

EQUALITY

The persistent endeavour for unity, harmony and equality is a fundamental goal deeply rooted within humanity, a goal which, when unattended to, yields severe ramifications of ignorance and discrimination. However, the pursuit of equality can only be achieved when individuals are able to unveil the shroud of misconception, prejudice and pride so deeply embedded within society, and finally grasp the core values of love, mutual understanding and respect which unite the human race.

Despite the indefatigable desire for a world in which all humans stand in unity, inequality has been a highly prevalent issue within society. How can one expect to rise above this abyss of injustice, to free themselves from the chains of inequality, if we do not first combat the prevalent stigmas which have moulded, corroded and defined the perceptions of society's hierarchy? To achieve equality, we must first render the misconstrued conceptions of stigmatization obsolete, as they perpetuate uninformed, poorly supplemented biases towards various communities. The inimical, inherent consequences inevitably propagated by stigmatization is a theme that is thoroughly explored within Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird," through characters such as Tom Robinson, a black man who is falsely accused of raping a white woman, and Arthur (Boo) Radley, a reclusive character who is segregated from the rest of the book's fictional Maycomb community. The strident nature of stigmatization is demonstrated through society's perception of Arthur Radley as a vicious, vociferous and vehement creature, purely because of his reserved, reticent nature, as exemplified by the connotations of the lexicon 'malevolent' in the phrase 'Inside the house lived a malevolent phantom.'¹ The diction 'phantom' further imbues Arthur with violent and abnormal qualities, further emphasizing the core argument that stigmas not only impose a subsequent seclusion within society, but serve to dehumanize individuals. The extent to which the stigma has been perpetrated is once again solidified when Jem, who is the brother of protagonist Scout, claims that Arthur's enigmatic lifestyle is caused because 'maybe he doesn't have anywhere to run off to,'² further augmenting the notion that he has been neglected and isolated by society. This point is made more poignant with its parallel to Tom Robinson, who is affiliated with the invidious affiliation that 'all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, that all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women,'³ a clear illumination of the unwavering biases so deeply embedded within society's beliefs, further conveyed through the writer's employment of tripling and repetition. The irrevocable impacts pertaining to the circulation of such stigmas is enforced when Atticus Finch, the protagonists' father, is hiding Tom Robinson, who is described as being 'a soft, husky voice'⁴ which 'came from the darkness above.'⁵ The lexicon 'soft' and 'husky' imply that Tom Robinson has been suppressed and undermined by society, whereas the diction 'darkness' further portrays how he has been inured to the savage conditions bestowed upon him because of his skin colour, similar to the prejudice towards Arthur Radley. Therefore, it is illuminated that stigmatization is not only

¹ *To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee-Page 9*

² *To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee-Page 157*

³ *To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee-Page 223*

⁴ *To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee-Page 169*

⁵ *To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee-Page 169*

the very impetus which generates iniquity within society, but jeopardizes the integrity, value and security essential to an individual's life, hence catalysing a stark disparity in society.

Moreover, 'To Kill a Mockingbird' further exposes the excessive temerity of mankind as it enforces prejudice in the name of political expediency: stigmatization is so deeply embedded within society's paradigm, that it has been impregnated within the judicial system, and more importantly, within human judgement and society's mind-set. By failing to recognize this dichotomy, we are the frail threads of a harmonious, cohesive and integrated society and are shrouded by the conformities and laws of society. This notion of political expediency ultimately undermining the importance of equality is best elucidated between the relationship of Tom Robinson and Mayella Ewell, the woman who falsely accuses him of rape. Initially, there is a sharp juxtaposition between the two characters; Tom Robinson is deprived of the same rights as Mayella Ewell because he is black, and Mayella Ewell is white. However, it is soon revealed that the two are quite similar, as illuminated when Scout remarks: 'it came to me that Mayella Ewell must have been the loneliest person in the world,'⁶ further supplemented by the phrase "she was as sad as a mixed child." The use of the absolute 'loneliest,' compounded with her being imbued with the qualities of a black child, serves to alter her status to emulate that of Tom Robinson as he himself is restricted to the dark depths of society because he is misunderstood and isolated. However, despite this similarity between the two characters, Mayella still sees Tom Robinson 'as if he were dirt beneath her feet.'⁷ The writer's incorporation of a simile serves to expose the detrimental hierarchy and discord present within society, as Tom Robinson's status is immediately diminished to worthless. The brevity of the monosyllabic 'dirt,' suggests a finality to Tom Robinson's status, a finality which is accentuated through the inconsequential, insignificant and disdainful connotations of the syntax, serving to enforce the notion that Tom Robinson has been denied of his value. This leads to a much deeper, underlying thesis which suggests that the catalyst of all stigmatization is a lack of understanding and proper judgement within society, further supplemented by the quote 'A court is only as sound as its jury, and a jury is only as sound as the men who make it up.'⁸ How are we to enforce quality when the very mechanism which controls the outcome of the law is influenced by the ignorance, lack of understanding and moral education of society? If we do not acknowledge the very root cause of discrimination and segregation, the entire pillars of society will collapse under injustice, and it is therefore of utmost importance that we learn to see one another for our similarities and appreciate our differences.

