

## EXAMPLE COMPARE AND CONTRAST ESSAY

**Prompt:** Compare and contrast Lily from *The Secret Life of Bees* to Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* on at least three dimensions for the comparison and three dimensions for the contrast. Be sure to include in-text citations where needed as well as a reference list. Use the MLA style.

TITLE OF PAPER: Different as Night and Day?

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### Different as Night and Day?

Two main girl characters in well-known novels, Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee 1960) and Lily in *The Secret Life of Bees* (Kidd 2002), have a lot in common, but some critical differences make a huge distinction between them. A most notable similarity is that they are both white girls growing up in the midst of Segregation. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout tells the story of her attorney father's attempt to defend a black man who has been falsely accused of raping a white woman. She chronicles the events surrounding the man's trial and the effects of these events on herself, her family, and her neighbors. In *The Secret Life of Bees*, Lily tells the story of how she comes to live with a black family of three adult sisters on a bee farm. She chronicles the complex relationships that exist among the sisters, their friends, and society.

Both novels take place in the South. Lily is growing up in South Carolina; Scout is growing up in Alabama. Although the time frames of the two novels are different, many of the same issues that are related to prejudice against blacks are similar across the novels. The events in *To Kill a Mockingbird* take place in the Depression during the 1930s, whereas the events in *The Secret Life of Bees* take place in 1964 at about the same time that the Civil Rights Act was signed by President Johnson. Nevertheless, although the girls have certain similarities with regard to their general character, their relationships with their black nannies, and their curiosity about black culture, the circumstances surrounding the girls and their understanding of racism

are so very different that they set the stage for how the girls actually take action within their stories.

### **Similarities between Scout and Lily**

#### **General Character**

With regard to their character, Scout and Lily are similarly remarkable girls in several ways. First, even though they are younger than the other characters in their respective novels, they take a leading role by being the narrator of their stories. All of the events of each novel from the beginning to the end are seen through their eyes. Their perspective on each event is therefore important, and it is clearly described by each girl in an engaging and sometimes surprising or funny way. Additionally, both girls are very smart. They love to read and devour books. In fact, Scout probably taught herself to read while her father read to her each night. When her first-grade teacher discovers that Scout can read, she tells Scout that her father has to stop teaching her, but Scout declares that her father is too tired to teach her anything. Fortunately for Lily, Mrs. Henry, her teacher, appreciates her intelligence. She tells Lily, “You could be a professor or a writer with actual books to your credit” (Kidd 16). Furthermore, both girls are courageous. They are both willing to say what they think. In addition, six-year-old Scout often gets into trouble for beating up boys who are older and bigger than she is. She threatens her friend Dill when he tells her a made-up story about how he can smell death by stating, “Dill if you don’t hush I’ll knock you bowlegged” (Lee 48). Similarly, Lily is willing to take on foes who are bigger than she is. When her nanny gets put into jail and then into a hospital under guard, Lily masterminds and leads her nanny’s escape. Then she figures out a way that they can hide from her father and the police.

### **Relationships with Their Nannies**

With regard to their relationships with their black nannies, Scout and Lily both have especially close relationships with them. Importantly, both girls lost their mothers when they were young, and their nannies are replacements for their mothers. Scout's mother died of a sudden heart attack when Scout was two years old; Lily's mother was shot and killed when she was four years old. In fact, Scout calls Calpurnia "our cook" (Lee 6), but Calpurnia watches over and disciplines Scout as a mother might. She came to live with the family when Scout's older brother Jem was born. Likewise, Lily's nanny, Rosaleen, has been a long-time part of her life; she came to live with Lily after her mother's death. Lily calls her "my stand-in mother" (Kidd 2) and describes Rosaleen's love for her by stating, "I was the only one who knew that despite her sharp ways, her heart was more tender than a flower skin and she loved me beyond reason" (Kidd 11). Despite the love bond between the girls and their nannies, there is also an element of distance between them. Scout describes her frustration with Calpurnia by saying, "Our battles were epic and one sided....I had felt her tyrannical presence as long as I could remember" (Lee 7). Lily has her frustrations with Rosaleen, too. At one point in the story, she wishes that Rosaleen could "...be more cultured" (Kidd 73); at another point, she wishes that Rosaleen would "...get some manners" (Kidd 75). Nevertheless, one might imagine that these are the same kinds of frustrations any child might have with a mother figure.

### **Curiosity about Black Culture**

Probably because of their close relationships with their black nannies, both Scout and Lily are curious about the black culture. Calpurnia takes Scout and Jem to church with her, which is quite a revelation to them. Scout is curious about the absence of hymnals and how the

offering is collected. Later, Scout wants to visit Calpurnia's home, but her aunt will not allow her to go. During the trial, Scout sits in the courtroom balcony with the black people. She accepts them, and they accept her. Similarly, Lily is curious about Rosaleen's life. She visits Rosaleen's home and notices many details about Rosaleen's daily activities. She moves in with a black family of sisters, and she fully participates in their business and home life. She even participates in their invented religious activities. She meets, becomes friends with, and falls for a black teen-aged boy.

