodiment of both the imagined American provincial perfection of cordial friendships and neighbourly atmosphere as well as of the lack of compassion and pervasive racist tendencies and an affinity for prejudicial, narrow-

minded judgements. The objective of this thesis is primarily to examine the effect of those small-town values on its inhabitants with emphasis on the negative aspects of oppression and injustice exemplified in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The aim of this thesis is to examine the role of the small-town environment and the extent of its influence on both the individuals as well as the community as a whole. In order to establish a foundation for the attempted exploration of the characteristic features of the small town in the practical part of the thesis, the theoretical part focuses on studies discussing the phenomena needed for such exploration. Among many others, the major works used to demonstrate the above outlined are: Ima Honaker Herron's *The Small Town in American Literature* providing the background to the importance of the small town to the American history and the problematics of its definition and John Kidd Young's "*The Revolt from the Village*" in *Contemporary American Literature* focusing on the transition from the idyllic perception of the small town to the more critical understanding of the settlement; Ryan Poll's *Main Street and Empire. The Fictional Small Town in the Age of Globalization* and Miles and Orvell's *The Death and Life of Main Street: Small Town in American Memory, Space, and Community* dealing with the complexity of the American small town, its problematic past and the question of discrimination and lastly David Jansson's *The Work of Southering: Southern Justice and the Moral Landscape of Uneven Racism* describing the distinctiveness of southern justice.

The theoretical part of this thesis will deal with the importance of the small town for American society and primarily with the characteristic features of the southern small town. It will focus on the questions of identity and community, provincial values and, as mentioned above, the question of stereotypical judgements and discrimination. In addition, another objective of the theoretical part will be to examine the distinctiveness of southern justice and the discriminatory legal code present in the provincial sphere.

The objective of the practical part of the thesis will be to observe the instantiated matters in Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* and detect how they manifest throughout the plot of the novel as well as how they are incorporated in the

personalities of certain characters and to what extent the small-town environment and its typical features affect the behaviours and decision-making of the Maycomb community. It will focus on the small-town disparities and their social and territorial demonstration, and also on the distinctive characters of Atticus and Scout who embody the fight against the characteristic organization of the town. The practical part will also explore the face of justice and the issues of its partiality in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

## 2 Theoretical Part

### 2.1 *To Kill a Mockingbird* within the work of Harper Lee

Nelle Harper Lee, best known only as Harper Lee, born on April 28 in 1926 in a small town of Monroeville in southwest Alabama (Anderson) is an American writer who is „nationally acclaimed“ for her literary work *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one of the only two novels she had ever written (Britannica).

The first published *To Kill a Mockingbird* is labelled as a coming-of-age novel and it gained instant popularity and success shortly after it was released in 1960 (Pilkington). Unlike her other work *Go Set a Watchman* the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Mockingbird* is generally acknowledged and valued worldwide, and it ranks among the “most affecting and widely read books of American literature” (Anderson). Lee’s second novel *Go Set a Watchman* was published in 2015 and it is often referred to as the “sister book” to *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Pilkington). The novel *Go Set a Watchman* is surrounded by a great mystery of its origin and a number of questions of the exact time of its creation (Pilkington). Even though the story of *Go Set a Watchman* portrays Scout, the famous child protagonist of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as an adult and describes her return home to the city of Maycomb, it is in fact an early version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Kakutani). After the submission of the *Go Set a Watchman* to the publisher, Harper Lee is believed to had been asked to rewrite parts of the book which, allegedly, led to the creation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Kakutani). Although the novel *Go Set a Watchman* may attract readers by the mysterious circumstances of its provenance, *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains Lee’s most memorable work until today.

Lee’ own growing up in Monroeville in Alabama fundamentally shaped the style and themes of both of her works (Anderson), and inspired by her personal experience of a small-town environment Harper Lee mastered, especially in her work *To Kill a Mockingbird*, to draw both “the country’s original sin and its redeeming qualities” (Teague). The American author spent her childhood growing up in an American small town in a family of a lawyer, Amasa Coleman, and as the youngest of four children she had been growing up as a “tomboy” (Biography). Her hometown even inspired the creation

of the fictional town of Maycomb, the setting to the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* as well as *Go Set a Watchman* (Teague).

However, it is not only the small-town surroundings that shaped the style of her writing. Another significant theme stemming from her personal context present in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the one of law and justice. The greatest influence on her perception of justice and righteousness was her father, a lawyer for the state legislature of the state of Alabama (Biography) who was an essential real life figure for shaping the beloved hero-like character of *To Kill a Mockingbird* – Atticus Finch, a kind, wise, and always just father and neighbour (Fine).

In conclusion, the autobiographical features in both of the novels are therefore mainly based on Lee's family background and the small-town environment which Harper Lee grew up in, and the employment of her personal experience in her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not only observed from the literary point of view, it also brought fame to the factual town of Monroeville (Teague).

## **2.2 Small town and its definition throughout the history**

### **2.2.1 The importance of small town in America**

Even though the contemporary texts often refer to small towns as a “dying community” (Poll), the number of best-selling works in the first quarter of the twentieth century depicting the small-town settings speaks against it. It is believed that the nature of small-town life has shaped the American population regardless of whether citizens lived within or outside this type of settlement (Poll), and according to Ryan Poll, the small town “has become a national icon, a national tradition, and a national myth” (Poll). This became evident especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century when Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* became one of the best-selling novels, *Peyton Place* by Grace Metalious was the prime-time TV show, and a great number of films whose narratives were framed by the small-town environment such as *Back to the Future* or the renowned *Forrest Gump* were widely favoured in America during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Poll). The influence of the small-town environment is, however, not apparent solely in the literature and film industries, according to Poll it “dominates political discourse as well” (Poll). The small-town ideology was

employed in campaigns of several presidential candidates, too (Poll). Namely when Ronald Reagan highlighted his personal provincial values and morality by presenting himself as a “small-town boy” in his autobiography written in 1965, or when Sarah Palin stressed her love for small-town America by referring to it as the “place where “real” America can be discovered” (Poll). The affinity to the “real” America which blends with the idea of the “small-town America” has been advertised as a virtue as opposed to the “elitist Wall Street”, and it is mostly considered to be the embodiment of “the everyday and innocent America” (Poll).

Due to the diversity of American towns, finding a compact definition of the American small town or village proves rather difficult, and there are several different perceptions of what constitutes a small town. Julie Patton states that people are fond of the “idea” of a small town with its intimacy and charms, and she believes that only few can be “indifferent” to the lovable “little towns” (Patton 2), whereas others understand the concept of village as something “antiquated” or may even perceive it as a “sleeping community” (Honaker Herron 4). The idea of a small town, Herron says, may resemble anything from beach and lake resorts, university centres, Colorado mining camps to small communities closely connected to big cities (Honaker Herron 4). There are neither strict nor very clear defining boundaries for the classification of the American small town (Honaker Herron 4).

However, certain lines of definition may be drawn based on the census. The status of “town” or “village” in America is assigned to communities with the number of citizens below 2,500 (Rosenberg). Nevertheless, the use of the status “small town” is not always entirely based on the number of citizens as defined by the urban studies (Honaker Herron 5). Particularly from the literary perception, the attribute “small“ results rather from the image of a “concentrated neighbourhood (...) with visible unity of the town group of homes and shops“ than from the precise number of its citizens (Honaker Herron 5). More than anything, the small town is associated with “traditionalism” and with “conservative social value” which opposes the diversity of the city (Orvell 2).

Owing to the fact that until the midst of the 20<sup>th</sup> century most American citizens experienced small-town social organization first-hand, the small-town with its values and ways of living has been an important factor in shaping the American sense of identity and

community, and as such it played a significant role not only in literary discourse, but also in politics, political campaigns, and economics. The picture of a small town, no matter the lack of solid definition, remains an essential part of the American imagination and identity (Poll) and the “core building block of America” (Price 2).

