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### From Maycomb to the Nation: Narrative Perspective and Social Justice in To Kill a Mockingbird

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Senior Thesis

FROM MAYCOMB TO THE NATION: NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE AND SOCIAL  
JUSTICE IN *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

submitted by

MADISON BOYD, CLASS OF 2020

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2020

Director: Professor Katherine Bergren

Reader: Professor Dan Mrozowski

Reader: Professor Sheila Fisher

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## Acknowledgments

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Thank you to all of my professors who have been a source of comfort and inspiration in my academic growth. The classroom atmosphere is intense and demands immense reflection: I can honestly say that I earned my degree. To that point, my four years at Trinity have been the greatest academic adventure of my life. The professors' kindness, understanding, and determination are the reason why I will look back on my experience with a great sense of joy and accomplishment. I am a part of the unique senior class that will finish the journey of undergraduate school from the solitude of our homes. Despite the hardships people face during this time, the English department has gone above and beyond to support me and my fellow seniors enjoy every last moment we can. For that, I want to thank the English department for its constant innovation and intense spirit.

I have many people to thank for the meaningful lessons and fulfilling experience of writing a thesis. However, there is one person who has been my guide throughout college. She may not know it, but Professor Katherine Bergren, or Kate, is the reason why I am an English Major. Even more, Kate inspired me to write a thesis the day she helped me feel brave enough to

declare my English Major. Throwback to the spring of 2018, as I sat in her office, Kate explain to me the intention of the critical reflection requirement of this major. In short, this requirement will help me understand why I study English. But, Kate's explanation was far more exciting. She gave me example of an idea she had for a class like this. The course would explore and evaluate the student's journey in high school literature classrooms. Now if my memory serves me correctly, the name of the course would be: "Why did I read these books in high school?" From this point on I was hooked. Literature influences me every single day and I believe it would be a disservice not to give literature the attention it deserves. This story leads to why I am writing today. I wanted to revisit the book that I read in high school that made me learn to enjoy literature, *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

## Introduction

“It’s different this time,” Atticus explains to his daughter Scout. “This time we aren’t fighting the Yankees, we’re fighting our friends.”<sup>1</sup>In *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960), Atticus Finch is a respected lawyer who fights an uphill battle for racial equality in the 1930s South. Atticus defends a black innocent man, victim of a racially-motivated accusation and legal system. During this trial, Atticus and his two children face continuous challenges in his attempt to change the ways of Maycomb, Alabama. Through the eyes of the young narrator, Scout Finch, we see the trials and tribulations of racial inequality in her community. However, the lesson Scout receives is incomplete. Atticus continues his words to Scout above with a contingency: “But remember this, no matter how bitter things get, they’re still our friends and this is still out home.” In other words, when one fights against the grain, remember not to burn any bridges. Despite the dangerous and tragic scenes that Scout observes, she takes Atticus’s lesson as gospel. To readers today, the subject matter of racial injustice seems to be far more important than maintaining friendships. But *Mockingbird*, which remains widely taught in the United States sixty years after its publication, tells a story of a battle lost to the social structure of the Jim Crow South while focusing attention on its child narrator, who concludes this novel with disappointing indifference to the battle the Finch family is fighting.

As early as 1965, *Mockingbird* was taught in high school and middle school classrooms all over the country. While the majority of my family read *Mockingbird* in ninth grade, many of

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<sup>1</sup> Harper Lee, *To Kill A Mockingbird* (New York: Arrow Books, 1989), 84—5, subsequent references to the novel will appear parenthetically.

my peers and younger cousins are now reading *Mockingbird* as early as seventh grade. The novel continues to be taught in classrooms around the country, showing students the unfortunate history of racial inequalities in the U.S. In fact, this novel is the spark for many individuals who go on to pursue a career fighting for those who are victim to systematic injustice. I have grown up hearing from lawyers, teachers, and public officials that Atticus Finch is a model for what it means to fight for justice. As a result, this novel is a household name in both public and private American schools. However, this thesis intends to show that interpreting *Mockingbird* as an introduction to the fight against social injustice is at best ambivalent and at worst harmful for future activists.

I have always been particularly concerned with how each step of my education shapes the person I am today. I entered college to prepare for a career in fighting for racial equity in the U.S. How I will do this is still a mystery to me, but this thesis is my attempt at reckoning with what social justice looks like to me. When I read *Mockingbird* in tenth grade I was horrified by the racial torment that occurred in the Jim Crow South. I felt an immediate urge to fight back and defend against any wrong doing to others based on the color of their skin. This was the first moment in which an English classroom created the space for me to explore how literature can shape the way I perceive the world. So, when it came time for me to choose a thesis topic, I thought I would return back to the book that started it all. However, the book I remembered was not at all the book I read for this project. I read Lee's second novel, *Go Set A Watchman*, and it is a story that shatters the reputation of Atticus Finch and diminishes the moral character of Scout Finch. After, when I returned to *Mockingbird*, the themes of racism and lack of justice made me realize I could not be the only one who was blind to the truth of this novel.

