

"Symbolism and Racism in To Kill a Mockingbird"

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Criticism about: To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee (1926-), also known as: (Nelle) Harper Lee, Nelle Harper Lee, Harper Nell Lee, Nell Harper Lee

Nationality: American

[(essay date 1996) In the following essay, originally published online in 1996 as "Symbolism in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird," Smykowski analyzes Lee's use of symbolism to explore issues of racism in the novel.]

"I'd rather you shoot at tin cans in the backyard, but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." This is what Atticus Finch tells his children after they are given air-rifles for Christmas. Uniquely, the title of the classic novel by Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was taken from this passage. At first glance, one may wonder why Harper Lee decided to name her book after what seems to be a rather insignificant excerpt. After careful study, however, one begins to see that this is just another example of symbolism in the novel. Harper Lee uses symbolism rather extensively throughout this story, and much of it refers to the problems of racism in the South during the early twentieth century. Harper Lee's effective use of racial symbolism can be seen by studying various examples from the book. This includes the actions of the children, the racist whites, and the actions of Atticus Finch.

Snowman: White over Black

The actions of the children in this novel certainly do have their share of symbolism. For instance, the building of a snowman by Jem and Scout one winter is very symbolic. There was not enough snow to make a snowman entirely out of snow, so Jem made a foundation out of dirt, and then covered it with what snow they had. One could interpret this in two different ways. First of all, the creation of the snowman by Jem can be seen as being symbolic of Jem trying to cover up the black man and showing that he is the same as the white man, that all human beings are virtually the same. Approval of these views is shown by Atticus when he tells Jem, "I didn't know how you were going to do it, but from now on I'll never worry about what'll become of you, son, you'll always have an idea." The fire that night that engulfed Miss Maudie Atkinson's house can be seen as the prejudice of Maycomb County, as the fire melted the snow from the snowman, and left nothing but a clump of mud. The fire depicts the prejudice people of the county saying that blacks and whites are, certainly, not the same. Another way of looking at the symbolism of the snowman would be to say that Jem's combination of mud and snow signifies miscegenation, marriage or sexual relations between persons of different races. The fire at Miss Maudie Atkinson's could, once again, be seen as the prejudice of Maycomb County showing that the mixed child is, in fact, no better than a pure black child, and that the two

are, actually, one and the same. Jem and Scout's encounters with Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose are also filled with symbolism. Mrs. Dubose and her insults, which included, "Your father's no better than the niggers and trash he works for!" not only show us her own views, but they also represent the views of the rest of Maycomb County. As they were going by the house later that day Jem snatched Scout's baton and "ran flailing wildly up the steps into Mrs. Dubose's front yard. ... He did not begin to calm down until he had cut the tops off every camellia bush Mrs. Dubose owned." Since camellia flowers are white, their destruction could exemplify Jem trying to destroy the ways of the prejudiced white people of Maycomb County. Later, Atticus forces Jem to nurse the plants back to health, and read to Mrs. Dubose. Now, Jem's nursing of the flowers signifies his courage, and how he nurses his courage, so he will be able to tolerate what others say about him and his family. The children visiting and reading to Mrs. Dubose is symbolic of their aims to change the racist ways of Maycomb. The actions of the children do, indeed, symbolize various themes in the racist South.