### **2.2.2 The American small-town literature**

As stated in the previous chapter, the small-town settlement can be understood as the “carrier” of national culture and identity (Klusáková 1) and it was not only the American writers who have been attracted to and inspired by the small-town life and who incorporated its varied forms in many of their works (Honaker Herron, Preface VII). We may perceive the small-town distinctiveness in the European settlement as well (Klusáková 1). The undeniable influence of small-town environment is, for instance, particularly apparent in English literature which was inspired by the rural lifestyle since Chaucer (Patton 18). Julia Patton claims that “in a sense the village has never been absent from English literature” (2) and since *Piers Plowman* the charming ideals of life in a small town including intimacy and simplicity have held a certain amount of significance in the literary works of English authors (3–4).

In its beginnings in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the American genre of small-town literature, known also as the American village genre, tended to comply with the English literary tradition of provincial intimacy (Honaker Herron, Preface XIV). Gradually, the English tradition was abandoned, and the American small-town genre developed alongside the transformation of the American civilization itself (Preface XIV). Since moving away from the English influence of the perception of small town, the genre has been continuously developing in a great variety of modes and styles, and it depicted the diversity of the small-town environment in a wide spectrum of forms from poetry to fiction, essays, historical works and texts with autobiographical features (Preface VII).

The early works of the American small-town literature were primarily inspired by provincial lifestyle and depicted the small town as a “source of virtues” (Campion 80), a safe and homely haven with good and beautiful people (Young 1). However, in 1920 this “American tradition” (Campion 80) was disrupted by Sinclair Lewis’ novel *Main Street* which was one of the very first satires of the small town describing its smallness and

shallowness and as such it initiated the degradation of former small-town values (80). Numerous American authors such as Sherwood Anderson or Floyed Dell, who, just as Sinclair Lewis, “experienced small town life at first hand” followed this new satirical literary trend of unmasking the hypocrisy of the small town (Honaker Herron, Preface XVI).

From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the references to small towns in American literature have been repeatedly recurring in wide range of novels of authors such as in the novellas and novels of John Steinbeck, e. g. *Cannery Row* (1945), Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) or in Stephen King’s *It* (1986) which combined the small town setting with horror features. The variety and diversity of the small town nature have made this genre “a place the national history has passed through,” a genre which helped capture the change and gradual evolution of the American nation (Honaker Herron, Preface XIII).

### **2.2.3 Revolt from the village**

This subchapter focuses on the transition from the idealized perception of the small town emphasizing its intimacy and innocence into a more realistic idea of rural America with its virtues as well as its vices induced by the “Revolt from the village” movement.

The “Revolt from the village” is an American literary movement originating in the the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century associated with names such as Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis or Lee Masters and it refers to a rejection of the long-established “pastoral tradition” (Price 4) which was used to create the literary image of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century rural America based on purity and calm perfection (Young 93). To authors such as Washington Irving, Henry James or Jack London village life was the epitome of innocence, and they believed that “nothing that was connected with village life could be bad” (93). The American Civil War together with the industrial growth and the disillusionment that followed this period have, however, shifted the general views towards a more realistic approach to life and gave rise to works such as *Sister Carrie* by Dreiser or Master’s *Spoon River Anthology* (93).

The Revolt from the village movement is not widely recognized. However, the critics who recognize it as such, date this movement in the “time period from around 1915 until about 1930” (Price 3). Although the pastoral depiction of small town had partially returned

after the Revolt movement was over, the “conception” of the Revolt movement outlived the 1930 and the perception of small towns was no longer as homogenous as it was before (Price 3). The movement can be therefore also understood as a “revolt from mediocrity (...) and dullness” as it not replaced but widened the rather narrow pastoral perception of the preceding decades (Young 18).

According to Price, the change in understanding the nature of small-town environment has become a “lasting motif of the twentieth century and beyond” and it contributed to the transformation of the picturesque portrayal of small towns into a more critical one (4). Thanks to this movement, authors sought to draw a more realistic picture of small-town life with its tendencies to “hypocrisy and corruption,” (Price 13) and they published many realistic works about the American small town such as Gale’s *Birth* which describes the harshness of everyday life (Applegate 157).

In short, the clash of the idealized portrayal of the small town with the Revolt from the village brought about the realization that small towns are the combination of both negative and positive aspects, and that the communities are neither entirely morally pure and virtuous nor decaying places full of vice and corruption. The realistic views of the small town, its criticisms and satirizing eventually resulted in a “reconciliation” of the two extremes which is valuable in the general perception of the conception of the small town (Young 92).

#### **2.2.4 Southernness and Southern distinctiveness**

As the story of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is placed in the Deep South Alabama and displays some of the defining features of the region, it is necessary to elucidate the phenomenon and the matter of belonging to the American “South”, moreover, it outlines the differentiating features of this distinctive part of the USA.

The American South also known as the Deep South which stretches from North Carolina through Georgia to Alabama and eastern Texas is perhaps the most distinctive region of the United States (Mark Abadi). It is, as Stephen S. Birdsall puts it, a “geographic composite of beliefs, attitudes, patterns, habits, and institutions” (Birdsall). The southern states are tied by the historical production of tobacco and cotton which is closely connected with slave labour which was, in fact, the primal reason for the parting of the South and the

North (Birdsall). Until the 1930' the South was isolated from the rest of the United States and it operated as though it was a "separate country" (Birdsall), and according to Grantham, the South is still, in many people's minds, often associated with "lynching, (...) mob violence, and reactionary politics" (Grantham).

The region's differences from the rest of America and especially "the North" in religion, political beliefs, and particularly in the question of racism have sustained the concept of southern distinctiveness and the image of the "the South" and "Southerners". (Bone 1). The question of racism is, more than others, essential for the distinction and characterization of the South which is often seen as "being hampered by a problematic past" (Jansson 132). Although this connection of the imagined South with injustice and oppression might be considered the region's burden, it served as a great foundation for shaping the "American identity that stands for the pursuit of justice" (Jansson 132), and it is understood to be the forming power of the "national mappings of justice and morality" (Jansson 132).

Martyn Bone believes that the South with its southern culture is closer to an "ideology or a construct" rather than a material place with fixed geographical borders (Bone 2) and therefore the South can be understood as a moral canvas portraying the "national guilt" which functions as a "scapegoat for stricken conscience" (Jansson 132). Taking this into consideration, the southern heritage can be utilized to represent the American culture with its social issues of racism, segregation, the question of "whiteness" and the "struggle for justice and equality" (133) which are some of the underlying themes of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

### **2.3 Typical American small town features**

Small-town America is, in our imaginations, the America where one knows their neighbour, where one experiences the community life with all its benefits of warm and simple familiarity, and the place which allows us to take a step back from the hectic life-style of large cities (Johnson 7). For decades, small towns represented the simplicity and innocence of the American rural life where people sat on front porches and watched their children playing on the street while chatting with their neighbours (7). There are, however, other characteristic attributes quite opposite to the described idyllic image of provincial

living as the towns were more than often interwoven with racism and rooted biases. Even though individual small-town communities may vary in their origin, landscape or economic, cultural, and social conditions (7), they share certain common characteristics. The objective of the following chapters is to clarify and describe those characteristic features typical of American southern small towns.

### **2.3.1 Provincialism**

The work *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in a provincial environment and this subchapter therefore aims to explain the scope of the term “provincialism” and define its fundamental values with their underlying menace.

According to Josiah Royce, the word “provincialism” should be used in an “elastic sense,” rather than as a fixed term which may refer to any sort of province civilization and its customs (Royce 69). He believes that the term “provincialism” may be used exclusively to “name (...) the fashions, the manners, and customs of a given restricted region of any country” (70) as well as it can be understood in its abstract form which conveys the “fondness” for the local customs and conventions. Broadly speaking, the term “provincialism” has a dual meaning comprising both the social customs of certain places as well as the “mental interest” in those traditions and beliefs which helps to preserve them (Royce 71).