My research questions are: how might the evolution of *Mockingbird*'s reception influence students reading of the novel today, if they knew about it? Then, how is the novel taught today and where does it fall short in the historical context of white supremacy? In order to research these questions, I engage in a study of the novel's reception, its role in school curricula, and a reading of the novel itself. The first chapter will explore the novel's reception, focusing especially on its reception in the 1960's, and a current method of teaching *Mockingbird*. My argument in this chapter is that a student cannot fully understand the meaning of *Mockingbird* without learning about its original reception and all relevant historical context; including the 1930s, 1950s, and 1960s. The second chapter will analyze the effect a child narrator's perspective has on the interpretation of *Mockingbird*. My argument in this chapter is that a child narrator diminishes the severity of race relations in the Jim Crow South for two reasons. First, Scout distracts the reader from important scenes because a child would not interpret the deeper meaning. Second, Scout's inability to reflect leads to a delay in judgement on the injustice in the Jim Crow South.

In recent years, scholars have paid much attention to Lee's representation of white supremacy, noting the novel's exclusive focus on the perspective of white characters. For instance, Naa Baako Ako-Adjei, Helle Porsdam, and Michael Macaluso argue that white characters perspective on the perilous crimes of injustice during the Jim Crow South continues racial inequality through the exclusion of the black perspective. Holly Blackford and Katherine Henninger note that *Mockingbird* falls into the category of literature on black people history in the U.S. written by a white author. So, when teaching *Mockingbird*, students need to understand how to discuss a white author's place in the complex history of racial inequality. Henninger joins James B. Kelley in the conversation regarding *Mockingbird* and *Watchman*, which notes



the two texts as inseparable if a reader plans to understand the full picture of Maycomb Lee writes. This thesis builds on the analysis of *Mockingbird*'s racial overtones and political allusions in youth education by discussing how the changing perception of the novel explains why the child narrator is so disconcerting for a grim and momentous subject matter.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis examines perception in two different realms. First, it analyzes the popular perception of *Mockingbird* change from its first release until the introduction of Lee's second novel *Go Set A Watchman*. Then, it analyzes and critiques the perception of its child narrator, Scout Finch, as she postpones judgement on the racial inequality in the South. I analyze these two realms of perception in order to argue that the attention *Mockingbird* as an ideal vehicle for students' initial lessons about social justice considers neither the novel's original reception nor the inner workings of its narrator's inability to perceive and analyze her world.

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<sup>2</sup> This thesis joins a vast conversation that identifies *Mockingbird* as a racist novel. The initial reception of the novel views the text in more positive light, but many critics recently examine the many layers of racism. For more literature on *Mockingbird* and Racism, see: Helle Porsdam, "Literary Representation and Social Justice in an Age of Civil Rights: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*," in *Law and Literature*, ed. Kieran Dolin (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018): 255-72; Michael Macaluso, "Teaching To Kill a Mockingbird Today: Coming to Terms With Race, Racism, and America's Novel," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 6, issue 3 (2017): 279-87; Naa Baako Ako-Adjei, "Why It's Time Schools Stopped Teaching To Kill a Mockingbird," *Transition*, no. 122 (2017): 182-200, doi:10.2979/transition.122.1.24; Jennifer Murray, "More Than One Way to (Mis)Read a 'Mockingbird,'" *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2010): 75-91; Holly Blackford, "Uncle Tom Melodrama with a Modern Point of View: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*," in *Telling Children's Stories: Narrative Theory and Children's Literature*, ed. Mike Cadden (Lincoln: University Nebraska Press, 2010) 165-86. For the literary response to Lee's second novel, *Watchman*, see: Katherine Henninger, "My Childhood Is Ruined!: Harper Lee and Racial Innocence," *American Literature*, 88:3 (Sept, 2016): 597-626, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-3650259>; James B. Kelley, "Reading To Kill A Mockingbird and Go Set A Watchman as Palimpsest," *Explicator*, 74:4 (2016): 236-39, DOI: [10.1080/00144940.2016.1238809](https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2016.1238809). For analysis on Atticus Finch and the white man hero, see: "Being Atticus Finch: The Professional Role of Empathy in 'To Kill a Mockingbird,'" *Harvard Law Review* 117, no. 5 (2004): 1682-702.; Cramer R. Cauthen and Donald G. Alpin, "The Gift Refused: The Southern Lawyer in 'To Kill a Mockingbird, The Client', and 'Cape Fear,'" *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 19, no. 2, (1996): 257-275. For a tangential area of *Mockingbird* analysis gender studies, see: Thomas L. Dumm, "Motherless Children Have a Hard Time: Man as Mother in *To Kill a Mockingbird*," in *Reimagining To Kill a Mockingbird: Family, Community, and the Possibility of Equal Justice under Law*, ed. Sarat Austin and Umphrey Martha Merrill (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 65-80; Imani Perry, "If That Mockingbird Don't Sing: Scaffolding, Signifying, and Queering a Classic," in *Reimagining To Kill a Mockingbird: Family, Community, and the Possibility of Equal Justice under Law*, ed. Sarat Austin and Umphrey Martha Merrill (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), 81-103.

