



Extract from the introduction to
Native Son by Richard Wright
– written in 1940, twenty years before
To Kill a Mockingbird

Any Negro who has lived in the South knows that times without number he has heard of some Negro boy being picked up on the streets and carted off to jail and charged with “rape”. The thing happens so often that to my mind it had become a representative symbol of the Negro’s uncertain position in America.

Let me describe this stereotyped situation: A crime wave is sweeping a city and citizens are clamouring for police action. Squad cars cruise the Black Belt and grab the first Negro boy who seems to be unattached and homeless. He is held for perhaps a week without charge or bail, without the privilege of communicating with anyone, including his own relatives. After a few days this boy “confesses” anything that he is asked to confess, any crime that handily happens to appear unsolved and on the calendar. Why does he confess? After the boy has been grilled night and day, hanged up by his thumbs, dangled by his feet out of twenty storey windows, and beaten (in places that leave no scars – cops have found a way to do that), he signs the papers which are usually accompanied by a verbal promise to the boy that he will not go to the electric chair. Of course, he ends up by being executed or sentenced for life. If you think I’m telling tall tales, get chummy with some white cop who works in a Black Belt district and ask him for the low-down.

When a black boy is carted off to jail in such a fashion, it is almost impossible to do anything for him. Even well-disposed Negro lawyers find it difficult to defend him, for the boy will plead guilty one day and then not guilty the next, according to the degree of pressure and persuasion that is brought to bear upon this frightened personality from one side or the other.....

So far removed are these practises from what the average American citizen encounters in his daily life that it takes a huge act of his imagination to believe that it is true, yet the same American citizen, with his kindness, his American sportsmanship and goodwill, would probably act with the mob if a self respecting Negro family moved into his apartment building to escape the Black belt and its terrors and limitations...

Explain how this extract relates to *To Kill a Mockingbird* – what is important about what is said here in terms of Tom Robinson’s case?