

Atticus Finch's Closing Argument

1. Refer to your "Rhetoric" handout and go over the different rhetorical devices listed.
2. Annotate by clearly identifying and labeling each rhetorical device in Atticus's closing argument.
3. Complete the exercise based on Atticus's closing argument

Finch: To begin with, this case should never have come to trial. The State has not produced one iota of medical evidence 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. Now there is circumstantial evidence to indicate that Mayella Ewell was beaten savagely by someone who led, almost exclusively, with his left [hand]. And Tom Robinson now sits before you, having taken "The Oath" with the only good hand he possesses -- his right.

I have nothing but pity in my heart for the Chief Witness for the State. She is the victim of cruel poverty and ignorance. But, my pity does not extend so far as to her putting a man's life at stake, which she has done in an effort to get rid of her own guilt. Now I say "guilt," gentlemen, because it was guilt that motivated her. She's committed no crime. She has merely broken a rigid and time-honored code of our society, a code so severe that whoever breaks it is hounded from our midst as unfit to live with. She must destroy the evidence of her offense. But, what was the evidence of her offense? Tom Robinson, a human being. She must put Tom Robinson away from her. Tom Robinson was to her a daily reminder of what she did.

Now what did she do? She tempted a negro. She was white and she tempted a negro. She did something that in our society is unspeakable: She kissed a black man. Not an old uncle, but a strong, young negro man. No code mattered to her before she broke it, but it came crashing down on her afterwards.

The witnesses for the State, with the exception of the sheriff of Lincoln County, have presented themselves to you gentlemen -- to this Court -- in the cynical confidence that their testimony would not be doubted; confident that you gentlemen would go along with them on the assumption, the evil assumption, that all negroes lie; all negroes are basically immoral beings; all negro men are not to be trusted around our women, an assumption that one associates with minds of their caliber, and which is in itself, gentlemen, a lie -- which I do not need to point out to you.

And so, a quiet, humble, respectable negro, who has had the unmitigated TEMERITY to feel sorry for a white woman, has had to put his word against two white peoples. The defendant is not guilty. But somebody in this courtroom is.

Now, gentlemen, in this country our courts are the great levelers. In our courts, all men are created equal. I'm no idealist to believe firmly in the integrity of our courts and of our jury system. That's no ideal to me. That is a living, working reality!

Now I am confident that you gentlemen will review without passion the evidence that you have heard, come to a decision, and restore this man to his family.

In the name of God, do your duty. In the name of God, believe Tom Robinson.