

## An overview of To Kill a Mockingbird

Critic: Darren Felty

Source: Exploring Novels, Gale, 1998

Criticism about: (Nelle) Harper Lee (1926-), also known as: Nell Harper Lee, Harper Lee, Nelle Harper Lee, Harper Nell Lee

Nationality: American

[Felty is a visiting instructor at the College of Charleston. In the following essay, he explores how the narrative structure of *To Kill a Mockingbird* supports a reading of the novel as a protest against prejudice and racism.]

Most critics characterize Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a novel of initiation and an indictment of racism. The novel's point of view, in particular, lends credence to these readings. As an older woman, Jean Louise Scout Finch, the narrator, reflects on three crucial summers in her childhood. During this time, she, her brother Jem, and their friend Dill encounter two figures who change their views of themselves and their community. The first of these people, Boo Radley, the Finches' reclusive neighbor, develops from a malevolent phantom who dominates the children's imaginations to a misunderstood man who saves Scout's and Jem's lives. Tom Robinson, the second and more tragic figure, loses his life because of racial prejudice, teaching the children about the more malicious characteristics of their society and fellow citizens. Guided by the ethical example of their father, Atticus, the children attempt to understand the lives of these two men. Gradually, through their exposure to Boo Radley's life and Tom Robinson's death, they learn about the grave ramifications of the social and racial prejudice that permeate their environment. Their honest and often confused reactions reflect their development as people and also help the reader to gauge the moral consequences of the novel's events.

Boo Radley is a compelling enigma and source of adventure for the children, but he also represents Scout's most personal lesson in judging others based upon surface appearance. In their attempts to see and communicate with Boo, the children enact in miniature their overall objective in the novel: to try to comprehend a world that defies easy, rational explanation. At first, Boo represents the mysterious, the unfathomable, which to the children is necessarily malevolent. They cannot understand why he would remain shut away, so he must be terrifying and evil. They ascribe nightmarish qualities to him that both scare them and stimulate their imaginations. In Jem's reasonable description of him, Boo is six-and-a-half feet tall, dines on raw squirrels and cats, bears a long jagged scar on his face, has yellow and rotten teeth and popped eyes, and drools. He is, in essence, a monster who has lost all traces of his former humanity. And by never appearing to them, Boo always plays the part the children assign him: the silent, lurking antagonist.

Yet even their imaginations cannot keep the children from recognizing incongruities between their conceptions of Boo and evidence about his real character. The items they discover in the tree knothole, for instance, tell them a different story about Boo than the ones they hear around town.

The gifts of the gum, Indian head pennies, spelling contest medal, soap-carving dolls, and broken watch and knife all reveal Boo's hesitant, awkward attempts to communicate with them, to tell them about himself. The reader recognizes Boo's commitment to the children in these items, as do Jem and Scout after a time. The children, we see, are as fascinating to him as he to them, only for opposite reasons. They cannot see him and must construct a fantasy in order to bring him into their world; he watches them constantly and offers them small pieces of himself so he can become a part of their lives. The fact that Nathan Radley, Boo's brother, ends this communication by filling the hole with cement underscores the hopeless imprisonment that Boo endures, engendering sympathy both in the reader and the children.

After Boo saves the children's lives, Scout can direct her sympathy toward a real person, not a spectral presence. Because of this last encounter with Boo, she learns firsthand about sacrifice and mercy, as well as the more general lesson that Atticus has been trying to teach her: You never understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it. Boo left the safe environment of his home to risk his life for hers, and she knows that his essential goodness and vulnerability need protecting. Hence, he is a like a mockingbird, and to assail him with public notice would be comparable to destroying a defenseless songbird who gives only pleasure to others. As she stands on his porch, she reflects on her former behavior and feels shame: Boo was our neighbor. He gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives. But neighbors give in return. We never put back into the tree what we took out of it; we had given him nothing, and it made me sad. Scout feels remorse over the children's isolation of Boo because of their fear and the prejudices they had accepted at face value. As a result of her experiences with Boo, she can never be comfortable with such behavior again.