Even though provincial values can be found in any sort of establishment which cherishes its unity and stable customs regardless its size (Royce 259), it is predominantly the small town environment and its lifestyle that is prone to the provincial perception of reality and is loyal to its biases and common beliefs (Halper). Those commonly shared views and so-called “provincial spirit” may, however, be also the cause of many “evils” (Royce 76). Namely, those may be the issues of assimilation of newcomers who are often unable to align with the community social order which may, according to Royce, be a “cause of social danger” as the community requires a solid social structure (76), or the “mob-spirit” (80) referring to certain type of passionate behaviour of the community members who are under the influence of their social group (81). The “mob members” are usually unable to observe that their judgement is affected by the ideals of their social group and they are, on the contrary, mostly certain that they express their own personal belief.

However, their behaviour is largely based on the mass opinion rather than their individual principles and free will (81).

Altogether, a province is a community largely based on strict organization, a given set of rules, and habits which are generally adhered to and honoured, and in which members may often tend to follow the crowd opinion rather than their own reasoning. Also, it is not a well-suited place for newcomers and even though the community needs new members in order to flourish it may be difficult to assimilate as the foundations of the community and its “strong provincial spirit” lies within the already established “centralized portion of the community” consisting of well-known old settlers (Royce 76). Therefore, the new inhabitants are often expected to fight for their “social place” to become an internalized part of the community (Royce 261).

### **2.3.2 Small-town identity and community**

The “sense of place” that constitutes a small town does not only reside in its architecture and material aesthetics, it is, even more importantly, constructed socially (Knox 76). On the one hand, people tend to conform to their surroundings and accommodate its values as the feeling of belonging proves important for people’s mental state as it helps us define and understand who we are (Knox 76). On the other hand, home-towns are also being “modified and adjusted to suit their needs and express their values” (76). Therefore, our dwellings can be perceived as places people accommodate to as well as places which are shaped and recreated by human activity (76).

Small towns are commonly regarded as places where people know one another well and the inhabitants are believed to be mostly on friendly, neighbourly terms (Wuthnow 101). Although the interpersonal relationships seem to be more familiar, and the inhabitants of small towns seem to be closely acquainted with the rest of the community, it is not necessarily always the case (Wuthnow 102). The roots of the “community spirit” and the foundations of the difference between small town and city or metropolitan social relationships lies especially within the absence of “levelling” (102). All small-town members dine and shop at the same place and therefore the social differences between neighbours may seem to be slightly blurred (102).

In sum, community is not based only on the mutual recognition of one another but it is rather founded in the “activities and organizations along with the resulting perceptions and narratives that arise” (Wuthnow 102). The “community spirit” resides predominantly in shared interests and ideals which are vital for maintaining functional community rather than family-like relations (102). Those shared beliefs and common interests are, however, governed by “unspoken code of behaviour” which may be difficult to adjust to (102).

As mentioned in the previous chapter on provincialism, assimilation issues are not alien to the small town setting and it is particularly challenging for newcomers to adjust to and align with the communal set of unspoken norms and standards and they may be, even after decades of habitation in a certain town, viewed as outcasts (Wuthnow 126). The original communities are usually “dominated by a single ethnic or nationality background” and such “ethnic distinctiveness” can pose an obstacle to complete assimilation (126). The hostility towards the newcomers and in particular towards the members of different ethnicities is not genuinely based on their participation in community activities and their adherence to the social habits and generally accepted customs. On the contrary, the outcast inhabitants of small towns do not usually have power over their general acceptance no matter their willingness to fit in (137). It may be said that, by more than anything, the true nature of small towns is represented by this projected “sense of distance from the community” (137).

### **2.3.3 Discrimination and oppression within the scope of southern small town**

As capitalism spread, strengthened, and became more aggressive during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the understanding and portrayal of small towns transformed. In the eyes of Americans, it was a warm, friendly, and homogenous place, and as such it opposed the modernity of the dehumanizing capitalist city (Poll 86). It was particularly during the 1930s that the small-town dwellings became once again, after Sinclair Lewis attempted to expose its defects, the imagined “icon of social harmony” (Orvell 130). Throughout this period, the small town was perceived as a place which preserved the American “national traditions” (Poll 86), and as such it defined and regulated the boundary between the understanding of what is “native” and what is “foreign” (87). As Ryan Poll remarks “to be

at home in the small town is to be at home in the nation, and conversely, to be excluded from the small town is to be excluded from the national symbolic” (87).

However, beneath the surface of friendliness and kind neighbourly relationships, there was a significant clash of cultures causing discrimination and oppression (Orvell 130) apparent especially in the use of public lynching of African-American inhabitants by their white neighbours which went usually unpunished or other forms of oppression of the African-Americans by their fellow white citizens (133). The question of race is so central to the US politics and culture that according to Quinn “the history of the country could be written purely as a history of race relations” (Quinn 240). It was, however, not only a matter of race, the communities were rigid in accepting differences and otherness regarding all “religious, political, ethnic, or racial” grounds (Orvell 131) and so the desire to escape the uncertain modernity of big cities created a “violently xenophobic culture,” (Poll 93) and as the imagined ideal form of community was a “unified, authentic collective identity,” the American small town “predicated exclusion” (Poll 94).

The tension and one-sided superiority between the Southern small-town inhabitants originates, as explained in the chapter on Southernness, in the history of the cotton industry which marked the Southern small-town population and characterized the region both “socially as well as economically” (Stetson 16). This industry built on slavery divided the population into two unequal groups and led to the lasting “rigid enforcement of racial restrictions” (16). Although after the abolishment of slavery the majority of the South population was African-American, it was still considered a “white man’s country” (Stetson 78). The former plantation workers had absolutely no voice in public affairs and their lives were still restricted by “discriminatory legal code (...) and law enforcement” (Stetson 78), and so, as Poll puts it, the 20<sup>th</sup> century South was “engulfed in racism” (86).

In the South, the separation of race from class is impossible to perform (Maxwell 5) but however deeply rooted racism and discrimination are in its history, the Southern small town seems to remain oblivious to its oppression and exploitation (Poll 100), and according to Orvell, small town is a persisting dark icon of “prejudice, segregation, and hostility” (131).

#### 2.3.4 Stereotypes and racial prejudice

This chapter seeks to define the term “stereotype” and “prejudice” more closely in order to establish a foundation for further examination of those biased tendencies present in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the practical part of this thesis.

In general, the term stereotype is understood as a “commonly held public belief about specific social groups or types of individuals” (Simon, Preface VII). Therefore, stereotypes can be perceived as a matter which helps us comprehend and anticipate the world around us with its social order and hierarchy as well as understand the greater picture of how individuals fit into their role and position within the society (Simon 47) as the stereotypical perception reduces the complexity of a person to a “set of exaggerated (...) character traits” (Heathy 46).

However helpful stereotypes may be in understanding the world that surrounds us, they may also lead to uneven or unequal judgements and “erroneous conclusions” springing from the social disparities caused by them (Simon 48) affecting a variety of differences from race through age, wealth, and very commonly also gender (Fields 115). The conviction of understanding the reasons behind people’s certain behaviour – which is provided by stereotypes – serves also as a tool of justification and defence of these social inequalities and they are therefore particularly difficult to refute (Simon 48).

Similarly to stereotypes, prejudices can also be either positive or negative and in regards to social hierarchy, prejudice is generally understood as a belief that some races or social groups are superior to others (Kuvlesky 14). Based on a research run by William P. Kuvlesky, the stereotypes and prejudices towards the African-American dwellers often held by the white inhabitants of towns and villages are generally negative (14).

Moreover, the stereotypes often imply that those generalized behavioural traits attributed to the stigmatized groups originate in biological innate differences (Simon 56). Based on social psychological research it has been shown that people link physical appearance with certain behavioural traits, and visage and even more importantly race play a significant role in “forming impressions” (Fields 85). Therefore, the commonly accepted stereotypes and deeply rooted prejudices inflict the above described racially biased

judgment of African-Americans in the USA where they are generally “viewed as criminal, aggressive, and dangerous” (Fields 85).

Due to race and facial features which are bially perceived as intimidating or threatening, stereotypes may result in “deadly consequences” (85) and the stereotyped group may be perceived as “deserving of lethal force” (Fields 87). All in all, those negative stereotypes and prejudices pose a threat to the stigmatized group whose members’ actions may be judged differently, (Fields 24) and have a profound influence on the way the members of generalized groups are treated (Simon 54).

