

## Discovering Theme and Structure in the Novel

Critic: Edgar J. Schuster

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

Nationality: American

[(essay date October 1963) In the following excerpt, Schuster comments on the theme and structure of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.]

Students enjoy reading *To Kill A Mockingbird*, but my experience has been that their appreciation is meager. Over and over again their interpretations stress the race prejudice issue to the exclusion of virtually everything else. . . .

In the pages that follow I shall set forth both a practical classroom approach to the novel and an interpretation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* based on that approach. The reader should bear in mind that I am dealing here primarily with the elements of theme and structure. . . .

It is not difficult to teach students the distinction between full and summary rendering. Furthermore, through their work in composition they are already familiar with the principle that the more space one gives an incident or idea, the more emphasis it receives. In fiction, it follows that those incidents that are fully rendered and those that are relatively long will be keys to the author's intention. . . .

If *Mockingbird* is primarily a race relations novel, why is it that the author gives such a full treatment to episodes that seem totally unrelated to this theme? . . .

Another process of examination has to do with the discovery and tracing of thematic motifs. . . .

My students and I have identified five thematic motifs in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. . . .

One of the motifs largely understated due to the novel's point of view concerns Jem's physiological and psychological growth. Although this growth motif may have more to do with character than with theme, the two elements are ultimately bound; moreover it seems clear that the growth of Jem (and of his sister as well) is intimately related to the theme and structure of the novel.

A second thematic motif is centered around what Miss Lee calls the caste system in Maycomb. This motif brought up in many places throughout the book is obviously related to other motifs, such as growth, superstition, and education. Furthermore, it is within the context of the caste system motif that Aunt Alexandria's missionary circle and all their talk about the Mrunas and J. Grimes Everett is to be understood.

Thirdly, the title of a novel, students should know, often points to one of its key themes, and this is obviously the case in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Mockingbirds are mentioned in several places throughout the book, often in key scenes. Best of all, the tracing of this motif will reveal clearly to the students that Tom Robinson is not the only mockingbird in the novel.

Finally, the thematic motifs that I would like to discuss in fuller detail are those dealing with education and superstition. The education motif comes up early in the novel and persists until very near the end. . . . Reflection will reveal . . . that the education motif far from being incidental is a center for the ironic contrast between what is taught and what is learned, a contrast that lies at the very heart of the novel.

In the course of their growing up the children do a great deal of learning, but little of that learning takes place in school. . . . Their most effective teacher, . . . is life itself, their experience. . . .

Superstition is another key motif running through the novel. Superstitions are, of course, the product of fear and ignorance. We expect them to disappear as fear and ignorance are replaced by security and knowledge, and this is clearly what happens, at least to the children, as the novel progresses.

The most memorable superstition in the book is the one concerning the hot places. Because of its uniqueness, it stands as a kind of symbol of superstition in general. . . .

The novel opens with the reference to Jem's bad arm and the argument between the children over who started it all. Scout blames it on the Ewells, but Jem claims that it began when Dill first came and gave them the idea of making Boo Radley come out. Although Atticus says that both children are right, the author tacitly confirms Jem's view by devoting her first fully rendered scene to the meeting with Dill and Jem's foray on the Radley Place.

It is also in this chapter that Dill wagers his copy of *The Gray Ghost* against two Tom Swifts that Jem won't touch Radley's house. Here, too, we learn of the summertime boundaries of the children: the Dubose house two doors to the north and the Radley Place three doors to the south. Mrs. Dubose is gray in age; Radley lives in a gray house. Both characters are ghosts in the sense that the children do not know them; fear and prejudice and superstition surround both homes. All these facts should be kept in mind as the novel moves toward fulfillment. . . .

A discovery of the structure of *To Kill a Mockingbird* must begin by focusing on the first chapter: the summertime boundaries, the gray ghosts, the tension centered in the question of what Boo Radley is really like. How do these phenomena fit into the over-all design?

If that design is to be truly over-all, it is obvious that the final chapter, too, must play a key role. It is in this chapter just after having escorted the real Boo Radley home that Scout makes the point about growing up and algebra; it is here that she says that one never knows a man unless he stands in his shoes and walks around in them; here that she realizes that nothin's real scary except in books; and here, finally, that Atticus reads

to her from *The Gray Ghost*. The novel concludes with Scout revealing some of the content of that book:

An' they chased him 'n' never could catch him 'cause they didn't know what he looked like, an' Atticus, when they finally saw him, why he hadn't done any of those things . . . Atticus, he was real nice. . . .

His hands were under my chin, pulling up the cover, tucking it around me.

Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them.

And so the gray ghosts Dubose and Radley in particular and superstitions and prejudices of all kinds are gone, banished by security and knowledge the security stemming from the love and example of Atticus, the knowledge coming from real contact with real people.

The achievement of Harper Lee is not that she has written another novel about race prejudice, but rather that she has placed race prejudice in a perspective which allows us to see it as an aspect of a larger thing; as something that arises from phantom contacts, from fear and lack of knowledge; and finally as something that disappears with the kind of knowledge or education that one gains through learning what people are really like when you finally see them.

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