It is integral that our plight for racial equality is enforced, but if equality is truly to be achieved, there is yet another looming issue that is underrepresented, neglected and undermined which we must address: the stigmatization of those suffering from mental illness. It is inexorable that those suffering from mental illness require a much higher level of attention and care in comparison to healthy individuals, nonetheless, what is disguised as 'care' is often condescension, embarrassment and fear, inevitably creating a culture in which those which require the most support are alienated and distanced. As a person with a grandmother who had

⁶ *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee-Page 209

⁷ *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee-Page 209

⁸ *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee-Page 224

suffered from Alzheimer's disease, I am acutely aware of the vulnerable emotional lapses which follow, and the exigency for intimacy and understanding when supporting a patient. These themes are evocatively expressed in the novel 'Still Alice' by Lisa Genova, which depicts the struggle of Alice Howlands, a former professor of psychology at Harvard University who is diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. As the novel progresses, Alice not only has to struggle with the memory lapses which are thrust upon her, but the deterioration of her reputation and the feelings of worthlessness which ensue. This is illustrated in the phrase: 'Her reluctant vocabulary and vanishing memories advertised mental instability and impending insanity.'⁹ The author's use of alliteration in the lexicon 'instability' and 'impending insanity' serves to augment the feelings of alienation and estrangement as correlative to society's perception of the mentally ill; regardless of Alice's high intellect, society has already categorized Alice as incompetent, incapable and inept. This consequently creates a blatant loss of identity which is secured through the author's choice of diction in 'advertised,' implying the lack of respect and sympathy which Alice subsequently faces as she is considered an object of amusement as opposed to a human being. These notions are enhanced in the phrase '*needy* equalled weak, dependent, pathological,'¹⁰ establishing a motif through which Genova articulates the vilifying nature of society's perceptions as Alice is dehumanized through these descriptions, she is immediately objectified as impedimenta and an encumbrance. This is a clear depiction of how stigmatization is an incarcerating agent which renders the mentally ill as inconsequential, hence not only jeopardizing the emotional stability of patients, but the betterment of society as it fails to identify the nascent potential of mentally ill patients. In the same way that Alice is ashamed of the potential ignominy which may tarnish her intellectual reputation, many others are unabashedly defined by this inextricable label which has been affiliated with their condition, and this is certainly not the path to equality. How are we meant to have a society in which equality is regarded with utmost respect, a society in which we give consideration to all and do not undermine the abilities of any individual, when we immediately defy one's capabilities merely by conforming to the rampant stigmatization which overwhelms us with a tirade of injustice and prejudice? It is therefore crucial that we address these issues and ensure that those suffering from mental illness are treated with the proper respect and consideration.

Fundamentally, what Genova serves to emphasize as imperative to the construction of a society with a foundation of equality is mutual understanding, a concept which is explored in both 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and 'Still Alice.' This is best exemplified by the phrase 'Even the well-intentioned and educated tended to keep a fearful distance from the mentally ill,'¹¹ solidifying the notion that the underlying, root cause of discrimination is when we fail to recognize the traits which unify all individuals and hence empathize with one another. The quote vividly portrays how even those that are have received a sufficient education have conformed to society's paradigm, and have become plagued with dread when communicating with somebody who is mentally ill, further suggesting that although education is important, what is conducive to an equal environment is a sense of moral and mutual understanding. The metaphorical

⁹ *Still Alice*, Lisa Genova-Page 136

¹⁰ *Still Alice*, Lisa Genova-Page 28

¹¹ *Still Alice*, Lisa Genova-Page 136

description of Alice during a period of vulnerability in ‘It was the scared, defeated, and unrestrained crying of a small child’¹² serves to emphasize the irrefutable exigency for support towards those suffering from mental illness, because by conforming to stigmatization, we are harming the pride, intellect and self-worth of those discriminated against, we are rendering them diminutive in power and helpless in strength. Ultimately, we are not only harming an individual, but an integral fraction of society as we disrupt its cohesion. This theme is also expressed in ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ through the motif of a mockingbird, when Atticus Finch says ‘It’s a sin to kill a mockingbird’¹³ as mockingbirds create music to enjoy, and are a source of happiness, pleasure and comfort; which is a clear allusion to the black community. Mockingbirds are also natural creatures, implying how the black community is a natural, essential component of society, and hence, by preventing equal opportunities for all, it will interfere with what is inherently natural and thus society will face adverse losses. Therefore, understanding and appreciating one another is a primary concern to address. As Scout herself commented, ‘you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around with them,’¹⁴ highlighting the importance of empathy, love and consideration in society. Therefore, equality is not only a luxury to be reserved for a particular elite, but is a crucial component which must be enforced in order to ensure the progress and betterment of society.

The pursuit for equality is a difficult one, but it can be achieved when we learn empathize, connect and relate with one another, when we learn to look past our indifferences and accept one another. Equality will only be achieved when we acknowledge its ability to create a society which is empowered, enhanced and harmonious, a society which is better. As Alice Howlands herself said, we should not be limiting those who are disabled, whether it be by mental illness or by stigmatization, but empowering them. Let us not be prejudiced and biased, but caring and loving. Let us end inequality.

WORD COUNT: 1981 Words (not including references and bibliography)

¹² *Still Alice, Lisa Genova*-Page 173

¹³ *To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee*-Page 98

¹⁴ *To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee*-Page 305

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