

## EXAMPLE SHORT EFFECTS ESSAY

**Prompt:** In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Mayella Ewell lies to the sheriff, stating that she was attacked by Tom Robinson. Write a Short Informative Theme which describes the effects of Mayella's lie on the lives of at least three of the other characters in the novel. Be sure to write at least six paragraphs. Include quotations related to the effects of Mayella's lie, in-text citations, and a reference list. Use MLA style.

TITLE OF PAPER: What Harm Can One Lie Do?

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### What Harm Can One Lie Do?

In *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960), one of the characters, Mayella Ewell, tells a “whopper” of a lie to the sheriff. Mayella, a white girl, lives with her father, Bob Ewell, and her siblings in a dilapidated cabin behind the garbage dump in Maycomb, Alabama. The Ewell family is very poor; Bob Ewell is unemployed and known to be a heavy drinker. Nineteen-year-old Mayella takes care of her younger brothers and sisters because their mother is dead. When the sheriff, Mr. Heck Tate, is called to their home by Bob Ewell, he finds that Mayella has been beaten. He later testifies that “...she was pretty bruised up when I got there, and she had a black eye comin’.” (Lee 225). He further testifies that when he asked her who beat her up, she told him that Tom Robinson, a black man, attacked her and raped her. This lie sets in motion events that have serious consequences for other characters in the novel including Tom Robinson, Atticus Finch, Bob Ewell, and their families.

Tom Robinson is, of course, the character who is most severely affected by this lie because he is innocent. Predictably, after Mayella tells the sheriff that Tom attacked her, the sheriff arrests Tom and charges him with raping Mayella. Tom is put in jail and then placed on trial. Unfortunately, an all-white jury finds him guilty of the crime, a capital offense. He is sentenced to death. While he awaits his appeal, Tom is sent to the Enfield Prison Farm. This prison is located 70 miles from his home, and he continues to be isolated from his family. This set of circumstances causes Tom to lose hope. One of his friends claims that the last thing he said

to his attorney before going to the prison farm was, "Goodbye Mr. Finch, there ain't nothin' you can do now, so there ain't no use tryin' " (Lee 314). Unfortunately, soon after arriving at the prison, Tom tries to escape by running across the exercise field and scaling the fence. He is shot and killed by the guards.

Another character who is deeply affected in a variety of ways by Mayella's lie is Atticus Finch, the main protagonist of the novel. By way of background, Atticus is a white attorney who lives with his two children, Scout and Jem, and their black maid Calpurnia. Atticus is highly respected by the townspeople, many of whom are related to Atticus in some way. After Tom Robinson is arrested by the sheriff, the judge appoints Atticus to defend Tom during Tom's trial. Atticus is deeply troubled by this appointment. His personal principles dictate that he will defend Tom using all his skills and knowledge; however, he knows that by doing this he will be putting himself and his children in danger. At the least, he knows that they will be ridiculed and verbally attacked. At the worst, he fears that because the townspeople are very prejudiced against black people, they will do something rash and even violent. In fact, at one point in the novel, Atticus and his children are put in danger because an angry mob of men tries to storm the jail in hopes of attacking and perhaps lynching Tom. Later, Bob Ewell spits in Atticus's face, presumably to provoke a fight with him. Toward the end of the novel, Jem and Scout are physically attacked by Bob Ewell who appears to be trying to kill them. All of these incidents, the trial, and Tom's death weigh heavily on Atticus.

The other main character who is severely affected by Mayella's lie is her father, Bob Ewell. At first, Bob appears to be a bystander who, through a window, witnesses the attack on Mayella by Tom. After all the testimony has been heard, though, there is considerable evidence that he might have been Mayella's attacker. Atticus asks questions of the witnesses that reveal

that Bob has beaten her in the past, that Mayella's right eye was blackened, that Bob was left handed, and that Tom's left arm was crippled and useless. When Atticus tries to explain to Jem how Bob feels after the trial and why Bob spit in Atticus's face, he says, "I destroyed his last shred of credibility at that trial, if he had any to begin with. The man had to have some kind of comeback, his kind always does" (Lee 292). Atticus assures the children that no further harm will be done by Bob. Nevertheless, Bob attacks Jem and Scout, breaking Jem's elbow. In the process of defending the children, another character (Boo Radley) kills Bob. Thus, at the end of the novel, both Tom and Bob have been killed.

Clearly, the other characters in the novel that are affected by Mayella's lie are the children of these three men. First, Tom's children no longer have a father and a family bread winner. This circumstance puts considerable stress on his family because they are poor, and Tom's wife has never worked outside the home. Besides suffering the grief of losing their father, Tom's children will likely experience extreme poverty. Second, Atticus's children are emotionally and physically affected by the trial and Bob's attack on them. Even before the physical attack, Scout describes herself and Jem as "...dragging around the neighborhood, not eating, taking little interest in our normal pursuits..." and "deeply frightened" (Lee 292). Likewise, Bob's children are also affected by the lie. They no longer have a father. They will be known as the children of the man who attacked and tried to kill Atticus's children, a difficult heritage with which to live.

To conclude, Mayella's lie seriously affects many of the people in Maycomb, Alabama. Even though the lie was probably designed originally by her and her father to cover up his attack on her, Mayella perpetuated the lie by testifying in court against Tom. Tom, an innocent man who had generously helped Mayella numerous times around her home, is dead. Tom's children

are fatherless. Atticus and his children have endured ridicule and attack. The children's lives were put in danger. Bob is dead, and his children are fatherless. Thus, the ripples that have extended outward from this lie have touched numerous folks, probably not even in Mayella's mind or realm of experience at the time she told it. Certainly, lies can be deadly, and cover ups should be avoided.

Work Cited

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