## Chapter 1

### From Praise to Controversy: The Reception of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, 1960 - 2020

*To Kill A Mockingbird* strikes emotional chords in its descriptions of childhood adventures, family bonds, neighborhood drama, and schoolhouse challenges. But while I read this story in high school and put all of my energy into the Tom Robinson trial, readers in the 1960s saw the story differently. The reviews of *Mockingbird* right after its release in July, 1960 praise the novel for its fresh take on small southern towns. The aim of this chapter is to show that the reception of *Mockingbird* today, of socially aware and racially inclusive perspective, is fundamentally different than its original reception, which denies any social themes in novel all together. Importantly, the two receptions highlight one components of the novel's construction that determines its changing perception, the perspective of the narrator. But first, a full history of the novel's reception will help the reader today understand a wholistic meaning of *Mockingbird*. At the time America first reads *Mockingbird*, it is 1960 and the country's climate is tense as the nation builds to a political victory for racial minorities in the Civil Rights Act of 1964. One might reasonably imagine that the novel's scenes about race and justice would be seen as commenting on American society at that time. However, reviewers and the author herself were certain that this novel made no commentary on racism or the state of the nation.

In the first section of this chapter, I summarize and interpret the original reception through media reviews of *Mockingbird* upon its release. In the second section, I map the changing perception of the novel from 1965 until 2015, which marks the release of Lee's second novel *Go Set A Watchman*. It is important to understand the changing reception of the

*Mockingbird* because the context of the original reception changes the way readers understand the novel. Furthermore, the novel's initial reception has implications that impact the novel's role in middle school high school curricula. So, the final section examines one of the most progressive curriculums that teachers use today to guide students through *Mockingbird*. In this section, I trace the changing perception of the novel with the intention to demonstrate the purpose of *Mockingbird* and its limited ability to fulfill this purpose.

### The Original *Mockingbird*

The contemporary reception of *Mockingbird* is certain that the novel is only about individuals and their communities. Indeed, the following reviews show that the first readers were adamant that this novel is in no way about politics, social structures, or changing American culture. Instead, *Mockingbird* provides an insight into the world of small-town life in the South.

A frequently cited review from *Time Magazine* is representative in this regard: it praises *Mockingbird* as the lovely story of a small southern town filled with normal people and the simple lives those people live. While the review highlights that Lee teaches the reader many “useful truths” about the Southern life, it insists that *Mockingbird* “is in no way a sociological novel.”<sup>3</sup> There is active concern here for *Mockingbird* to be a novel of individuals and not the “sociological.” This concern reflects a desire to have the novel tell a story void of the national conversation about the South during the 1960s. The *Time Magazine* review is not alone in its perspective. In fact, contemporary reviews center on an alternative view of the South that many people felt was missing from other novels. This view gives the South the benefit of the doubt,

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<sup>3</sup> Dan Kedmey, “Harper Lee and 'To Kill a Mockingbird': Read TIME's Original Review,” *Time*, *Time*, February 3, 2015, <https://time.com/3693680/to-kill-a-mockingbird-review/>.

suggesting that people in small towns like Maycomb can still be good people despite harsh segregation. Another review solidifies this assumption that the Southern life is not all that bad. In July 1960, the San Francisco *Chronicle* published a review stating that “‘Mockingbird’ is a ‘moving plea for tolerance,’ despite some melodramatic moments.”<sup>4</sup> The author here concludes Lee’s novel is a ‘plea for tolerance’ because she writes a novel to unite people over a reimagined picture of southern life. To be clear, the “plea for tolerance” here is a plea for readers to tolerate people in the South. Further evidence of this tolerance is clear when the review summarizes that Lee “effectively employed the piercing accuracy of a child’s unalloyed vision of the adult world, to display the workings of a tragedy-laden region that little understands itself – or rarely seeks to.”<sup>5</sup> The emphasis here is on the region, suggesting that it is the South that “little understands itself” but still deserves tolerance. In other words, the way Lee writes a neutralizing perspective about the negative view of the South during the 1950s and 1960s.

Indeed, Lee intended for the novel to capture what these reviews perceive: the South is not a bad place. Lee herself said “I would like to be the chronicler of something that I think is going down the drain very swiftly. And that is small town middle-class southern life...there is something universal in it. There’s something decent to be said for it and there’s something to lament when it goes, in its passing.”<sup>6</sup> Lee accomplishes her goal by writing a story that engages many readers through friendly, relatable townspeople. The story illustrates the peaceful town of Maycomb through innocent characters like Scout’s neighbor Miss Maudie Atkinson and her coveted azaleas. Or a reader can dwell on the playful relationship between Scout, Jem, and Boo

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<sup>4</sup> Joshua Barajas, “How Newspapers Reviewed ‘To Kill A Mockingbird’ in 1960,” PBS, *Public Broadcasting Service*, July 13, 2015, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/newspaper-reviews-thought-kill-mockingbird-became-masterpiece>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Radley as they make ordinary items into mysterious currency by trading them via a nook in an old tree.

