

## **Using the Act of Protest to Affect Social Change**

Tension between races in the United States goes back hundreds of years, particularly between whites and blacks. Going as far back in history as colonial days, white European settlers brought slaves from Africa with them, to work on their farms and in their mines. Spain and Portugal had been participating in the African slave trade early in the 1400s, with England, France and others following by 1600. White Europeans believed they were superior to Africans, and as colonists continued to leave Europe, they brought slaves with them to the New World. Throughout the centuries, African Americans struggled to be recognized as equal to Caucasians and other races. Even though the American Civil War resulted in the abolition of slavery, blacks were still discriminated against and treated unfairly. Especially in the southern states, blacks faced segregation and extreme racism well into the 1900s. In her book, To Kill a Mockingbird, author Harper Lee illustrates the tension between whites and blacks by focusing on the trial of a young black man, wrongly accused of assaulting a white woman. The trial takes place in a small, segregated town in Alabama where a white, affluent lawyer (Atticus Finch) takes the case on, in an effort to end discrimination and promote tolerance. By agreeing to represent the defendant, Finch stages a personal protest of sorts, against the racist beliefs of many in his community. Although Atticus Finch is a fictional character, many leaders throughout history have used their own acts of protest to affect social change.

Black slaves brought to America from Europe were often put to work on farms and plantations as laborers. Slavery was especially popular in the southern states, where crops like tobacco and cotton needed to be picked by hand. Since farming was more difficult in the north, slavery was not as prevalent. In the northern states, slaves often worked in factories, homes and sometimes on ships used for trade or fishing. With the invention of the cotton gin, slavery in the south grew rapidly. Working conditions for slaves were often harsh, and depending on their situation and their owners, slaves could work long hours with few or no breaks, be punished for not working hard enough, and be denied medical attention. As slaves began to protest their living conditions and the immorality of slavery itself, rebellions often broke out. Some northerners became sympathetic and began instituting laws to end slavery. The issue of slavery eventually divided the northern states from the southern ones, and became a major cause of the American Civil War.

In 1861, there were 19 free states and 15 slave states, and President Abraham Lincoln was trying to unite his country. Since he was not a supporter of slavery, many southerners believed he was going to abolish it, and eventually 11 southern states seceded from the U. S., and called themselves the Confederate States of America. Ultimately, the two sides declared war, leading to the American Civil War. It took more American lives than any other war in history. The North eventually won, after the South surrendered, and The United States was once again whole. In 1865, slavery ended with the adoption of the thirteenth amendment. Although blacks were now free, they were still not treated equally under the law, especially in the South. Their legal rights were outlined in laws named black codes, which limited African American's ability to own land, be out past a certain time of night, etc. Black codes eventually gave way to Jim Crow laws, which outlined the legal separation of whites and blacks.

Jim Crow laws were instituted in the southern United States from about 1890 to 1965. The laws enforced racial segregation, and were supposed to ensure 'separate but equal' status to all African American citizens. All public facilities were segregated, including schools, restaurants and forms of public transportation like busses. The laws failed to protect equality among races, however. Whites received better treatment throughout the south, while African Americans continued to be treated like second class citizens. As civil rights advocates, many from the northern states, began to question the morality of Jim Crow laws in the south, activists began to stage protests against them. Civil rights leaders started to emerge, challenging the discriminatory practices that were being accepted throughout the country. Leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. inspired thousands of others to stand up against segregation, racism and discrimination. In 1963, King and A. Philip Randolph organized a March on Washington, where over 250,000 people gathered to bring awareness of civil rights violations. It was at this protest that King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, which became a rally cry for the Civil Rights Movement.

As a result of the protests and nationwide demonstrations, the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, assuring equal representation under the law to all people, regardless of race, creed, gender or religious beliefs. The Act gave legal avenues for people to pursue, if they were the victim of discrimination, and forbid all government agencies from discriminatory practices. Throughout history, individuals who have been motivated to institute change have led the charge against society's various ills. Beginning in the days of slavery, people affected social change through the act of protesting and staging rebellions. Some notable historical protests which led to social change include The Boston Tea Party, Womens' Suffrage, and the Civil Rights Movement. In her novel, To Kill a Mockingbird, author Harper Lee sets the stage for a southern lawyer to stage his own personal protest against racism in the 1930s.

In the novel, attorney Atticus Finch (white) agrees to defend Tom Robinson (black) despite living in a deeply segregated town in Alabama. Although the majority of the town disapproves of his actions, Finch is a believer in racial equality and uses the trial to expose the cruelty present in segregation. His defense of Tom Robinson is his own, individual protest. Even though the mostly white (and mostly racist) community denounces Finch, he seizes the moment to teach his children Scout and Jem about how wrong segregation is. Instead of going along with the crowd, Finch stands up to the social injustices of his time and challenges the status quo. He presents his own form of protest inside the courtroom, and not only insists his client is innocent, but suggests another person may be guilty: a white person, in fact. By defending Tom, Atticus really is questioning an entire social structure, and pursuing change.

Since Lee's novel takes place in the early 1930s, Jim Crow laws were in effect and there were strict parameters as to what black residents living in the town of Maycomb could, and could not do. For example, before entering the courtroom for Tom Robinson's trial, black attendees had to wait for all the whites to sit first. African American residents had a curfew and could not be out past a certain time of night. Only white children could attend the public school. Atticus told his children that "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird", because they were innocent songbirds that didn't hurt anyone and simply provided pleasure through their song. Throughout the book, there are several symbolic 'mockingbirds' that represent innocence, including Tom Robinson. Although the majority of the town disapproves of him defending a black man, Finch is a believer in racial

equality and uses the trial to expose the immorality of segregation. Despite threats to himself and his family, he fully commits to his personal protest by defending Tom during his trial. Although the outcome is not in his client's favor, Finch's protest was not in vain. If society's cruel rules and practices were equivalent to a brick wall, he was able to leave cracks, that eventually could lead to deep breaks and hopefully the crumbling of racism.

History has shown us that individuals who are motivated to change society may often do so through the act of protest. Fictional lawyer Atticus Finch is one such individual. Throughout the novel, he strategically protests racial segregation in a variety of ways, from defending Tom Robinson against false allegations, to treating his housekeeper Calpurnia as one of the family. Even though he was not successful at freeing Tom Robinson, he revealed certain societal truths to Scout and Jem, and others in the community, who would hopefully use them to make changes in their own lives and in society itself.