### **2.3.5 Southern small-town justice**

The question of already discussed prejudice, stereotypes and also the protection of a buoyant community life is closely connected with the question of justice, and as the theme of righteousness is prominent in Harper Lee’s *Mockingbird*, the objective of this chapter is to explore the distinctiveness of the so-called “southern justice” so that its nature can be exemplified in the latter part of this thesis.

Most of the Americans understand the term of “southern justice” as a very different term to the national American justice itself (Jansson 132). As described in the previous chapters of this thesis, the problematics of social prejudice and racism had certainly had an essential impact on shaping the South which led to the differentiation of its conception of justice as well (132). Due to its history of injustice and racial prejudices, the “South” is often seen as a place of a “lower ethical plane” (132).

Mark Curriden claims that the small-town justice in the rural South is very distinctive and utterly different from the rest of the USA (66). According to his article it is not only due to the fact that there are only a few lawyers in the southern counties and are therefore a “rare commodity”, moreover, he states that in the rural counties, it is “more important to keep a neighbour than to win a lawsuit” (66). As the “community spirit” and neighbourly relationships are imperative for small town inhabitants, it is essential that the lawyers and prosecutors in small rural areas observe and mind the voice and opinion of the community itself while they are obliged to remain impartial as well (66).

This juristic distinctiveness of the oppressive and racist “South” helped, however, established the division of the USA to “the South” and “the Other” (Jansson 132), and the “South” due to its racist history, fear of unknown and its stereotypical nature, may be understood as a representation of “the struggle for civil rights and equality” (133).

### **3 Practical Part**

#### **3.1 *To Kill a Mockingbird***

*To Kill a Mockingbird*<sup>1</sup> is a story about justice, racial inequality, and the Depression era southern small-town life. The story takes place in a sleepy southern small town called Maycomb during the 1930's and it pictures the small-town life vices with all its prejudices, stereotypes and biases rooted in the minds of its citizens. The story explores the moral nature of human beings and questions whether humans are inherently good or inherently evil. As the story is told from a little girl's perspective whose closest friend is her - also rather young - brother, it also portrays their transition from their childhood innocence to a more mature, more critical understanding of the ways of life. Through their everyday adventurous experiences, the tender guidance of their beloved father, and certain events which take place during the story, the siblings learn to understand that there is good in people some may struggle to see, as well as there is hidden evil in them and that they themselves may have unknowingly contributed to the often distorted and unsubstantiated perception of other human beings. Moreover, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a novel about a change of perspective on the world that surrounds us, about experiencing a loss of trust in justice, fairness, and even faith in humanity itself. It depicts the darkest parts of human nature together with our weaknesses and fears as well as it showcases the good, the innocent and honourable qualities of the American small-town society.

The upcoming chapters and subchapters will focus on those outlined themes and features within the book and will examine and explore their role in the lives of the inhabitants of Maycomb as well as their influence on the community as a whole.

#### **3.2 The representation of social and racial separation in the scope of Maycomb**

Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop; grass grew on the sidewalks, the courthouse sagged in the square. Somehow, it was hotter then: a black dog suffered on a summer's day; bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering

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<sup>1</sup> The following page references are expressed with an abbreviation TKM in parentheses in the text

shade of the live oaks on the square. Men's stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon, after their three-o'clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum. People moved slowly then. They ambled across the square, shuffled in and out of the stores around it, took their time about everything. (*TKM* 5)

This chapter of the thesis will focus on the foundation of the whole story on which the specific personalities of the community are built. It will describe the typical southern provincial environment<sup>2</sup> of the town of Maycomb in order to establish a platform for the characters of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The town of Maycomb is a small provincial fictional town set in a fictional county, and it is a setting for the 1930' story of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is a common American small town where nothing ever happens "A day was twenty-four hours long but seemed longer. There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go" (*TKM* 5). It provides an image of the American small-town community based on the more realistic ideas established by the Revolt from the village movement<sup>3</sup> highlighting the deficiencies of provincial life. It depicts the Maycomb community as a flawed place capable of harm and hypocrisy, however, it also portrays the moral virtues and usual provincial solidarity of some of its inhabitants. As it is characteristic for a small town community<sup>4</sup>, the families have lived in Maycomb for generations and their reputation is primarily based on the size and prestige of the members of their family tree as it is evident in Atticus' comment on the behaviour of Jem and Scout "you should try to live up to your name" (147). Moreover, the individuals are commonly associated with the personality traits of their ancestors which are believed to pass down from one family member to another as an inevitable legacy<sup>5</sup>. In Maycomb, a person often faces generalisations such as "All the Bufords walk like that" (*TKM* 145) or "never take a check from a Delafield without a discreet call to the bank" (145) and such labels are impossible to cast off.

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<sup>2</sup> See chapter 2.2 of the theoretical part.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 2.2.2.1 of the theoretical part.

<sup>4</sup> See chapter 2.3.1.1 of the theoretical part.

<sup>5</sup> See chapter 2.3.3 of the theoretical part.

Maycomb does not like change, and it maintains its stereotypical, uniform ways of thinking generation after generation irrespective of any expressions of individuality. It is a dusty, slow town rather dull in its unwaveringly rigid ways of living based on a deeply stereotyped understanding of the world. It is home to a community deeply prejudiced, and utterly unfair in judgment of others which is especially evident in the court case based on a false accusation. However, not all Maycomb inhabitants are as shallow and narrow-minded as the rest of the community and are willing to fight for justice and equality of their neighbours as it will be discussed in the following chapters.

Regarding the architecture and town aesthetics, Maycomb is a typical American small town with “streets graciously wide” (144), school, and a town court to maintain order and justice. Its wide streets are framed with wooden houses with porches and gardens and people tap their hats as they pass their neighbours’ residences. Its geographical setting is, however, also important in understanding the underlying issues of grim social relationships between certain groups of its inhabitants. The Maycomb’s territorial distribution marks the segregation of its inhabitants and represents the issues of social disparity rather clearly.

It was mainly due to the Great Depression which shattered the whole of the USA and the history of the cotton industry in southern America<sup>6</sup>, that the people of Maycomb had “no thing to buy and no money to buy it with” (*TKM* 6). But even though nobody in Maycomb could be considered rich or wealthy, the disparity between the town people and their separation into different social classes is still very much present and is, as mentioned above, especially evident in the geographical organization of the town itself. The families and individuals who might be, in comparison to the rest of the community, considered the upper class of the town such as the Finches, the Radleys or Miss Maudie all lived in said large houses with front porches and gardens close to the town school and the centre of the town. The town infrastructure, however, placed the less fortunate inhabitants such as the Ewell family, who represent the lowest social class of the white society of Maycomb, away from their richer neighbours. The Ewells lived in a grubby cabin close to a dump where nobody visited unless throwing the Christmas tree on the pile of rubbish towering next to their house. The Ewells, the least educated and the poorest family of the town, lived in a

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<sup>6</sup> See chapter 2.3.2 of the theoretical part.

shack away from the sights of others, hidden away in their pitiable home, and the rest of the white inhabitants would not “have anything to do” (*TKM* 212) with them.

However unpleasant the living conditions of the Ewells family were, the small village-like settlement of the Maycomb black inhabitants excluded from the prosperous parts of the rest of the town, was considered even less approachable. It was the black inhabitants’ settlements that were perceived as a forbidden, and a dangerous place. Even the Ewells themselves, who lived in dirt and utter poverty, viewed the habitation of the blacks as a heathen place and Mr. Ewell even believed it devalued his property “I’ve asked this county for fifteen years to clean the nest down yonder, they’re dangerous to live around ‘side devaluin’ my property” (*KLM* 193). It may be said that blacks’ dwellings which were strictly separated from the rest of the town and never visited by the whites - not even at Christmas - were, in the eyes of the small-town society, understood as an utterly uncivilized place.