What these reviews willfully miss is that the simple life and the kindness of the characters in Maycomb does not cancel out the fact that the town is starkly segregated by race and class. Lee fills her novel with complicated race relations and social hierarchies that she could have eliminated from her picturesque vision of Scout Finch's life in the small town of Maycomb. Lee does not efface these social truths, but rather observes the social truths from the perspective of a child throughout the entire novel. I say this not to prove that the South is a bad place and that the world should look on Southern life as inherently bad. Rather, Lee presents a story which she encourages tolerance of all people, white and black, with the aim that not all people are bad. Furthermore, the reviews show that many readers saw the novel taking attention away from the sociology of American culture at the time. In contrast, the main reading of this novel today is that the novel comments on highly charged political themes of the mid 1900s. As a result, this chapter aims to reveal that *Mockingbird*'s contrasting reception leads to an inconclusive judgement on the main social themes in the novel such as racial inequality.

One answer to the problem above is that Harper Lee wants to explore the individual and the general day-to-day realities of life. However, the only way to show a person's reality, or perspective on life, is to incorporate the environment around him or her. Therefore, the realities of life in the American South during the 1930s must include major sociological truths. Despite efforts to avoid social commentary, Lee incorporates contemporary, political allusions to the 1930s American South, such as the resurgence of the KKK and the legal issues in a southern courtroom in reference to the Scottsboro Affair. These realities of Southern life are evidence of the broader sociological truths about American culture. So, for the reviews to say the novel is

highly unpolitical and removed from sociological themes suggests that the readers did not want this novel to critique the South.

In an attempt to be neutral, Lee writes a novel that even the first reviews identify as recounting Southern life in an unconventional way. One review by Margaret Marble of the *Los Angeles Times* from August of 1960 states that Lee's "tale has fresh rapport."<sup>7</sup> Specifically, Marble reflects that *Mockingbird* has elements that are similar to the "'southern' novel...but they seem to wear a look of innocence, an aura of freshness, as though we were encountering them for the very first time."<sup>8</sup> The face of innocence that *Mockingbird* wears is its child narrator, Scout Finch. From the very first reviews of *Mockingbird*, it is clear that the novel's message is heavily dependent on such a young perspective. In fact, this review highlights just how vital Scout is to the reader's experience with *Mockingbird*. Marble writes, "The narrator of this unpretentious but moving book is Scout Finch, who is as bright a little girl as anyone would want to have around."<sup>9</sup> First, the review tells us that Scout is both 'little' and 'bright.' Describing Scout as 'bright' could mean that she is a smart girl for her age. There is more to this description though. 'Bright' also signals that Scout is happy, clear, shiny, positive. In other words, the first readers picked up this book and latched on to its warm and welcoming guide, Scout. Additionally, this review continues the theme that *Mockingbird* is not a sociological novel with the comment that it is "unpretentious but moving." The word "unpretentious" points to something modest and simple. Similarly, it is "moving" because it focuses on the experience of the individual or personal. In other words, "unpretentious but moving" is a way of saying that this novel is relatable to many people; it is not alienating, but rather inclusive. This reception is surprising because of the

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Marble, "Lee Tale has Fresh Rapport." *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug 07, 1960.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

important events that occur in *Mockingbird* are disproportionately harmful to black people: a lynch mob, for example, or the wrongful conviction of an innocent black man. Even if the point of view of a child narrator makes the events seem oddly mundane and regular, the events' presence in the novel alone points to some commentary on the state of the Jim Crow South.

Reviews that entirely overlook this commentary begin to feel effortful. There has to be active restraint when reading *Mockingbird* in order to suppress the themes of social class and race into non-existence. But in fact, the original reception of *Mockingbird* uses language that ignores the key sociological themes in its main plot elements. The reviews acknowledge the key scenes such as the Tom Robinson trial, but go on to explain the novel is not critiquing such racial injustice. The concluding remarks by Marble strengthen this point: "There is a timelessness about them, and Miss Lee's novel leaves one with the feeling that they will prevail in the difficult and painful adjustments the South must inevitably make. At least one has hope, and is grateful for it." The object of the sentence here is "them," referring to the townspeople of Maycomb, including the three main characters of the novel: Scout, Jem, and Atticus. But what is timeless about these people? Timelessness suggests *Mockingbird* is a story which transcends context. It is worth specifying what specifically this novel transcends: the trial of an innocent black man proven guilty to protect the racial order.<sup>10</sup> The *Mockingbird* plot builds up to a trial in which Scout's father, Atticus Finch, defends a wrongly accused black man, Tom Robinson, of raping a white woman. The trial scene is similar to two infamous trials: the Scottsboro Boys Affair and the Emmett Till murder. In short, "timelessness" implies that the book's allusion to

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<sup>10</sup> The trial scene in *Mockingbird* is when Scout's father, Atticus Finch, defends an innocent black man who is wrongly accused of raping a young white woman. This young woman is also the eldest of the town's disgraceful and impoverished family, the Ewells. Just as seen in the Emmett Till Case, Tom Robinson is wrongly accused by a white woman. Another layer is added in *Mockingbird* as Tom Robinson is not lynched but instead convicted in the court of law by an all-white jury.

historically significant events to the civil rights movement is not social commentary, and is not an important part of the book. So, at a time in the U.S. when race relations are violent and tense, *Mockingbird* clears the air with a timeless tale of a simple town filled with regular folks. This interpretation suggests that the original readers made the effort to downplay the plot points that point to social and political themes.

