

## EXAMPLE SHORT ARGUMENTATIVE THEME

**Prompt:** In the novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the author emphasizes the message that people should not judge others without knowing them. Choose one of the characters in the novel, and write an Argumentative Theme to prove that the character's role in the book was designed to illustrate this theme. Include at least three quotations and other information in at least five paragraphs, based on your close reading of the novel. Also include a reference list and in-text citations as needed. Use the MLA style.

TITLE OF PAPER: Boo Radley: Judged Too Quickly?

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### Boo Radley: Judged Too Quickly?

Boo Radley is the most mysterious character in *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960), but he is a perfect illustration of one of the author's main messages in the story: Never judge other people without knowing them. To provide some background, the story takes place in a fictional town called Maycomb, Alabama, in the 1930's during the Depression and Segregation. Atticus Finch and his two children (Jem and Scout) are the main characters in the story; Boo Radley is one of their neighbors and a minor character. In fact, he is so minor that he only appears at the very end of the story. His presence is felt throughout the story only because the other characters talk about him. Thus, Boo Radley is used by the author to show how a person can be judged by others without truly knowing him. She makes Boo a mysterious character whom no one knows. Then she shows how rumor, gossip, and minimal encounters can create an untrue picture of a person, and finally she reveals his true nature at the end of the novel.

One way Harper Lee builds her message about judging others is by keeping Boo Radley isolated from the community such that no one really knows him. As the story goes, when Boo was a teenager, he started hanging around with the "wrong crowd" (Lee 12). He and his friends got into trouble with a church officer, and the judge sent the rest of the boys to the state industrial school. Boo's father somehow convinced the judge to allow Boo to stay at home; Boo stayed in the family home for the next 15 years without coming out into

the town. At that point, Boo was rumored to have stabbed his father in the leg with scissors. As a result, he was locked in the courthouse basement for some time. No one seems to know how long he was imprisoned there or when he returned to his home. During the time of the novel, he was continuing to stay in his family home and not taking part in the neighborhood or community. No one had seen him for years; no one knew him.

The second way Harper Lee builds her message about judging others is by using rumors and gossip to paint Boo Radley as a “malevolent phantom” (Lee 10). As rumor had it, “People said he went out at night when the moon was down, and peeped in windows. When people’s azaleas froze in a cold snap, it was because he had breathed on them. Any stealthy small crimes committed in Maycomb were his work” (Lee 10). In other words, since the townspeople had not seen Boo for years, they had created strange rumors about how he looked and acted. For example, Jem described Boo as “...about six and a half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch... There was a long jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time” (Lee 16). These descriptions had made Boo Radley into an evil force to be feared and avoided. The children also speculated that Boo was really dead and had been stuffed up the family chimney. No one knew for sure what had happened to him or what he was like.

The third way Harper Lee builds her message is that she uses minimal encounters with Boo Radley to build suspense in the novel. At first, Jem and Scout and their friend Dill want to lure Boo Radley out of his home, so they can determine whether he is alive and what he really looks and acts like. Initially, Jem is dared to touch Boo’s house, so he runs into the yard, slaps the house, and runs out. The children see a tiny movement through one

of the windows. They suspect that Boo is alive. Next, Scout finds two pieces of chewing gum in a hole in a tree at the edge of the Radleys' yard. Later, Jem and Scout find two Indian-head pennies in the same tree. They decide to keep the pennies and ask around about the owner of the pennies.

As the summer unfolds, the children begin to act out Boo's life on their front porch and in the yard. Everyday, they build upon their play about Boo's life. When they get tired of that, they decide to write him a letter asking him to come out of his house and telling him that they will buy him some ice cream. Their father, Atticus, catches them trying to put the letter through Boo's window using a fishing pole. He tells them to stop bothering Boo and to stop putting Boo's life "history on display for the edification of the neighborhood" (Lee 65). Still later, the children decide to look through Boo's window to see what he looks like. Instead, Boo's brother shoots at them with a shotgun. Jem rips and loses his pants as he tries to squeeze through the fence to get away. When he goes back to get them later, he finds them neatly folded over the fence with the rip in them carefully stitched up. More and more gifts appear in the tree, including soap carvings, more chewing gum, a spelling medal, a pocket watch, and a knife. The children become upset when Boo's father fills the knothole with cement. All these events build suspense about who Boo Radley really is: Is he a "malevolent phantom," or is he a thoughtful person who leaves the children gifts and mends pants?

The final way that Harper Lee builds her message in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is by creating a climax that reveals Boo's true nature. The climax occurs because another character in the novel, Bob Ewell, wants to harm Atticus. Bob has become angry with Atticus because Atticus, an attorney, has defended an African American man accused of

raping Bob's daughter in a trial. Bob threatens to "... get him if it takes the rest of his life" (Lee 290). However, instead of attacking Atticus directly, Bob Ewell attacks Jem and Scout with a knife on their way home from a Halloween party. During the attack, Jem's arm is broken, and he is knocked unconscious. Scout is roughed up and cannot immediately identify their attacker because her Halloween costume blocks her vision. After Boo Radley carries Jem home, the sheriff asks Scout to identify the person who pulled Bob Ewell away from her. She points to Boo Radley and identifies him as the hero of the incident. When the sheriff inspects the attack site, he concludes that Boo Radley killed Bob Ewell to save the children's lives. That night, Scout learns from watching Boo that he is a gentle and timid person. She tells her father that Boo "...was real nice" (Lee 376). Her father replies, "Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them" (Lee 376).

To conclude, Harper Lee uses a variety of methods to show how Boo Radley embodies one of the main messages of her novel about judging others. At first, she creates mystery surrounding Boo. The fact that he has stayed inside his home for most of his life makes people wonder about him. They begin to spread rumors and judge him negatively even though they know nothing about him and have not seen him for most of his life. Later in the novel, Harper Lee builds suspense because the children receive little gifts that create more mystery surrounding him. They become obsessed with the story of his life and reenact it regularly. They try to figure out ways to "see" him. Finally, Boo saves the children's lives, and his true character is shown. When Scout finally meets Boo and "sees" him clearly, she can conclude rightly that he is "real nice" and not an ogre. Thus, Boo Radley's story is the perfect story for teaching people not to judge others before knowing

them personally; it has mystery, rumors, suspense, and action. Scout learns that Boo is truly a hero in disguise.

Work Cited

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