

## Quadrant II – Transcript and Related Materials

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Programme: Bachelor of Arts (First Year)

Subject: English

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Paper Title: Introduction to Literature

Unit: 3

Module Name: Harper Lee's – *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Symbolism and Racism

Module No: 27

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Symbolism is derived from the Greek verb *symbolleîn* which means “to put together”. It's a literary device in which a writer uses a physical object to represent something more abstract.

Symbols could be strong, subtle or indirect thereby allowing the author “to create nuance and complexity,” and convey meaning poetically.

An image or a recurring narrative element with symbolic significance is a motif. “Motifs must be related to the central idea of the work, and they always end up reinforcing the author's overall message.”

### SYMBOLISM IN THE NOVEL *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

- The Mockingbird
- Tim Johnson, the rabid dog
- Flower symbolism

### THE MOCKINGBIRD

“...remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.” – Atticus.

Miss Maudie reiterates the same thought.

- “... the mockingbirds were silent...” before the death of the rabid dog. (Chap 10)
- “...the atmosphere in the courtroom was... as a cold February morning, when the mockingbirds were still...” (Chap 21)
- Underwood likened Tom's death “to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children...” in his editorial in *Maycomb Tribune*. (Chap 25)
- On their way to the pageant, “a solitary mocker poured out his repertoire.” (Chap 28)
- Scout recognizes that the public exposure of Boo would be “sort of like shootin' a mockingbird”. (Chap 30)

## THE RABID DOG

The rabid dog episode is equated with disease and rampant racism that spreads like a contagion in Maycomb.

One-shot Finch (Atticus) is the hero; who shoots Tim Johnson, and attempts to shoot down racism. Tim Johnson, the dog is owned by Harry Johnson and he resembles Tom Robinson. The dog is coloured brown and white. The innocence of the dog corresponds with the innocence of Tom Robinson. Atticus's rifle symbolizes power. With precision he yanks the "balltipped lever" and "the rifle cracked." Being a sharp shooter, he needed one shot and "Tim Johnson leaped, flopped over and crumpled on the sidewalk in a brown-and-white heap. He didn't know what hit him."

Atticus being aware of this skill, chose to give it up. Miss Maudie's comment that Atticus "put his gun down when he realized that God had given him an unfair advantage" refers also to the unfair advantage that whites held over blacks (because of the colour of their skin) and how whites like hunters preyed on the defenceless blacks.

## FLOWER SYMBOLISM

### Camellias

Mrs Dubose's camellias represent the prejudices which cannot be uprooted easily enough. You have to get them by their roots.

Jem cuts off their heads in rage, but like prejudice, their roots run deep.

Later a single camellia that Jem receives on Mrs. Dubose's death symbolizes reconciliation as well as final freedom from addiction.

### Azaleas

These fragile favourites of Miss Maudie, symbolize her love for beauty, passion and hard work. She is a Baptist who reads the Bible less and is into gardening more. Hence is doomed to go to hell, both she and her flowers. Unfazed by the gloom in her town, she is known for her merry heart and cheerful countenance.

### Geraniums

They are a poor person's substitute for roses. Mayella Ewell grows them in "six chipped-enamel slop jars" in the yard. Geraniums grow in any soil and symbolize hope for those considered "less fortunate", who still harbor dreams of a better reality.

## MYOPIA OF RACISM

RACISM = PREJUDICE + POWER [Patricia Padva - *Developing New perspectives on Race*]

Slavery had been abolished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but segregation, inequality, discrimination continued. Racial prejudice was a common phenomenon affecting African Americans, and the novel written in the 1950s reflects the times.

Deep rooted prejudice - "...our kind of folks don't like the Cunninghams, the Cunninghams don't like the Ewells, and the Ewells hate and despise the colored folks." (Chapter 23)

Amidst all the hatred, Tom Robinson, a black man, was accused of rape by a white girl Mayella and her father Bob Ewell. He lives in a town where a person's moral character is determined by the colour of their skin, Tom's fate is sealed.

But he isn't entirely abandoned. Help and hope arrives. An exemplary human being, an unbiased attorney, a professional who is completely free from any kind of prejudice that has beset Maycomb.

None of the white folk are happy that Atticus is defending a black man.

Atticus' children are taunted. Francis, their cousin tells Scout her father is a "nigger-lover". Later Cecil, a classmate and Mrs. Dubose taunt the children with something similar.

Atticus explains: "...every lawyer gets one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. This one is mine, I guess."

He is aware that he has no chance of winning, but he tells Scout that is "no reason for us not to try to win" (Chap 9)

Despite all the facts [that this case should never have come to trial, or that the State had not produced one iota of medical evidence] Tom Robinson unfairly convicted and sentenced to death.

Testament to the "Melanin Morality" that existed and probably still exists.