In concluding her review, Marble writes that “Miss Lee’s novel leaves one with the feeling that they will prevail in the difficult and painful adjustments the South must inevitable make.” First, this sentence contradicts the idea of timelessness because it implicitly acknowledges the South has to change, or at least “adjust.” Moreover, the sentiment is hopeful for the future, but everything is quite vague. The article says “they will prevail,” referring to the main characters and their fellow townsfolk, but how will they prevail? If the people who will prevail through the changes of race relations in the South are the simple folks Lee writes of, then *Mockingbird* becomes a call for patience as the South inevitably changes, just at the pace of its townspeople. Lastly, it is clear that this review finds *Mockingbird* to be a positive picture for the future because of the final line: “At least one has hope, and is grateful.” Granted, before this there is a short acknowledgement of the Finch family’s efforts for racial justice: “[they] swim against a stream of injustice and prejudice, and although they may make little measurable progress, they are never engulfed by it.” But even this acknowledgement is limited in scope. The prejudiced system in the South is important only insofar as it reveals a good effort by the Finch family.

Central to the original reviews of *Mockingbird* is a focus on the simple nature of a child’s perspective in a story that encounters the complexities of life. Marble writes that Scout’s young perspective and clever demeanor is what makes the reader’s tour through Maycomb



“unpretentious”—simple and straightforward. Similarly, a review published in July of 1960 in the New York *Times*, written by Frank H. Lyell, acknowledges the peculiarity of Lee’s characters and child narrator.<sup>11</sup> Lyell initially describes *Mockingbird* as being written with “gentle affection, rich humor and deep understanding of small-town family life in Alabama.” However, the praise for Lee’s “refreshingly varied characters” does not come without some fascination for the peculiar choice of a child narrator. Lyell suggests that “the praise Miss Lee deserves must be qualified somewhat by noting that oftentimes Scout’s expository style has a processed, homogenized, impersonal flatness quite out of keeping with the narrator’s gay, impulsive approach to life in youth.” Lyell expresses this interest in the narrator with the conclusion that Scout, while a happy and inviting narrator, is also “impersonal” and “homogenized” in a way that contradicts her youthful character. Moreover, Lyell suggests a mismatch between Scout’s personality and her ability to narrate. My point here is less to dwell on Lyell’s critique than to point out that he identifies the child narrator as a key characteristic of the novel.

While today, one could argue that Scout is a problematic narrator because social and racial tensions cannot be fully understood by children, this novel was received as a refreshing point of view of the South. Furthermore, this version of the novel’s message was well received in 1960. The initial reviews identify *Mockingbird* as sympathetic to the social structure of everyday life in the South and hopeful for the future because of the young narrator’s happy conclusion. Lyell quotes Lee to show that she is writing a novel that cares about individual experience. Lee does this through a unifying term “folks” in order to reduce the severity of individual differences and strengthen similarities to create the collective. Scout concludes in *Mockingbird* “that no

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<sup>11</sup> Frank H. Lyell, “One-Taxi Town: To Kill A Mockingbird, by Harper Lee,” *New York Times (1923-Current File)* (New York, NY), Jul 10, 1960.

matter how you try to divide up the human race, there's really 'just one kind of folks. Folks.'” Scout's individual experience is shown through a heightened appreciation for folks. The main takeaway of this novel upon its release is that all people are just people, so we should be tolerant. The newspapers follow the lead of the novel in their reviews, showing that *Mockingbird* puts forth a tolerant, relatable image of the South.

Together, the reviews by Marble and Lyell correlate *Mockingbird*'s interest in simple folks and Scout's role as the narrator. Each review emphasizes two things, the narrator's youth and the simplicity of southern, common folk. Due to the curious and openminded child narrator, the reader can capture the fresh image Lee paints of this small town. In like manner, Lyell finds *Mockingbird*'s picturesque, southern small-town to be an odd yet happy perspective. Lyell concedes that Maycomb is not perfect, but this novel focuses elsewhere: “Maycomb has its share of eccentrics and evil-doers, but Miss Lee has not tried to satisfy the current lust for morbid, grotesque tales of Southern depravity.” The review goes on to say that Lee focuses on the “decent and happy” Finch family. Here, Lee moves away from the Southern Gothic and into a friendlier image of the South. Leaving behind what the South has represented in American literary culture and American politics, Lee focuses heavily on the individual person's experience. The first critics clearly perceive this as each review points to a positive perception of the South and its future from the enjoyable narrator, Scout, who serves as the reader's guide.