### **Differences Between Scout and Lily**

#### **Life Circumstances**

In relation to the differences between Scout and Lily, the two girls have totally different sets of circumstances in which their stories are embedded. Scout, who is only 6 years old at the beginning of her story, has her brother, Jem, who is 10 years old, and a friend Dill, who is 6 years old. During their free time, they play together constantly, and Jem watches over her and protects her. He is constantly interacting with her and giving her his advice and wisdom. Also, because Scout's family lives in a neighborhood, she is constantly interacting with the neighbors. They also give her advice and interpret people's actions for her. Thus, Scout is surrounded by people. In contrast, Lily, who is 14 years old, has no brothers or sisters. She has no friends. To add to her isolation, her father requires her to sell peaches in a peach stand by herself at the roadside all day, but she has few customers. She reports this activity is very boring because her father will not allow her to read books. Moreover, because she lives on a peach farm, consisting of many acres, she does not have any nearby neighbors with whom she can communicate. Except for her father and her nanny, Rosaleen, Lily lives an isolated existence.

With regard to their relationships with their adult family members, like their fathers and extended family members, the differences between Scout and Lily continue. Scout has a very loving father who is a constant positive force in her life. He reads to her each evening and explains the world to her. He is the positive center in her world. In contrast, Lily's father, T. Ray, is abusive and difficult. She describes him and her relationship with him as follows: "He had an orneriness year-round but especially in the summer... Mostly I stayed out of his way. His only kindness was for Snout, his bird dog..." (Kidd 3). Additionally, Scout has an aunt and an uncle who are often present in her life. Her aunt is especially active in Scout's life. Jem explains their Aunt Alexandra to Scout by saying, "You know she's not used to girls, ... least ways not girls like you. She's trying to make you a lady" (Lee 302). In contrast, Lily has no extended family. There is no one to teach her to be a lady and no one to temper the hot-headed nature of her father. Furthermore, Scout's ancestry is clear. She traces it to Simon Finch who immigrated to America from England. She knows that her father was born and raised in Macomb County and that she is related to everyone in town "by blood or marriage" (Lee 6). She has roots and feels connected. On the other hand, Lily is disconnected. She knows nothing about her mother, who died when Lily was four years old, or her mother's relatives. She never mentions her father's relatives either. At one point, Lily remarks that "There wasn't a soul anywhere to help us" (Kidd 50) as she refers to her own and her nanny's plight.

### **Understanding of Racism**

Another way in which Scout and Lily are dissimilar is with regard to their understanding of prejudice and racism. Possibly because of her young age, Scout is naïve about prejudice. She is very puzzled about racist events as they occur, and she asks questions to the people around her about these events. As a result of their explanations, her thinking about prejudice evolves over

the course of the story. At the beginning of her story, she accepts Segregation and racist ideas as a matter of course; toward the end, she starts to question them and wishes that circumstances were different. In contrast, Lily understands racism from the beginning of her story. She is very aware that when Rosaleen, her black nanny, breaks the law by sitting in a white church and then sasses some white men, Rosaleen will be severely punished if not killed. She states, “Franklin Posey was the man with the flashlight, and he was gonna kill Rosaleen. But then hadn’t I known this inside even before T. Ray ever said it?” (Kidd 38). She is frustrated and angered by these circumstances, but, at first, she seems to accept Segregation and racism as the status quo.

### **Actions**

Finally, Scout and Lily are different with regard to the actions that they are able to take during their stories. Perhaps because of her age and her understanding of the situations around her, Scout is mainly an observer in her story. She watches the story unfold about Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. For the most part, she is removed from the action. The adults around her protect her from the ugliness of the situation. For example, they skirt around telling her what “rape” means. She does not know Tom and has no way of helping him or saving his life, especially after he is sent away to a prison farm. At one point, she unwittingly joins her father as he tries to calm an angry mob at the jail in which Tom is imprisoned; however, she acts more to save Jem and her father than to save Tom. At the end of the story, she becomes a victim of circumstances when Bob Ewell attacks and tries to kill her. She is not able to defend herself because she is imprisoned in her Halloween costume. Again, she is relegated to observer status. In contrast, Lily is an active participant in her story. She plots her escape and runs away from her abusive dad. In the process, she saves Rosaleen’s life by helping her escape. She decides where they are going, and she finds a way to get there. In the end, she

finds a new home for herself and Rosaleen with a black family. She takes action in a positive way that results in positive outcomes for herself and Rosaleen.

### **Summary**

In summary, although Scout and Lily are similar with regard to their general character, relationships with their nannies, and curiosity, their individual circumstances and understandings are very different. They are both growing up in the South in the midst of Segregation and a culture of prejudice against black people. They are smart and fearless, and they are both willing to say what they think and take action when needed, even to the point of beating someone up or breaking the law. Also, they both have black nannies who serve as their substitute mothers. Possibly because of their closeness to their nannies, they are curious about and open to the black culture. They empathize with black people and abhor their persecution. Nevertheless, their personal circumstances set the stage for their stories. Their ages vary enough that they have different opportunities, different understandings, and different access to options in their lives. Scout is surrounded by people who care about her and has roots, but Lily has almost no one besides her nanny and no knowledge about her roots. Lily's isolation and her abusive father add further elements to the situation. Perhaps because of these circumstances and the girls' differing understandings of prejudice, Lily is willing to take action. She runs away from home, and she acts courageously to save Rosaleen's life. She is also open to living with a black family. In the process, she saves her own life as well as Rosaleen's. Lily is the hero of her story, while Scout is an observer of all the events surrounding her. Although they both narrate their stories, the way the two girls participate in their stories is as different as night and day.



Works Cited

Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Secret Life of Bees*. Penguin Books, 2002.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Grand Central Publishing, 1960.