While Scout's encounter with Boo Radley makes Atticus's lessons about tolerance tangible and personal, Tom Robinson's trial teaches her about intolerance on a social level. But Lee does not treat this trial solely as a means to develop Scout's character. Instead, the Tom Robinson story becomes the vehicle for Lee's overt social criticism in the novel. We see the town of Maycomb in its worst light, willing to execute an innocent man for a crime he did not commit rather than question their belief in black inferiority and their social taboos about interracial relationships. Lee wants to make explicit the consequences of racism and to guide the reader's judgment of this episode in the novel. She accomplishes these goals, in part, by employing Tom Robinson's trial to allude to the famous Scottsboro Boys trials of the 1930s. These trials featured nine black defendants accused of rape by two white women. Despite a lack of evidence and the questionable credibility of the witnesses, the men were sentenced to death by an all-white jury. Unlike Tom Robinson, however, all of these men escaped death after a long series of new trials, in some of which the defendants were still convicted in spite of the evidence. These trials, like Tom Robinson's, revealed the deep-seated racial divisions of the South and the tenacious efforts to maintain these divisions. With the Scottsboro Boys trials as historical echoes, Lee points to fundamental American ideals of equality and equal protection under the law (as expressed by and portrayed in Atticus) to criticize the people's failure to meet those ideals. Through Lee's treatment, the white citizens of Maycomb become hypocrites, blind to the contradictions in their own beliefs. Hence, these people are judged, however benignly, by their own standards, standards which the reader shares.

Many of the lessons Tom Robinson's story dramatizes escape Scout's comprehension, but the reader still recognizes them, as does the older Jean Louise. The town of Maycomb is a sustaining force in Scout's life, and she views it uncritically as a child and even shares its prejudices. During the trial, for instance, she answers Dill's distress over the prosecuting attorney's sneering treatment of Robinson with Well, Dill, after all he's just a Negro. She does not experience Dill's visceral repulsion at the trial's racist manipulations, but instead accepts the premise that blacks are treated as inferiors, even to the point of their utter humiliation. But this attitude stems mostly from her immaturity and inability to comprehend the ramifications of racism. Ultimately, Tom Robinson's trial and death initiate Scout's early questioning of racist precepts and behavior. She sees the effects of racism on her teachers and neighbors, and even feels the sting of it herself. Because of Atticus's involvement with Tom Robinson, for the first time the children must face the social rejection caused by racial bias. They become victims of exclusion and insult, which they would never have expected.

Lee poses a limitation on her social critique in the novel, however, by directing it almost completely through the Finch family rather than through Tom Robinson and his family. This focus makes sense given the point of view of the novel, but it still keeps the Robinson family at a distance from the reader. Calpurnia acts as a partial bridge to the black community, as does the children's sitting with the black townspeople at the trial, but we still must discern the tragedy of Robinson's unjust conviction and murder predominantly through the reactions of white, not black, characters, a fact many might consider a flaw in the novel. Like the children, the reader must rely on Atticus's responses and moral rectitude to steer through the moral complications of Robinson's story. His is a tolerant approach, warning the reader against over-harsh judgment. He teaches the children that their white neighbors, no matter their attitudes, are still their friends and that Maycomb is their home. Yet he also asserts that the family must maintain its resolve because The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience. We see the results of Atticus's words and behavior in the older Jean Louise, who becomes a compassionate yet not uncritical member of her community, both local and national. Finally, through the Finch family's resolve and sympathy, Lee lyrically communicates the need to cherish and protect those who, like mockingbirds, do no harm but are especially vulnerable to the violent injustices of our society.

Source: Darren Felty, An overview of To Kill a Mockingbird in an essay for Exploring Novels, Gale, 1998.

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