#### The Progression of Interpreting *Mockingbird* from 1965 to the 2000s

In 1965 reviewers were still at odds about the racial themes in *Mockingbird*. By 2015 many readers were adamant that *Mockingbird* has themes of racism and inequality. In the first part of this section I analyze a review that admits the novel's racism, but criticizes the novel for

its sexual subject matter in its depiction of a rape trial. Over forty years later, a literary critic argues that *Mockingbird* falls short in the search for racial justice because the child narrator distracts the focus away from the novel's commentary on inequality. Lastly, the publishing of Lee's second novel, *Go Set A Watchman*, introduces a new perspective on *Mockingbird* from an adult Scout's perspective, thus no longer stands alone.

The conversations surrounding *Mockingbird* do eventually admit the undeniable presence of social commentary through the novel's setting in the social and racial structure of American society. Indeed, the initial reviews are not openly in favor of racial equality. However, once *Mockingbird* first appears in school classroom, teachers and other critics begin to analyze the novel's sociological aspects. Surprisingly, some critiqued the novel in order to combat the ideas of racial integration. In an article published in 1965 by the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, a minister by the name of Reverend Elmer H. Murdock showed great concern for the minds of students required to read *Mockingbird*. Specifically, one direct quote reveals the on-going complications of this novel: "The South and civil rights are burning issues in our day. A youngster needs a proper insight into the struggle, not an explanation full of profanity and sex."<sup>12</sup> This quote seems to be a reasonable concern for the innocence of young student's minds; however, this language is the socially 'safe' way for the Reverend to critique *Mockingbird*. To explain, the subject matter referenced in this quote is the sexual pursuit of a black man, Tom Robinson, by a white woman, Mayella Ewell, which is put on trial as an alleged rape. Throughout the trial Atticus proves to many in the court room that Tom is a victim of circumstance because the only guilt he has is that he is black. While this scene clearly depicts the complications of segregation in the Jim Crow

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<sup>12</sup> "'Mockingbird' Under Fire: School Officials Study Rights Novel's Sex Line," *New Journal and Guide* (1916-2003) (Norfolk) Dec 18, 1965.

South, this review suppresses a portion of the commentary on integration. In other words, this comment is not made out of concern for the sexual innocence of children. Rather, this review implicitly fights against integration through an explicit refusal to accept female sexuality and desire, especially when it is interracial.

Not all of the critiques of *Mockingbird* are this racist. An early piece of literary criticism written in 1964, by high school English teacher, Edwin Bruell, points out two important characteristics of *Mockingbird* that are problematic to readers today. The first observation is that *Mockingbird* sets up scenes of controversial events through the eyes of a child narrator. Lee “paints Scout in warm tones, and we like the child.”<sup>13</sup> As a result, this novel deals with a commentary on the racial dynamics of the 30’s, 50’s, and 60’s with many distractions by the child narrator.<sup>14</sup> The observations that a child’s point of view brings into the story line deviate from any strong concern with racial inequality. The distractions include subplots that cut away from time spent to reflect on the main plot, such as the Finch children’s relationship with Boo Radley, the summer time adventures with Scout’s friend Dill, or Scout’s minor arguments with her school teacher Miss Fisher. The first reviews would have found these details to be proof that the novel is not concerned with commenting on racial injustices, but the strong “caste system” in Maycomb leads critics like Bruell to point out the obvious concern with racial injustice. Here, Bruell points out a second key feature of *Mockingbird* which is Maycomb’s social hierarchy. Bruell describes what he labels the “caste system” as the following, “Others were destined to be morbid. Others were predestined to be liars...In short, everyone in town had his or her place, and everybody had damned well better keep it.”<sup>15</sup> Others are people who are not a part of the clan.

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<sup>13</sup> Edwin Bruell. "Keen Scalpel on Racial Ills." *The English Journal* 53, no. 9 (1964): 658-61. Accessed April 14, 2020. doi:10.2307/811370, 159-161.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

So, the Finch family are insiders, while the Ewell family are outsiders. Black people, like Tom Robinson, are outsiders. When two outsiders go on trial against one another, the caste system has a protocol for hierarchy that Maycomb follows. Thus, Bruell points out that an innocent man is found guilty because the white jury cannot bring themselves to change the system of white superiority. In this early essay, the problems in *Mockingbird* begin to be noticed.

The language used to describe *Mockingbird* among literary critics and popular culture reporters generally focuses on the novel's dual educational role on history and individual perspective. The positive reactions can be summed up into by short description of the novel's narrator, Scout: a warm, inviting, and curious narrator that brings a smile to the reader. However, over the last fifty years, teachers and literary critics have explicitly labelled *Mockingbird* as a novel littered with racism. One critic, Angela Shaw-Thornburg, comments that as an African American she finds this novel to be "alienating."<sup>16</sup> For example, the Tom Robinson trial is told from the point of view of the white community. Denying the voice of the black community enacts racial inequality as well as depicting it. In addition, *Mockingbird* is problematic because the novel only develops and valorizes the white characters. In sum, this novel teaches students about a history of the South and certainly about one individual's perspective. However, *Mockingbird* is only one perspective, and a privileged perspective too. In this sense, the novel misses the mark for an inclusive and wholistic understanding of the fight to end racial injustice.