Symbolic Language

The behavior of the prejudiced white people of Maycomb County is greatly expressive, as well. For example, the red geraniums that Mayella Ewell kept in her yard are very illustrative. These flowers represent "Southern white womanhood." The fence that surrounds the Ewells' property is symbolic of the fear and racism of the Southern whites that tries to protect this womanhood. The purity of the womanhood is being protected from miscegenation, from the black man. As the black quarters lie just beyond the Ewells' house, the entire scene (the flowers, the fence, and the quarters) represents the fear of miscegenation as the threat from the black man is ever-present, and very near. In fact, a sort of miscegenation does occur, as Mayella Ewell makes advances toward Tom Robinson. Her advances startle Bob Ewell and bring about his greatest fear, as he is willing to end an innocent man's life because of it. There is also much racist symbolism used in the court case of Tom Robinson. Bob Ewell stands up and exclaims, "I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin' on my Mayella!" This obscene language, specifically the use of "ruttin'," makes Tom Robinson and black men seem like animals, giving black men a bestial, non-human quality. Mr. Gilmer, the prosecutor, adds to this racist symbolism as he cross examines the witness, Tom Robinson. Mr. Gilmer gives Tom Robinson no respect during his cross examination. He continually calls Tom "boy," which is racist when referring to a black man. He also adds to the non-human, bestial representation of Tom Robinson by referring to him as a "big buck." Racist symbolism is mixed with bitter irony during one of Aunt Alexandra's missionary circle meetings, as Mrs. Grace Merriweather talks about the Mrunas in Africa. She tells about how they live in "poverty and darkness," with no one but J. Grimes Everett to help them. The Mrunas in Africa actually represent how the blacks live poorly in their quarters in Maycomb. The bitter irony is that the ladies feel sorry for, and are so willing to help the Mrunas, that they overlook the problem at home, and even criticize their own black cooks and servants. After the Tom Robinson trial is over, Aunt Alexandra tells Atticus that he shouldn't have let the children watch the trial, and Atticus retorts, "they might as well learn to cope with it. ... It's as much Maycomb County as missionary teas." Atticus symbolically refers to the missionary teas as being just as racist as the trial. Racism does appear in the everyday lives of the narrow-minded people of Maycomb County.

Bluejays and Mad Dogs

Finally, the actions of Atticus Finch are also symbolic of themes in the prejudiced South. It may not seem so at first, but the shooting of the rabid dog by Atticus was, indeed, greatly illustrative. Here the rabid dog, Tim Johnson, represents prejudice, and how, like a rabid dog, it spreads its disease throughout the South. Atticus Finch is seen as the hero, the avenger, as he kills racism and prejudice, not allowing it to spread itself any further. Realistically, Atticus was unable to dig out the deeply rooted prejudice of Maycomb County. Scout says the trial "was like watching Atticus walk into the street, raise a rifle to his shoulder and pull the trigger, but watching all the time knowing that the gun was empty." Throughout the novel, Atticus Finch personifies justice, and acts rationally as the voice of reason. Thus, we are, finally, brought back to the title of the story, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as Atticus says, "I'd rather you shoot at tin cans in the backyard, but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember, it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." Bluejays are viewed as the bullies of the bird world. They are very loud, territorial, and aggressive. The bluejays represent the prejudiced "bullies" of Maycomb County, such as, Bob Ewell. Mockingbirds are innocent, and all they do is sing beautiful songs. They would not harm anyone. Killing a mockingbird was the only thing Atticus had ever told his children was a sin. He also told them, later in the novel, that "As you grow older, you'll see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don't you forget it--whenever a white man does that to a black man, no matter who he is, how rich he is, or how fine a family he comes from, that white man is trash." What Atticus tells the children is similar to what he said about killing mockingbirds. Therefore, the mockingbird symbolizes Tom Robinson, and underprivileged black people in general. They are innocent, and would never harm anyone. The mockingbird also symbolizes Boo Radley, since he is innocent, and would never harm anyone. He just stays inside because he does not want to face the corrupt and prejudiced world outside. Atticus does, indeed, represent a hero in this novel. He is rational and impartial, in a world that is senseless, emotional, and prejudiced.

Symbolism is, indeed, used extensively by Harper Lee in her timeless classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The symbolism reveals the prejudice and narrow-mindedness of the common citizens of Maycomb County, the fears they have, and all of the immoral things they do. It also reveals an attempt to rid Maycomb of these feelings, by a hero figure, a model to the community--Atticus Finch, as well as his two children, who will surely follow in his footsteps. It is, in fact, symbolism that makes this novel so rich and pertinent. Therefore, it is rather fitting that Harper Lee ends her book with a very representative and summarizing ending, as Atticus Finch reads the story, *The Gray Ghost*, to Scout by Jem's bed. Before she falls asleep Scout describes the story, which happened to be about someone who was falsely accused of doing something that he had not done, just like Tom Robinson and Boo Radley were. Scout has, certainly, learned a great deal. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was an influential novel at the time it was written. However, it remains just as important, influential, and, certainly, as symbolic today as when it was first written.

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