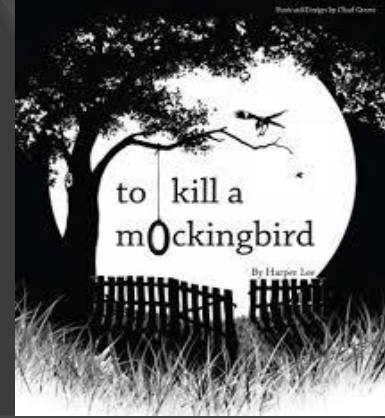


# To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

## The Power of a Word



Words can inspire. And  
words can destroy. Choose  
yours well.

Robin Sharma

# Nigger...



## Quickwrite:

What is your reaction to this word?

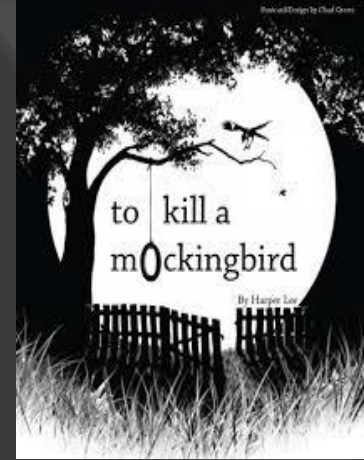
When, if ever, should it be used?

Where do you hear this word in your world?

How do you feel about its usage?

# “The Meaning of a Word”

## By Gloria Naylor

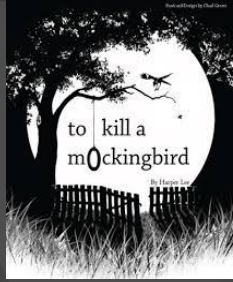


### Gloria Naylor (1950-Present)

Gloria Naylor is an African-American novelist whose most popular work, *The Women of Brewster Place*, was made into a 1984 film starring Oprah Winfrey.

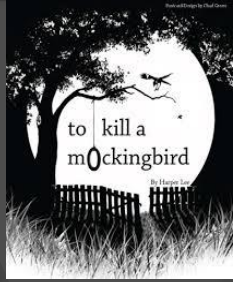


# “The Meaning of a Word” by Gloria Naylor



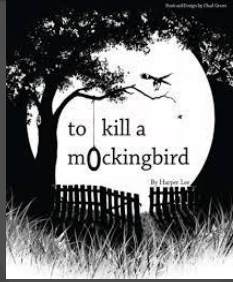
I remember the first time I heard the word nigger. In my third-grade class, our math tests were being passed down the rows, and as I handed the papers to a little boy in back of me, I remarked that once again he had received a much lower mark than I did. He snatched his test from me and spit out that word. Had he called me a nymphomaniac or a necrophiliac, I couldn't have been more puzzled. I didn't know what a nigger was, but I knew that whatever it meant, it was something he shouldn't have called me. This was verified when I raised my hand, and in a loud voice repeated what he had said and watched the teacher scold him for using a “bad” word. I was later to go home and ask the inevitable question that every black parent must face — “Mommy, what does nigger mean?”

# “The Meaning of a Word” by Gloria Naylor



And what exactly did it mean? Thinking back, I realize that this could not have been the first time the word was used in my presence. I was part of a large extended family that had migrated from the rural South after World War II and formed a close-knit network that gravitated around my maternal grandparents. Their ground-floor apartment in one of the buildings they owned in Harlem was a weekend mecca for my immediate family, along with countless aunts, uncles, and cousins who brought along assorted friends. It was a bustling and open house with assorted neighbors and tenants popping in and out to exchange bits of gossip, pick up an old quarrel, or referee the ongoing checkers game in which my grandmother cheated shamelessly. They were all there to let down their hair and put up their feet after a week of labor in the factories, laundries, and shipyards of New York.

# “The Meaning of a Word” by Gloria Naylor

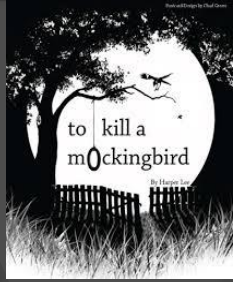


Amid the clamor, which could reach deafening proportions – two or three conversations going on simultaneously, punctuated by the sound of a baby’s crying somewhere in the back rooms or out on the street – there was still a rigid set of rules about what was said and how. Older children were sent out of the living room when it was time to get into the juicy details about “you-know-who” up on the third floor who had gone and gotten herself “p-r-e-g-n-a-n-t!” But my parents, knowing that I could spell well beyond my years, always demanded that I follow the others out to play. Beyond sexual misconduct and death, everything else was considered harmless for our young ears. And so among the anecdotes of the triumphs and disappointments in the various workings of their lives, the word nigger was used in my presence, but it was set within contexts and inflections that caused it to register in my mind as something else altogether.



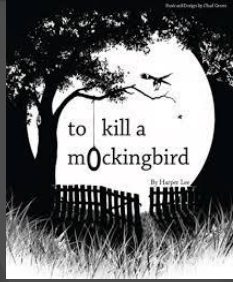
# **“The Meaning of a Word”**

## **by Gloria Naylor**



In the singular, the word was always applied to a man who had distinguished himself in some situation that brought their approval for his strength, intelligence, or drive: “Did Johnny really do that?” “I’m telling you, that nigger pulled in \$6,000 of overtime last year. Said he got enough for a down payment on a house.”

