

LITERATURE'S ECHO:
SDG 16 IN HARPER LEE'S *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

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Abstract

In today's world, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) guide us towards a better future. This article looks at SDG 16, which is about peace, justice, and strong institutions, through the lens of Harper Lee's famous novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Set in the American South during the 1930s, the book shows racism and unfair trials in a way that still speaks to us. By exploring characters like Atticus Finch and Tom Robinson, we see how literature can push for justice and fight prejudice. This piece argues that stories like this one help build empathy and support SDG 16's aims in real life.

Key Words: *SDG 16, To Kill a Mockingbird, justice, racism, literature, peace, strong institutions, Harper Lee, empathy, social change*

Introduction

As a postgraduate student diving into literature, I often think about how old books connect to our modern problems. The ENGZINE magazine, from our English department at St. Joseph's College, Trichy, loves pieces that mix creativity with real-world issues, like in its first issue that celebrated student voices on campus life. That's why I'm writing this for the current issue.

The UN's SDGs are 17 goals to make the world fairer by 2030. SDG 16 focuses on peace, justice, and strong institutions – things like reducing violence, ending discrimination, and making sure laws work for everyone. Literature has always been a mirror to society, showing wrongs and suggesting fixes. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) does just that for SDG 16. Through

young Scout Finch's eyes in Maycomb, Alabama, we witness a town gripped by racism, where justice fails a black man named Tom Robinson.

This novel isn't just a story; it's a call to empathy. Atticus Finch, Scout's dad and a lawyer, defends Tom despite knowing the odds. His line, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view," teaches us to fight prejudice. In a time when racial injustice was common, Lee used her book to highlight these issues, much like SDG 16 targets non-discriminatory laws.

Understanding SDG 16

SDG 16 wants peaceful societies where everyone feels safe and justice is real. Its targets include cutting violence, protecting kids from abuse, and promoting fair laws. But in many places, corruption and bias still block this. For example, the goal calls for reducing all forms of violence and ensuring equal access to justice.

Literature steps in here by making us feel these problems. Books let us walk in others' shoes, building the empathy needed for change. UNESCO even linked literature to SDGs, with projects like "17 Books for 17 SDGs" where cities pick stories for each goal. *To Kill a Mockingbird* fits SDG 16 perfectly because it exposes how weak institutions let racism win.

In the 1930s South, Jim Crow laws kept blacks unequal. Courts favored whites, just like Tom's trial shows. Today, SDG 16 fights similar battles worldwide, from police bias to unequal rights. Lee's novel reminds us that strong institutions start with moral courage.

The Novel's World: Maycomb and Its Shadows

To Kill a Mockingbird is told by Scout, a tomboy growing up with her brother Jem and widower dad Atticus. Their quiet life changes when Atticus defends Tom Robinson, accused of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell. We know Tom is innocent – he's kind, helps Mayella for free, but her racist dad Bob frames him.

Maycomb is sleepy but rotten with prejudice. White folks gossip about Boo Radley, a recluse, and shun blacks. The trial is the heart: despite Atticus proving Mayella lied and Tom couldn't have done it physically, the all-white jury convicts him. Tom dies escaping prison, a victim of injustice.

This mirrors SDG 16's fight against discriminatory justice. The book shows how bias poisons institutions – the sheriff ignores evidence; neighbors harass Atticus's family. Scout learns from it all, seeing "the hell white people give colored folks" without realizing her own role at first.

Atticus Finch: A Beacon for Justice

Atticus is the hero we need for SDG 16. He tells his kids, "The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience." He takes Tom's case not for fame, but because it's right. Even when losing friends and facing mobs, he stays calm.

His courtroom speech blasts the jury: "She has committed no crime; she has merely broken a rigid and time-honored code of our society." He calls out the "evil assumption" that all blacks are bad. This pushes SDG 16's target for non-discriminatory policies.

Atticus teaches empathy, key to strong institutions. He makes Jem read to Mrs. Dubose, a racist, to see her humanity. For SDG 16, leaders like Atticus show how personal integrity builds peaceful societies. In real life, his character inspired civil rights fights, linking fiction to action.

Tom Robinson and the Victims of Injustice

Tom is the mockingbird – innocent, harmed for no reason. He loses an arm saving Mayella from her dad, yet gets accused. In court, his testimony is honest, but the prosecutor twists it with racism: "You felt sorry for her?" as if a black man pitying a white woman is a crime.

His conviction shows SDG 16 failures: unequal justice, violence in prison. Tom says, "Mr. Finch, if you was a nigger like me, you'd be scared too." It highlights fear in discriminated groups. Literature like this raises awareness, pushing for SDG reforms.

Boo Radley parallels Tom – both outcasts protected by kids' kindness. Boo saves Scout from Bob Ewell, proving innocence beneath rumors. This ties to SDG 16's child protection and reducing violence.

Racism's Grip and the Loss of Innocence

Racism in Maycomb is everyday: Calpurnia, the black cook, can't visit white churches fully; kids use slurs casually. The trial educates Scout and Jem – Jem cries, "It ain't right." Their innocence fades, like the book's theme.

This loss links to SDG 16: prejudice breeds violence, weak institutions. Lee, from Alabama, drew from real events like the Scottsboro Boys trial, where blacks got unfair death sentences. Her book critiques this, urging empathy over hate.

Literature's Role in Promoting SDG 16

Stories aren't just fun; they change minds. *To Kill a Mockingbird* sold millions, taught in schools, sparking talks on justice. It fosters global citizenship, as one study says literature does for SDGs. In India, similar issues like caste discrimination echo Maycomb. Books can bridge cultures, supporting SDG 16 everywhere. ENGZINE-style magazines spread these ideas among Gen Z. Teachers use it for social justice lessons, turning readers into activists. With SDG deadline nearing, we need more such works.

Why This Matters Today

In 2026, SDG 16 lags – conflicts rage, corruption festers. But books like Lee's endure. They remind us justice requires courage, like Atticus facing the mob. Scout ends hopeful: "Most people are nice when you finally see them." For students, this novel is a guide. It shows literature heals societies, aligning with ENGZINE's spirit of young voices. Let's read, discuss, act.

Conclusion

To Kill a Mockingbird powerfully supports SDG 16 by exposing injustice and championing empathy. Through its characters and trials, it calls for strong, fair institutions. As literature students, we must use stories to build the peaceful world SDGs promise. This isn't just analysis; it's a nudge to live better.

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