

EXAMPLE SHORT INFORMATIVE THEME (Six Paragraphs)

Prompt: Harper Lee uses the metaphor of the mockingbird to communicate one of the main messages of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Write a six-paragraph Informative Theme to trace her reference to mockingbirds throughout the novel and to explain the meaning of the metaphor. Use the APA style, and include quotations and in-text citations as needed.

TITLE OF PAPER: Do No Harm!

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Harper Lee's reference to mockingbirds begins with the startling title of her book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Of course, the reader is prompted to wonder why anyone would want to kill a mockingbird. Mockingbirds are actually harmless, medium-sized birds about 10 inches long (National Geographic, 2006). Their 17 species can be found in North and South America (Wikipedia, 2014). They were given their name because they "mock" or imitate other birds' songs. A single mockingbird can sing the songs of as many as 200 other species of birds and even some insects. Usually, they repeat another bird's song two or three times before switching to another bird's song (Bergin, 2007). They can sing a whole string of other birds' songs, and thus they are known for their continuous singing. Interestingly, Harper Lee refers to mockingbirds at several points in her novel about prejudice to communicate one of the main messages of her novel.

By way of background, Lee's novel is set in a fictional town in Alabama. Two children, Scout and Jem, and their father, Atticus, are at the heart of the novel. About a third of the way through the novel, the children receive air rifles as their Christmas gifts from their father. Atticus refuses to teach them how to shoot the rifles. Instead, he tells them to shoot at tin cans or blue jays in the backyard. He warns them that killing mockingbirds is a sin. When Scout asks their neighbor, Miss Maudie, why killing mockingbirds is a sin, Miss Maudie tells Scout the following:

"Your father's right," she said. "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (Lee, 1960, p.119).

Throughout the remainder of the novel, Harper Lee uses mockingbirds to set the tone or mood for several scenes. Since mocking birds are known to be always singing, their silence can be a signal that something is wrong. For example, when a “mad dog” is meandering down the street, Scout reports, “Nothing is more deadly than a deserted, waiting street. The trees were still, the mockingbirds were silent, the carpenters at Miss Maudie’s house had vanished” (Lee, 1960, p. 125). For another example, Scout describes the tense scene in the courtroom as follows: “The feeling grew until the feeling in the courtroom was exactly the same as a cold February morning, when the mockingbirds were still, and the carpenters had stopped hammering on Miss Maudie’s house...” (Lee, 1960, p. 281). In both cases, fear and possible death were in the air.

In contrast, toward the end of the novel, Harper Lee reminds the reader once more about the positive nature of mockingbird singing. To set the stage, Scout and Jem are walking together toward their school on a dark Halloween night. They are excited about Halloween and the Halloween party planned at their school. Jem starts teasing Scout by talking about haints and other scary things associated with Halloween. Then Jem draws Scout’s attention to the scary house of their reclusive neighbor, Boo Radley. Scout gets a little scared, but as they walk past it, they hear the songs of a mockingbird. Scout describes the singing as follows:

High above us in the darkness a solitary mocker poured out his repertoire in blissful unawareness of whose tree he sat in, plunging from the shrill kee, kee of the sunflower bird to the irascible qua-ack of the bluejay, to the sad lament of Poor Will, Poor will, Poor Will (Lee, 1960, 342).

Thus, the dark mood of the evening has been broken, and the children happily proceed to their party.

At the end of the novel, Harper Lee refers once more to the metaphor of the mockingbird. At this point in the novel, Scout and Jem are walking home from the Halloween party together. The night is dark, and they do not have a flashlight. Scout still has her Halloween costume on, and she and Jem cannot see much. Nevertheless, the children hear someone following them. After a few minutes of being followed, they are attacked by someone. Jem is knocked unconscious and his arm is broken. Scout is thrown to the ground in her costume. Someone else comes along and saves them by stabbing the attacker. Even though Scout does not know what happened because she was blinded by her costume, the sheriff and Atticus reason through what happened. They conclude that Boo Radley, their reclusive neighbor, came out of his house to save the children. They decide not to arrest him and put him on trial for murder although they predict that he would be acquitted for saving the children. Atticus asks Scout whether she understands why they have made that decision. Scout says, "Yes, sir, I understand.... It'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?" (Lee, 1960, p. 370)

In the end then, through the use of the mockingbird metaphor, Harper Lee teaches the lesson that people should not harm innocent creatures who do no harm themselves. Mockingbirds are innocent creatures who only make our lives more beautiful by singing lovely songs. They should not be harmed. People like Tom Robinson, the crippled man in the novel who is innocent of the crime with which he is charged, should not be found guilty and sentenced to death. Likewise, people like Boo Radley, the reclusive man who saved the children from vengeful Bob Ewell who was trying to kill them, should not be put on public trial for murder and paraded around for all the world to see. In the most general sense, Harper Lee used the metaphor of the mockingbird to teach the concept of "Do no harm" but takes it a step further to be "Do no

harm to those who do no harm.” The metaphor pushes people to carefully consider the possible innocent nature of those around them who might be criticized or punished.

References

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