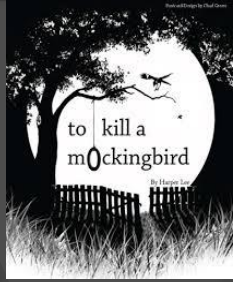
# “The Meaning of a Word” by Gloria Naylor



When used with a possessive adjective by a woman – “my nigger” – it became a term of endearment for her husband or boyfriend. But it could be more than just a term applied to a man. In their mouths it became the pure essence of manhood – a disembodied force that channeled their past history of struggle and present survival against the odds into a victorious statement of being: “Yeah, that old foreman found out quick enough – you don’t mess with a nigger.”

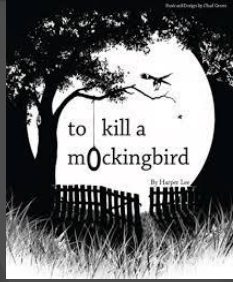


# “The Meaning of a Word” by Gloria Naylor



In the plural, it became a description of some group within the community that had overstepped the bounds of decency as my family defined it. Parents who neglected their children, a drunken couple who fought in public, people who simply refused to look for work, those with excessively dirty mouths or unkempt households were all “trifling niggers.” This particular circle could forgive hard times, unemployment, the occasional bout of depression – they had gone through all of that themselves – but the unforgivable sin was a lack of self-respect...

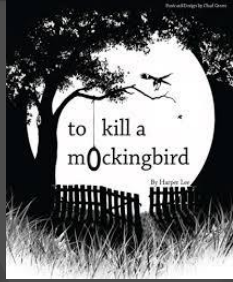
# “The Meaning of a Word” by Gloria Naylor



I don't agree with the argument that use of the word "nigger" at this social stratum of the black community was an internalization of racism. The dynamics were the exact opposite: the people in my grandmother's living room took a word that whites used to signify worthlessness or degradation and rendered it impotent. Gathering there together, they transformed nigger to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be. If the word was to disappear totally from the mouths of even the most liberal of white society, no one in that room was naïve enough to believe it would disappear from white minds. Meeting the word head-on, they proved it had absolutely nothing to do with the way they were determined to live their lives.

# **“The Meaning of a Word”**

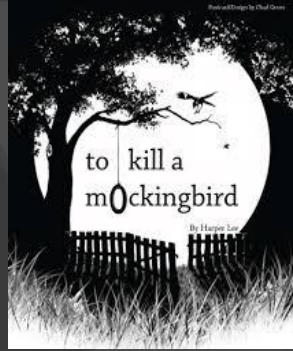
## **by Gloria Naylor**



So there must have been dozens of times that “nigger” was spoken in front of me before I reached the third grade. But I didn’t “hear” it until it was said by a small pair of lips that had already learned it could be a way to humiliate me. That was the word I went home and asked my mother about. And since she knew that I had to grow up in America, she took me in her lap and explained.

# “Incident”

## By Countee Cullen



**Countee Cullen (1903-1946)**

Writer Countee Cullen was an iconic figure of the Harlem Renaissance, known for his poetry, fiction and plays.



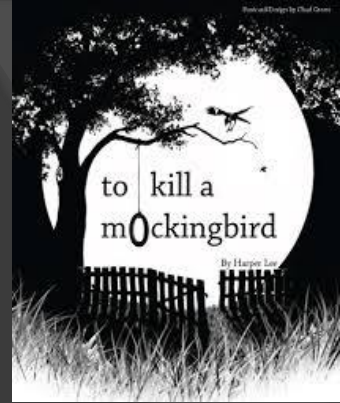
# “Incident”

## By Countee Cullen

Once riding in old Baltimore,  
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,  
I saw a Baltimorean  
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,  
And he was no whit bigger,  
And so I smiled, but he poked out  
His tongue, and called me, “Nigger.”

I saw the whole of Baltimore  
From May until December;  
Of all the things that happened there  
That’s all that I remember.



1. What might lead a child to insult another child in this way?
2. In what ways is a child's prejudice even more disturbing than an adult's?
3. Look at the last stanza.  
Look at the title.  
What's ironic here about the title?
4. How does Cullen's experience echo Gloria Naylor's story from the essay I just read? What's significant about the fact that two writers from two very different times faced the same ugliness?

## Incident

by Countee Cullen

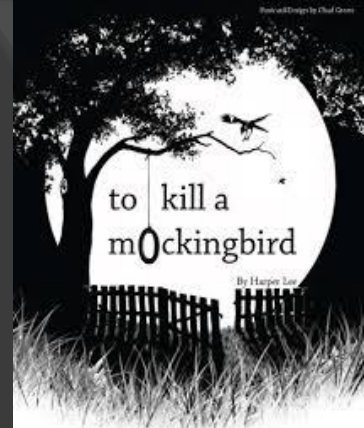
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# Reflection

## Post-Discussion Questions:



- 1.) After reading and discussing these two pieces on the word nigger, has your understanding of what it means and how it can be used changed? Why or why not?
- 2.) On a scale of 1-5 (least to most) how comfortable are you seeing, reading, using this word in your everyday life? Explain.
- 3.) Do you think modern celebrities and musicians understand the history of this word when they use it in their common speech and song lyrics? Should they be more careful in their use of it?
- 4.) Do you think this word should be banned from our vocabulary in any way? Why or why not?