I now turn to Lee's second novel *Go Set A Watchman*, published in 2015, in order to show the most recent shift in the perception of *Mockingbird*. Arguably the most important shift,

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<sup>16</sup> Angela Shaw-Thornburg, "On Reading To Kill a Mockingbird: Fifty Years Later," in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird: New Essays, ed. Michael J. Meyer (Lanham, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 114–115.

*Watchman* rattled the conception of *Mockingbird*'s innocence when it was published. Similar to Lee's comment about *Mockingbird*, her remarks prove to be concerning. In 1963, Lee commented she is writing a second novel that "does not have a racial angle."<sup>17</sup> Considering that *Watchman* reveals Atticus to be a leader in Maycomb's chapter of the KKK, this comment is both confusing and important. On the other hand, *Watchman* is an important piece to the story Lee outlines for the reader because it satisfies the natural progression of a person's perspective. The reader gets to see how Jean Louise Finch, known as Scout in *Mockingbird*, understands her small southern town as an adult and as resident of the North. To summarize the plot briefly, Jean Louise discovers that her beloved father, Atticus Finch, is a part of the KKK. Jean Louise confronts her father about the terrible actions and beliefs of the organization. Atticus responds in a blunt, disappointing way:

Jean Louise, you've been reading nothing but New York papers. I've no doubt all you see is wild threats and bombings and such. The Maycomb council's not like the North Alabama and Tennessee kinds. Our council's composed of and led by our own people. I bet you saw nearly every man in the county yesterday, and you knew nearly every man there.<sup>18</sup>

Atticus here blames Jean Louise for having a bad opinion of the KKK. First, Jean Louise is wrong for assuming Atticus is bad because she is too influenced by "New York papers." This shows a side of Atticus that is not seen in *Mockingbird*. Here, Atticus judges an entire people based on the geographic location and implies that he holds a negative opinion of those people. In other words, Atticus exhibits the type of thinking that is not welcoming of other people or

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<sup>17</sup> "Novelist Harper Lee Sees Dixie Racial Progress 'Not Fast enough'." *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967) (Chicago, IL), Mar 02, 1963.

<sup>18</sup> Harper Lee, *Go Set A Watchman* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2015), 238, subsequent references to the novel will appear parenthetically.

opinions. He further assumes Jean Louise is brainwashed by the New York papers. Atticus continues his judgement by saying to his daughter. "I've no doubt all you see is wild threats and bombings and such." Atticus removes Jean Louise from his own social circle and places her in the group opposed to the South. Second, he justifies his actions by reminding Jean Louise that the people she is criticizing used to be her neighbors and family. At this moment, Atticus removes Jean Louise from the people she used to call home all because now there is a difference in opinion about the social structuring of the South. Finally, *Watchman* successfully changes the depiction of Maycomb from a safe and family oriented small town to a prideful, insular community protective of its traditions. In this way, *Watchman* deepens the understanding of *Mockingbird*, for while the first novel reveals a great deal about character perspective and the horrifying realities of segregation, it is in no way a critique of the Jim Crow South.

### The Social Implications of the Tom Robinson Trial

Lee wrote a novel which she thought focused on individuals and perspective, not a social commentary on the changing country she lives in. Despite this effort, *Mockingbird* is a novel that cannot help from commenting on the social and political environment during the decades Lee is writing. More specifically, the way in which Lee writes about the case of Tom Robinson sets up a clear comment on sociological themes of race, politics, and injustice.

The plot of *Mockingbird* leads to a big trial in which Atticus defends an innocent black man who is wrongly convicted of raping a lower-class white woman. The falsely accused man is Tom Robinson and the accusers are Mayella Ewell and her abusive father Mr. Ewell. The aim of this section is to demonstrate how Lee writes these characters' dialogue using language that reinforce the social hierarchy of the Jim Crow South. I organize the following section into three

close readings from the trial scene. First, I discuss the true implications of the trial through the analysis of Mr. Ewell. The key findings here are that Mr. Ewell's language categorizes him into a social stereotype of a race-based hierarchy, which the lowest class white family is still higher than respected black family. Second, I examine part of the closing testimony Atticus delivers in order to show that Lee reinforces a societal truth of systematic racism of the Jim Crow South through the enforcement of racial order in seemingly inclusive laws. Third, I conclude that the language and allusions in *Mockingbird* are undeniably a comment on society during the twentieth century.