The black families’ dwellings and the Ewells’ cut-off homes and the perception of them by the rest of the town are characteristic features of the prejudiced small town communities and clearly indicate the racial segregation as well as the economical separation of the social classes of Maycomb. The town itself allowed for even stricter separation based not only on the social, racial, and economic differences, the inhabitants were separated geographically as well to demonstrate their insurmountable differences.

### **3.3 The importance of understanding local customs and the Maycomb school**

It was not only the territorial organization of Maycomb which helped to implement and anchor the stereotypical thinking. An important source of the biases and narrow-mindedness of its inhabitants were also the local institutions. The primary institution this subchapter will focus on will be the Maycomb school as a place of a clash of groups from divergent social backgrounds.

As described in the theoretical part of this thesis, small towns and the “community spirit” are primarily characterized by the absence of levelling<sup>7</sup> and the Maycomb school

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<sup>7</sup> See chapter 2.3.1.1 of the theoretical part.

being the only educational institution in the town of Maycomb, is a typical example of its absence. Children of all town residents, excluding the African-American children who were fully separated, had to study on its grounds. Therefore, the children from the poorest as well as the wealthiest families were sat next to each other and even though it led to a certain blur of their differences, the school environment was predestined to exclusion and misunderstandings.

However, it was not the pupils who misinterpreted the manners of their surroundings. As it is characteristic for the small-town newcomers to struggle with the rules and habits of their new home<sup>8</sup>, the misconceptions came especially from the position of their teacher, Miss Caroline Fisher. Even though Miss Caroline was from the state of Alabama herself, she was not well accustomed to the ways of Maycomb and yet not understood the unspoken code of the town and was therefore not perceived as a proper “Maycombian” (*TKM* 24). As such, she represented the “different” and the “unknown”<sup>9</sup> and might be perceived as an outsider of the Maycomb community.

Her lack of knowledge and thorough understanding of the town customs was obvious not only in her expectations of children’s interests when she read them a story while “the class was wriggling like a bucketful of catawba worms” (*TKM* 18) as she was not able to take into account her pupils who “chopped cotton and fed hogs from the time they were able to walk” (18) were “immune to imaginative literature” (18). Moreover, that she was a stranger was particularly evident in her approach to certain children who she, utterly unaware, embarrassed, or angered by not knowing their family’s name and situation. “Walter’s one of the Cunninghams, Miss Caroline” (*TKM* 22) was Scout’s explanation which she considered sufficient enough for Miss Caroline to fully comprehend why one of the pupils could not accept her offer to borrow her money and repay it later. Scout’s intervention was not met with understanding and her efforts to explain what everybody in the class knew led to Miss Caroline’s irritation and even to punishment as Miss Caroline, unaware of Scout’s inability to express her thoughts properly, considered her behaviour unacceptable and rude.

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<sup>8</sup> See chapter 2.3.1.1 of the theoretical part.

<sup>9</sup> See chapter 2.3.1.1 of the theoretical part.

A similar moment proving Miss Caroline's lack of knowledge of Maycomb social order took place when Miss Caroline first encountered the uneducated and dirty Burris Ewells who she unsuccessfully tried to force to remain seated and stay at school. It, however, did not meet with success. The explanation of the present pupils of who he was was similarly limited as Scout's "He's one of the Ewells, ma'am, (...) you're supposed to mark 'em absent the rest of the year" (*TKM* 30). Even though Miss Caroline seemed willing to listen and learn about Maycomb, those rules were still beyond her comprehension which was proved by her efforts to enforce what she believed was right "Sit back down, please, Burris" (30). The general rules and "maycombian" ways were, however, rooted deeply in the children and they therefore defended their dominion by handling the situation regardless of Miss Caroline's wishes. Such ignorance of the unspoken code of the community on Miss Caroline's side resulted not only in the loss of respect for the teacher "When Miss Caroline threatened it with a similar fate the first grade exploded again, becoming cold sober only when the shadow of Miss Blount fell over them. Miss Blount, a native Maycombian as yet uninitiated in the mysteries of the Decimal System, appeared at the door hands on hips (...)" (*TKM* 24), it also humiliated and unsettled the children who at their young age were incapable of explaining those matters of social order and expected approaches towards others to her as to them those were utterly ordinary.

It was not only Miss Caroline who experienced uncertainty and feelings of misunderstanding at school. Beside the above-mentioned Walter Cunningham and Burris Ewells who were put into uncomfortable situations owing to Miss Caroline's ignorance of local social conditions, Scout encountered feelings of misunderstanding and unfounded guilt as well. For as long she could remember, she "never looked forward more to anything" (*TKM* 17) in her life than going to school. However, shortly after she entered the building, she realized that her imagination of the place was far from the reality of regular school days. For the first time in her life she experienced what it felt like to be unfavoured due to matters she could not control, and which were out of her power to change. Even though none of the misconceptions about her were based on her race or social class, she was still subjected to certain beliefs and stereotyping for Miss Caroline believed first-grade children were supposed to be illiterate and completely uneducated. Due to Atticus' sensible

and wise upbringing and owing to Calpurnia's strictness, Scout deviated from Miss Caroline's standards as she could write and read. Miss Caroline believed that such divergence could "interfere" (*TKM* 19) with her methods and even with Scout's ability to learn properly. Such remarks made Scout doubt herself as well as her family and she held "grudge against Calpurnia" (*TKM* 21) for her decline from what was considered normal. Her behaviour and her latter protest and pleas "please don't send me back, please, sir" (*TKM* 33) showed her despise of the fact that she did not complete the expected uniformity of the first grade. It was discomfoting for Scout to deviate from the common and usual and Miss Caroline's comments led to her realization that at times the easiest way to avoid trouble was to conform to the desirable standard.

Even though, as Atticus explained, "We could not expect her to learn all Maycomb's ways in one day, and we could not hold her responsible when she knew no better" (*TKM* 33), the importance of understanding the norms and unspoken codes of one's surroundings within the scope of small town proved important not only for Miss Caroline in gaining respect from her children as well as for her own comfort among her pupils, it could also avoid the misunderstandings and humiliating situations the children were put in without having the ability to articulate the reasons behind their behaviour as they had never, up to that point, been expected to. On the other hand, as shown by Scout and her need to accommodate her teacher's expectation to avoid difficulties, such adaptation may also lead to the oppression of individuality and a belief that safety can be only found in uniformity.

### **3.4 Acceptance and the Finches family**

In this and the following chapters, I will focus on the family of the protagonist of the story – The Finches. The chapter will focus on their differentiation from the Maycomb provincial standard as well as examining in which areas they meet the small-town norms. The subchapters will elaborate on the specific members of the family with focus on the distinctive features of their personalities.

In Maycomb, the Finches family was generally recognized and accepted. Their position within the town hierarchy was strengthened not only thanks to their historical

background which corresponded to the small-town norms<sup>10</sup> as they had their family roots in Alabama, the two offspring of the family were “the product of several generations’ gentle breeding” (*TKM* 147) and the father of the family himself was “Maycomb Country born and bred; he knew his people, they knew him, and because of Simon Finch’s industry, Atticus was related by blood or marriage to nearly every family in the town” (5). Moreover, Atticus’ prominent profession as a lawyer who worked for the good of the local people also supported their status of the proper “maycombian” family. As mentioned in the theoretical part, small-town lawyers held a specific position within provincial communities<sup>11</sup> as their profession connected them with the majority of the inhabitants. Therefore not only blood and ancestry, but also Atticus’ profession made him and his family well known by most of the Maycomb inhabitants. Also, they ranked among the wealthier families in town and even though Atticus’ income was not high, in comparison to the rest of the community, the Finches were rather well off.

“Are we poor, Atticus?” Atticus nodded.

“We are indeed.” Jem’s nose wrinkled.

“Are we as poor as the Cunninghams?”

“Not exactly. The Cunninghams are country folks, farmers, and the crash hit them hardest.” (*TKM* 23)

Therefore, the Finches could afford to live in a big house close to the city centre among the richer and educated members of Maycomb community such as the gossipy and nosey Miss Stephanie Crawford, the sharp-tongued Miss Maudie Atkinson or the odd but wealthy Radleys.

