

Long Quote Format

The case against Tom Robinson becomes the most racist action in the novel. Simply bringing a case based on coincidence and suspicious testimony illustrates the depth of the prejudice rooted in Maycomb. Had Tom been white, the case never would have reached a jury. Tom, therefore, must stand trial for no better reason than his skin simply radiates the wrong hue. Atticus states to the jury:

This case is as simple as black and white. The state has not produced one iota of medical evidence to the effect that the crime Tom Robinson is charged with ever took place. It has relied instead upon the testimony of two witnesses whose evidence has not only been called into serious question on cross-examination, but has been flatly contradicted by the defendant.

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The corrupt white witnesses, Bob and Mayella Ewell, have greater power in court than the honest Tom Robinson. Yet, Tom's life may end because of the racism running rampant through the all-white jury. Although the obvious verdict of "not guilty" seems obligatory, the jury decides against Tom and ultimately against any sort of justice.

Short Quote Format

Tom's death at the hands of prison guards clearly shows the racism in Maycomb County. He poses no threat to anyone with only one good arm (the other being crippled in a farming accident) and has no place to run. Instead of simply firing a warning shot to wound the desperate prisoner (who remains wrongfully convicted, devoid of hope, and extremely distraught), the guards fill Tom's body with seventeen bullets. Atticus summarizes the obvious when he says, "They didn't have to shoot him that much" (235). One bullet surely could have stopped a one-armed prisoner from climbing a fence or wall. Seventeen shots do not become necessary in many massacres, much less the slowing of a handicapped convict. However, the white guards do in fact kill an escaping black man and end any chance of criminal justice for an African-American defendant in Maycomb County.