

12 Angry Men: Bias on a Jury

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“12 Angry Men” is a story that illuminates some of the shortcomings of the justice system, despite the movie’s multiple inaccuracies. The story is central not to the actual case but to the fundamental right the accused have: burden of guilt must be proved by the state. It raises the question *What constitutes reasonable doubt?* There are many factors which can influence a person to feel doubt or express conviction over a trial and its outcome. One of the biggest factors highlighted in the movie was personal prejudice and how it can create the lens through which an individual sees the world.

The first instance of prejudice is exhibited by Juror 3, who had a volatile and violent relationship with his own son and so believes that any boy who has a poor relationship with his father must be inclined to violence against him. This juror was the first to express conviction that the boy on trial was guilty, and the last to change his vote and admit reasonable doubt. This prejudice of identifying a defendant as similar or the same as a person in the jurors’ own lives can cloud the facts of a case and result in an extreme bias. This was seen in the late 20th century when an African American was tried and convicted by a white court, because African Americans were believed to be more violent and savage than their white peers. Just because one individual had a few bad experiences with someone of a different race or age or background does not mean that every person who falls under that umbrella is the same. Juror 3 shows how powerful personal experience can be when making decisions, even one as weighty as whether a boy will live or die.

This theme is continued when Juror 10 goes on his tirade against ‘slum people’, claiming that ‘these people’ are inherent liars and drunks and killers. He believes that people born and raised in the slums are lesser than him and do not value human life as he does, because it is ‘part of their nature’. He fails to realize that regardless of background a person is still human and by our constitution entitled to a fair trial. It is not just to assume guilt based on race or background as previously mentioned. Juror 10 goes on to admit that a few are okay, most likely conceding that due to a different juror having been raised in the slums but elaborates by saying that those few are the exception. This proves Juror 10’s point moot, as who is to say that the boy is not one of those exceptions? He does not know the boy and so does not know which category he falls under. So even those with social prejudice can put aside their bias in case the person in question is ‘one of the few’. All other jurors turning their backs one by one is evident symbolism of how wrong it is to judge a person in this manner. Though the jurors do not all agree on the verdict, they do find common ground on the fact that they cannot sentence the boy to death simply on the way he looks or the place he was raised.

It is sad that in modern America prejudice is still a factor in jury bias. This movie, from 1957, is more knowledgeable and understanding than some U.S. citizens, even though this was a time of rampant racism. Perhaps if secondary schools showed this film to their students, we would see a decline in the hate created by racism and prejudice.