Even though the Finches appeared to be an ordinary maycombian family, they differed from the rest of the town in many aspects especially due to Atticus and his sense of fairness and his open-mindedness which he tried to pass down on both of his children. The Finches family was, at least according to former standards of Maycomb, an anti-racist family and even though they had certain supporters all over the town, in regard to this issue

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<sup>10</sup> See chapter 2.3.1.1 of the theoretical part.

<sup>11</sup> See chapter 2.3.4 of the theoretical part.

they were a minority. Owing to their unpopular opinions on segregation and social issues of the community and especially after Atticus' defence of Tom Robinson - a falsely accused African-American man - the lives of all Scout, Jem and Atticus were subjected to mockery and denigration. The indecent comments from their schoolmates that "Scout Finch's daddy defended nigger" (82) the siblings were expected to put up with and Atticus' experience with life threats from certain members of Maycomb such as when Bob Ewell threatened him that "he'd get him if it took the rest of his life" (239) are typical examples of the small-town discriminating "shallowness"<sup>12</sup>.

However miserable their situation was, Atticus remained composed and peaceful and he taught his children to follow his example. Their acceptance of unjust rumours, bravery in standing up to an enraged mob and ability to understand other people's perspective had made them a special unit of Maycomb. The Finched family represents the fight for a better future, the protection of justice, belief in equality and most importantly the belief in the importance of understanding and capability of seeing the world through another person's eyes which are attributes rather uncommon on the provincial small town grounds.

### **3.4.1 Atticus, the embodiment of righteousness**

Being a lawyer, Atticus possessed a great set of moral principles rare to the commonly prejudiced small-town community. Concerning his honourable beliefs of human equality and high moral standards which he unwaveringly retained and determinedly protected throughout the whole story, it is not surprising that Michiko Kakutani described him as the "novel's moral conscience" (Kakutani). Atticus can be described as the least hypocritical person in Maycomb as he followed his moral compass devotedly and living up to his own values was only one of his many virtues. Thanks to his wisdom, kindness and intelligence, Atticus was generally respected by all Maycomb inhabitants from the wealthiest ones to the ones who lived in absolute poverty. He was the person people turned for advice to and he was therefore a prominent member of the community whose opinion mattered. However, as he did not take side with injustice and oppression, he was also a well-known and beloved persona among the black community and since the small-town

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<sup>12</sup> See chapter 2.2.2 of the theoretical part.

inhabitants were generally racially biased<sup>13</sup> those views of his and especially his acceptance to defend Tom Robinson at the town court were values not widely favoured in Maycomb and resulted in certain difficulties for Atticus and his family.

As described in the previous chapter, his decision to defend a black person from the margins of the Maycomb society did not meet with understanding of the deeply prejudiced and racist background of the Maycomb community and subjected him as well as his children to a number of unpleasant and potentially dangerous situations. The people of Maycomb stood up to protect their small-town values of “natural” social order and their limited and stereotypical imaginations of what was right. In his firm beliefs, Atticus could not be intimidated by an angry mob or Bob Ewell’s life threats and even through such difficulties he retained his calmness and wit evident in his remark on Bob’s spitting on him “I wish Bob Ewell wouldn’t chew tobacco” (238).

Atticus’ commitment to the fight for justice and equality ran deeper than just a desire to do his job right. Those questions were personal to him as he shared with Jack “Do you think I could face my children otherwise?” (98). Moreover, to refuse this case would be the same as to refuse his own personal values and turn himself down. Should he not agree to defend Tom Robinson, his consciousness would never allow him to command or educate other people on what is right and what is wrong

“I couldn’t represent this county in the legislature, I couldn’t even tell you or Jem not to do something again”

“You mean if you didn’t defend that man, Jem and me wouldn’t have to mind you any more”

“That’s about right” (84)

As great a lawyer and neighbour he was, he was perhaps an even better father and even though both Jem and Scout were not proud of him from the very start as he was “feeble”, old, and most importantly he dared to wear glasses which, in Scout’s and Jem’s perception of age, made him unimaginably old (*TKM* 98), they grew to absolutely respect and value him. As they both experienced more of life and understood the nature of

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<sup>13</sup> See chapter 2.3.2 of the theoretical part.

Maycomb better, their admiration of Atticus grew. He became their role model and they respected him more than anybody else in Maycomb not only for his always fair and unbiased judgment as described by Scout to her uncle Jack “Atticus doesn’t ever just listen to Jem’s side of it, he hears mine too” (95) but primarily for that fact that he treated them as equals and did not abuse his power or status to punish them “Atticus don’t ever do anything to Jem and me in the house that he don’t do in the yard” (51).

Throughout the whole story regardless of the number of challenging affairs, Atticus managed to maintain his values and moral qualities and greatly influenced the ideals and perception of his two children. His aspiration was to “get Jem and Scout through it without bitterness, and most of all, without catching Maycomb’s usual disease” referring to complying to the provincial values of discrimination and acceptance of segregation and social disparity just as most of the children did when they grew up judging by the fact that all adults seemed immune to the unfairness and inequality “(...) and when they do it - seems that only children weep” (235). As the story unfolded, his efforts and advice prove to fall on a fruitful ground. Owing to his patient explanations but also the real-life manifestations of injustice, Scout and Jem learned to recognize the evil in people as well as gained the ability to understand the good in human nature.

Atticus played an essential role in the course of justice of Maycomb not only by raising a new and more open-minded generation concerned with equality and human rights, but also by his persistent fight for the moral values uncommon for the small-town environment. He might not change the world and the small-town nature of his hometown, but he certainly planted a seed of hope for a better future. Not only did he show Maycomb and his neighbours that one can fight for justice and stand up for their beliefs even when doomed to failure and showed the town the importance of perspective, he also equipped his children with the ability to see and understand the world through the lens of others as well as to seek the good in people. Concerning Atticus’ close to perfect manners and morals, he seems to be a rather idealized figure quite unrealistic considering the conservative provincial life-style and ideals of his time and surroundings. His values and fight for equality and his whole character in general are, sadly, very unlikely to be considered an authentic part of such environment as the one represented by Maycomb. Nevertheless, he

manifests beliefs and values desirable as much in his time as they are desirable today and can, therefore, be understood as a role model not only for his children, but the whole of society to this day.

### **3.4.2 Scout and her divergence from Maycomb provinciality**

At the beginning of the novel Scout was an innocent little girl. However, throughout the span of the story, she faced a number of important lessons which helped to shape her character significantly. She was, as well as the rest of the community, subjected to the stereotypical thinking and as she grew she had to decide whether she will side with the mainstream Maycomb perception of justice and overall understanding of reality, or whether she will follow the path her father and other distinctive people living in Maycomb presented to her. The objective of this chapter will be to outline the essential life lessons which formed Scout's personality and moulded her into the person she was at the end of the novel.

Even at her young age of five with her immature sheltered understanding of the world, Scout had unusual distinctive abilities and interests which differentiated her from the rest of Maycomb. She was very intelligent and unlike her peers she was able to read and write before she started school. Those unusual skills of hers led to the already described judgemental reaction of her teacher Miss Caroline. Her ability to write and read did not align with Miss Caroline's imagination of what set of knowledge a first-grade student should possess and the compulsory school attendance taught Scout that sometimes, in order to avoid refusal, it might be better to lower oneself to the level of their surroundings.

However, the primary clash of her personality with the Maycomb values was the one of the generally accepted image of a small-town girl with her distaste for anything feminine. Owing to Atticus' benevolent upbringing, Scout could do and wear anything she desired, and she had no interest in expected lady-like manners and the stereotypical image of girlhood. With her naturally adventurous personality and fancy for her older brother Jem, Scout was growing up as a tomboy wearing overalls, climbing trees and the greatest insult to her was calling her a girl. Remarks such as Jem's "I declare to the Lord you're

gettin' more like a girl every day!" (57) were unbearable for her and she would do anything to deny such statements "With that, I had no option but to join them" (57).

