

Empathy and Social Change in To Kill a Mockingbird, Milk, and Guess Who's Coming to Dinner Essay

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Empathy and Social Change in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Milk*, and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*

Empathy: "The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experiences fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner" (according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary). When we think of social change, several of the themes in the literature we have discussed are based upon this concept of empathy. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, there's the repetition of the idea that you should stand in someone's shoes before judging them. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, we see a liberal family who finds it difficult to accept interracial [marriage](#) when having to personally deal with the issue. In *Milk*, Harvey discusses how the gay movement has a better chance if more people come out, where if each person knows at least one "homosexual" there's a better chance of the movement gaining public approval. For social change to occur, one needs to be aware of and sensitive to the issues at hand, and conscious of how everyone's lives are differently affected in one way or another. Empathy is an important vehicle for creating lasting social change.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we see a father who continuously promotes a principle of empathy to his children as a way for them to understand and approach important issues that affect people's daily lives. For example, several times throughout the novel we see Atticus telling his children that you can "never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his sk..."

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... order to make a larger difference. They do so by either telling their story, asking the audience directly to think about an issue, or by putting them in someone else's shoes. When faced with difficult topics involving class, race, and/or sexual identity, using empathy as a tool to think about the issues is more beneficial to creating lasting social change than having the mindset of "this doesn't affect me so why should I care?" Having knowledge of, being attentive to, and vicariously experiencing others positions, allows one to be empathetic to the situations that affect people's lives every day, in hopes that change will occur, progressively. When we are privileged or members of the dominant group, we tend to not notice, or take for granted, the things that marginalize others. Using empathy as a vehicle for social change helps to make the unconscious conscious.

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