In her perception, accepting her femininity equalled to renouncing her freedom and losing control over her life expressed in her worry connected to Aunt Alexandra's desires to shape her according to her stereotypical standards "I felt the starched walls of a pink cotton penitentiary closing in on me, and for the second time in my life I thought of running away" (150). Therefore, the arrival of her Aunt who decided to pass down on Scout her "river-boat, boarding-school manners" (142) as well as her stereotypical imagination of womanhood was met with utter resentment on Scout's side. However, despite Scout's efforts to maintain her individuality, she eventually had no choice but to succumb to her Auntie's rules and accept them. Later, having observed Aunt Alexandra's bravery during the time of Tom Robinson's death and also thanks to her strong female role model Miss Maudie, Scout came to a realization that there are certain values to the ladylike manners and she therefore managed to embrace her gender "After all, if Aunty could be a lady at a time like this, so could I" (262).

However, living in a deeply prejudiced town, Scout had more lessons to learn beside accepting her gender and making peace with her femininity. She soon learned that there are more frightening matters than pink dresses and fancy teas as she had to face the racist and prejudicial nature of her hometown at the town court. At the beginning of the story, Scout was in fact rather prejudiced herself obvious in her remarks on the social class of Walter Cunningham "He ain't company, Cal, he's just a Cunningham" (27), and it was only due to the open-minded people's example in her life such as Atticus or Miss Maudie that she learned to overcome some of her simple-minded opinions stemming primarily from her fear of unknown. Her plainness was obvious not only in her very sheltered imagination of Arthur "Boo" Radley "Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that's why his hands were bloodstained" (14) but also in her inability to take into consideration other people's perspective.

As time passed and Scout encountered and faced the real evil of their community embodied in Bob Ewells and the injustice at the court, and especially thanks to the wisdom

and thoughtful upbringing of her father who introduced her to objectivity and unbiasedness „You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view” (33), Scout learned to comprehend the many levels of reality, the importance of perspective and complexity of human nature. Therefore, she was, unlike many others, able to understand that the world is much wider, more complicated, and not as black-and-white as she first thought. She got to understand that people might have different perspectives on life and was, unlike many others, not only able to perceive Arthur Radley with neither fear nor disapproval for his choice of life “Boo was our neighbor. He gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives“ (307) she was also able to comprehend and be deeply hurt by the utterly unsubstantiated outcome of the Tom Robinson’s trial.

### **3.5 The face of discrimination: racism and segregation in Maycomb**

Regarding the question of racism and oppressive tendencies of the small-town America, *To Kill a Mockingbird* represents both the characteristic small-town inclination to those biased tendencies as well as it depicts the rejection and defiance of those beliefs by some of its inhabitants such as Atticus and his children. The story examines a wide array of racially conditioned biases as well as the socially, economically, and even gender related prejudices. This chapter will focus mainly on the racial prejudices in comparison to the economically and socially conditioned ones focusing primarily on the different perception of the Ewells and Tom Robinson and, by extension, the whole African-American community of Maycomb.

As it is typical for the 1930’ small town, at first glance Maycomb seemed to be a peaceful and friendly place with congenial atmosphere<sup>14</sup>, however, underneath the neighbourly face, Maycomb was filled with superficial ignorance and shallow prejudice. As described in the chapter on social and racial separation in the scope of Maycomb<sup>15</sup>, the town was divided socially as well as geographically and as it was outlined previously, the ostracized inhabitants can be separated in two different groups: the poor and the coloured

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<sup>14</sup> See chapter 2.3.2 of the theoretical part.

<sup>15</sup> See chapter 3.2 of the theoretical part.

people. Even though both of the parties were rejected and looked down on, their social position and degree of acceptance by the community were fundamentally different.

Even though the Ewells were separated from the community territorially as well as economically and the town showed them “the back of its hand” (212), they were given the same opportunities as the rest of the white inhabitants and also financial support in the form of “Christmas baskets” and “welfare money” (212). Unlike the African-American inhabitants, Ewells were allowed to attend school, church services and participate in the town activities. Their separation was to an extent deliberate and even though the town provided them with options and opportunities of better life, they were not interested in them “they can go to school any time they want to, when they show the faintest symptom of wanting an education” (34) and they had not done “an honest day’s work” in their lives (33).

The black community on the contrary was not provided with any such choice and their separation was demanded. They had their own community on the margins of Maycomb with their own institutions such as church. Beside the utterly unjust trial with Tom Robinson which will be further elaborated on in the upcoming chapter, the separation of the black community from the rest of the town is evident in other areas as well. Even though racial inequality is one of the main themes of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the black voices were not frequently presented in the book. Their say in public affairs or even presence at social gatherings was rare if not non-existent. The only black character regularly reappearing throughout the story was Calpurnia, the Finch’s maid, who had a prominent position in the community thanks to the status of the Finches family. Calpurnia was more educated than the rest of the black community as she could write and read. However, as much as Atticus and the children accepted her as a part of the family, not all the white people shared their opinion and therefore Cal was torn in between the two strictly separated worlds. She had to adjust not only to the “white world” but also the black community evident in the visit of Cal’s church where she changed her expressions and language in order not to “aggravate” the black community (139).

Similarly to the question of Calpurnia who was a black woman partly accepted by the white community, the issues of acceptance in Maycomb is applicable vice versa as

well. The black community was very reclusive which was evident in Scout and Jem's visit to the African-American church "you ain't got no business bringin' white chillum here – they got their church, we got out'n" (131). The community was however, even if exceptionally, capable of accepting a white person among them. This was the case of Mr. Dolphus Raymond who sided with the African-Americans and was therefore absolutely rejected by the white community and considered "an evil man" (220). His choice and overall inclination to the discriminated community was entirely misunderstood and condemned. The two separated groups were unable of neither territorial, nor social connection and a person could be either fully accepted by one and rejected by the other or stand alone.

In Maycomb, there was, however, an even deeper level of separation concerning the mixed children of Mr. Raymond and his African-American partner. As Jem stated, those children were "real sad" as they did not belong anywhere. In fact, they were the true outcasts of the Maycomb community as not only the white inhabitants wanted to have nothing to do with them, but also the black community considered them different and did not recognize them as a part of their community. For the mixed offspring, the prejudiced South was a hostile place and they were often sent "up north" (178) as the society there, as described in the theoretical part of the thesis, was rather progressive and the people did not "mind 'em up north" (178). This said, Maycomb can be understood as a place of different levels of discrimination and oppression. It separates its inhabitants based on a variety of disparities such as the economic and educational differences, as well as based on race and the narrow-minded understanding of society prevents its members to be part of both of the groups.

### **3.6 Justice at the Maycomb Court**

*To Kill a Mockingbird* illustrates the distinctiveness of southern justice<sup>16</sup> and the prejudiced law enforcement characteristic for a southern provincial town. The Tom Robinson trial based on trumped-up charges is a great example of the small-town discriminatory legal code<sup>17</sup> and hypocrisy present in southern provincial America. Beside

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<sup>16</sup> See chapter 2.3.5 of the theoretical part.

<sup>17</sup> See chapter 2.3.3 of the theoretical part.

the court, the will of people of Maycomb was often enforced by rather common practices of deterrence and intimidation and as Scout mentioned “In Maycomb, grown men stood outside in the front yard for only two reasons: death and politics” (159). The visit by the prominent men to the Finches’ house was not only a friendly warning of probable oncoming danger, it was also an expression of disagreement of the town with Atticus’ decision reminding him of the fact that he had “got everything to lose from this” (160). However, the general disapproval later transformed into a more dangerous phenomenon characteristic for the small town. It was the failed mob scene in which the primitive racist tendencies were accentuated, and which exposed the crude personalities of the Maycomb people dominated and governed by the simplicity of the mainstream opinion<sup>18</sup>.

Atticus’ agreement to take on the case of Tom Robinson was a pivotal point of the story and nobody went untouched by the stirred emotions caused by this controversial case. The quiet small town was awakened from its undisturbed stillness and the affairs of the courthouse became a prominent topic of the community. As already outlined in the previous chapters, the lives of Atticus and especially the children were affected by siding with the minority. It was, however, not until later when the children understood the reasons behind all the bullying and intimidating comments. As mentioned in the theoretical part of the thesis, it was typical for the small-town lawyer to listen to the opinion of the community and they were expected to mind the voice of the town members<sup>19</sup>, however, in the case of Tom Robinson, Atticus stood virtually against it. Therefore, the primary issue for the resentment of Atticus’ doing was not the fact that he was defending a black defendant for he was appointed by the town court itself to do so, the fundamental reason for the scission of the white community was his aim to attempt to successfully defend him against the wish of the town “but Atticus aims to defend him. That’s what I don’t like about it” (180). Unlike the rest of the lawyers at Maycomb, Atticus was determined to succeed in defending a person already convicted in the eyes of the community and by that he provided a great source of anger for them.

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<sup>18</sup> See chapter 2.3.1 of the theoretical part.

<sup>19</sup> See chapter 2.3.5 of the theoretical part.

During that era, southern America was still a “white man’s country”<sup>20</sup> and ran on stereotypes and prejudices against everybody but most importantly against people of colour. The physical appearance of black inhabitants was stereotypically linked with imaginary personality traits which substantiated the general idea that black people were innately and inherently bad and criminal<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, concerning the trial itself, it was doomed to defeat from the very beginning and even Atticus himself knew it “You know what’s going to happen as well as I do, Jack, and I hope and pray I can get Jem and Scout through it without bitterness” (98). Nevertheless, he accepted it and attempted to win since rejecting the case would be against his most profound moral principles.

The number of people in Maycomb who believed in Tom Robinson’s innocence was at least at first glance insignificant. Most of the people did not even start to question the possibility of his innocence as it was unimaginable for them to side with a black person against a white man. Even though the Ewells were ostracized as well, they held the privilege of the colour of their skin providing them with a higher degree of believability “the only thing we’ve got is a black man’s word against the Ewells’. The evidence boils down to you did, I didn’t. The jury couldn’t possibly be expected to take Tom Robinson’s word against the Ewells” (97). However, Atticus was not alone in his beliefs supporting Tom’s innocence. There was, according to Miss Maudie a “handful of people” who believed that fair play was not marked “White Only” (261) and when Scout and Jem articulated their disappointment in the racist Maycomb community, she explained that it was not a coincidence that the judge appointed Atticus to defend Tom Robinson “Did it ever strike you that Judge Taylor naming Atticus to defend that boy was no accident? That Judge Taylor might have had his reasons for naming him?” (238). Even if not loudly expressed, Maycomb had members who fought the discriminatory legal codes and defended the discriminated, however, Atticus was by far the most vocal about it and therefore the most exposed to the anger and disagreement of the community.

However, even though it was virtually impossible for Tom Robinson to commit the crime he was wrongfully accused of and regardless of Atticus’s efforts to appeal to the jury’s sense of unprejudiced judgment and their sense of equality, the jury’s conclusion

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<sup>20</sup> See chapter 2.3.3 of the theoretical part.

<sup>21</sup> See chapter 2.3.3 of the theoretical part.

proved Maycomb's utter inequality and injustice. Justice and the right on a fair trial in Maycomb was a privilege conditioned by the colour of one's skin and as Atticus' explained to Jem in his statement "The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is in a courtroom, be he any color of the rainbow, but people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury box" (243), in order to get a just trial in the town of Maycomb, a person had to be born white.

## 4 Conclusion

The introduction of this thesis states that the aim of this work is to examine the role of the small-town environment in the community portrayed in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* with focus on its influence on the behaviour of certain characters and the course and outcomes of specific events. The characterization of the small-town environment and its specific features as well as its importance for the American culture is based on several studies focusing mainly on the small town tendency towards biased thinking and a prejudicial, simplified view of reality leading to social and racial disparities. Apart from the stereotypical perception presented in the small-town sphere, the thesis aimed to elaborate on the question of Southern justice and to demonstrate to what extent the small-town biases interfered not only with the community member's perception of justice but also with the judicial administration itself.

Based on the findings of the studies, the theoretical part shows that the American small town proves to be an important part of American society as a carrier of national traditions and values. It shows that even though there are no exact defining boundaries to what constitutes a small town, the American provincial town is, apart from its infrastructure, demonstrated by its shared beliefs and fondness of certain historically encoded values. The small town is founded on commonly accepted values and interests interwoven within the whole community and the question of acceptance and belonging to the community is therefore based on understanding and adhering to this often unspoken set of rules known to the members of the settlement. With regards particularly to the southern states and their provincial settlement, the research shows that due to the strong attachment to its values and love for customs built on the history of oppression and segregation such places are prone to exclusion. Moreover, the characteristic features of small town in southern America are shown to have participated in constituting the distinctive southern justice influenced by its rather superficial neighbourly relationships covering the underlying racial and social disparities of small towns. It describes the delicate position of town lawyers who are part of the community and as such are expected to take into consideration the common will of the community yet stay impartial. Apart from that, the theoretical part also established definitions of stereotypes and prejudices essential for

understanding the examination of this phenomena strengthening inequality in the practical part of this work.

The practical part of this thesis focused primarily on the manifestation of the small-town features of the southern provincial communities of prejudice, injustice and conditioned belonging to the community but also the fight against those values in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Apart from the personality traits of its inhabitants, the town of Maycomb manifests its characteristic features of the “smallness” in the geographical organization itself which divides the economically lower classes from the richer part of the community as well as completely ostracizes the coloured Maycomb dwellers highlighting their commonly accepted lower social status. Moreover, as it is typical for a small-town settlement, Maycomb is governed by the unspoken social codes which are passed on from one generation to another and their ignorance or violation is not acceptable as is evident in the case of Miss Caroline. It is shown that fully belonging to the Maycomb community is strongly conditioned by perfect understanding of its ways and adhering to the rooted social hierarchy, historical background and determining attributes of its inhabitants. Moreover, typically for a small town, Maycomb values the long-established history of its members who prove to value one’s pedigree more than one’s actions. A number of other instances of the provincial ways and the influences of small-town habits are also presented in connection to Tom Robinson’s trial. The Robinson’s case crystallized the racial prejudice, inequality and the devotion to the commonly accepted rules of Maycomb shown by the actions of the maycombians who fought to protect their narrow-minded values. It is particularly clear in the mob scene which depicts the use of common small-town ways of expressing opinions used to threaten and discourage Atticus from defending Tom. Moreover, even though many of the characters believed that the American courthouses were unbiased and just, the story, however, proves that to achieve justice, the colour of one’s skin is essential for the credibility of their testimony and therefore shows that the American small-town justice system is deeply prejudiced.

Furthermore, the practical part examines two distinctive characters; Atticus and his daughter Scout who fight the inequality characteristic of small towns and are therefore subjected to mockery and contempt from fellow residents. It focuses on Atticus’ all-

embracing acceptance and high moral values and also his efforts to pass those views on to his two children. He is, unlike the typical small-town inhabitants, open-minded, unbiased and impartial and he embodies the opposite of the Maycomb shallowness and provinciality. Scout, however, expresses both the small-town perception of reality she was born into as she believes in certain generally accepted ways of her hometown as well as the ability to transform and learn. She impersonates the possible change from a sheltered individual governed by the unjustified stereotypical rules of the small town into a person capable of having individual opinions and taking actions governed by her own personal moral sense rather than the demanded traditional values.

Overall, the characteristic small-town features described in the theoretical part of this thesis are in agreement with the description of the fictional setting of *To Kill a Mockingbird* examined in the practical part and the town of Maycomb can be therefore seen as a genuine representation of the American small-town environment. It can be said that the small-town settlement and its characteristic ways and values were evident both in the territorial organization of the town itself as well as in the actions of the Maycomb community. The Maycomb inhabitants, their decision-making and perception of justice and equality were strongly affected by the provincial small-town values, however, individuals were able to stand up to the commonly-held beliefs of the majority in an attempt to transform not only themselves but the town as a whole.

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