Mr. Ewell uses the "n-word" which indicates to the reader his race-based hatred. The aim of this close reading is to prove that Mr. Ewell's main concern about his daughter alleged raping is with regards to the identity and the race of the accused. Atticus questions Mr. Ewell on his concern for his daughter's condition, but not her physical condition. Atticus asks, "Weren't you concerned with Mayella's condition?" Mr. Ewell responds, "I most positively was," but he is arguably not truly concerned with Mayella since he immediately adds, "I seen who done it" (193). Here, the language of "seen who" shows that the primary concern of Mr. Ewell is with the perpetrator of this crime. Next, Mr. Ewell shows no concern for the physical condition of his daughter, but rather with whom she was found with. Furthermore, Mr. Ewell's crude testimony accusing Tom Robinson captures his rage about Tom's race: "Mr. Ewell looked confusedly over at the judge. 'Well, Mayella was raisin' this holy racket so I dropped m' load and run as fast as I could but I run into th' fence, but when I got distangled I run up to th' window and I seen -' Mr Ewell's face grew scarlet. He stood and pointed his finger at Tom Robinson. '- I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin' on my Mayella!'" (190). Mr. Ewell is haunted by his daughter and a black man being sexually intimate. There is unbridled emotion shown through Mr. Ewells spirited, yet



derogatory, words and feverish, scarlet face. The obsession of Tom's race is solidified when Mr. Ewell exclaims "'- I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin' on my Mayella!'" The rage associated with an angry, red face is directed at Tom Robinson. Though there is more insinuated here, Mr. Ewell once again makes the distinction that Tom is black and this is where a good part, if not all, of the anger comes from. In short, the way Lee writes the Mr. Ewell as obsessed with Tom Robinson and his race clearly marks Mr. Ewell is a racist.

Lee writes the closing statement to the trial with words that directly comment on society and a sentence structure that reinforces the racial order discussed. The following quote exhibits the point that Mayella is immune to the misfortunes of Tom Robinson because of her race.

I say guilt, gentlemen, because it was guilt that motivated her. She has committed no crime, she has merely broken a rigid and time-honoured code of our society, a code so severe that whoever breaks it is hounded from our midst as unfit to live with. She is the victim of cruel poverty and ignorance, but I cannot pity her: she is white. (224)

This passage is crucial to analyze because it addresses societal code and social norms. Mayella's fault her is that she broke "time-honoured code of our society." This is a heavily imposed code on society that divides black and white people in jobs, public and private spaces, romantic relationships, etc. Even more, this is the code which towns, like Maycomb, operate on. The severe nature of racist codes becomes dramatically clear when a social norm is brought into the legal arena. It is clear from this section of the closing argument that Atticus points out the obvious. To expand, the social class of Mayella, her race, and Atticus's lack of pity are all dependent upon another. This dependency signals that the long-lasting standard of race inequality in society is not excluded to the courtroom. However, despite Mayella being a "victim

of cruel poverty and ignorance, [Atticus] cannot pity her: she is white.” In all, Atticus establishes the code of racial segregation as central to the subject matter of the case.

Lastly, Atticus makes a profound, yet ultimately disappointing, testimony of the legal court system. To explain, Atticus argues that Tom should be convicted because the court is the one institution that should be above social inequality. However, the verdict of the jury ignores and opposes the following statement.

But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal – there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution, gentlemen, is a court. (226)

First, there is an intoxicating patriotism in this testament Atticus delivers. Even today, the young reader understands the references of Rockefeller and Einstein. There is timeless faith and patriotism that the common person can be equal to a genius and a billionaire. The patriotism is what makes the typical young reader fall for the hope of Tom Robinson's acquittal. The stupid, the rich, the genius, and the poor all can be in one courtroom and have an objective jury to apply the law. The reader can see that Atticus makes a valiant effort for the court to ignore any type of social implications of the trial. Although, it is questionable that Atticus does not bring up race in this quote. While the reader may be optimistic that this statement will push the jury to acquit Tom Robinson, there is no indication from Atticus that there is a pillar of racial equality in the eyes of the law. Subsequently, the trial sequence concludes that, ultimately, the rules of racial division are more important than those of the law. The jury rules the Tom Robinson is guilty of raping Mayella Ewell, and serves him the death sentence at a work camp.

In sum, *Mockingbird* is heavy in allusions to important societal and political issues. Specifically, in the trial scene, Lee uses language in the testimonies and arguments this focused on social and political injustice. So, this section demonstrates that Lee is entirely situated in a social conversation on racial inequality in the Jim Crow South. The final section shows that Lee's novel is taught as an insight into systematic enforcement of racism.

### Teaching *Mockingbird* Today

Teachers who select *Mockingbird* today help students analyze the novel as providing an important insight into history told through literature. And yet, many students are unaware of *Mockingbird*'s original reception and how much it deviates from the current place of the novel in American curricula. Over time, the ways of teaching *Mockingbird* have progressed into construing the novel as having deeply rooted social and political significance. In this way, readers today interpret *Mockingbird* much differently than those who first read it in 1960. The stark difference in the novel's reception is in part due to the changing makeup of American society. As society makes progress for racial and economic equalities, the critical reception of the racist themes in *Mockingbird* increases. Furthermore, the following section discusses a curriculum that espouses an inclusive and historic understanding of *Mockingbird*. But it is important to teach *Mockingbird* with an eye towards its flaws in perspective because the novel's conclusions are not sympathetic to an audience other than the white community. If this novel is to be taught for the purposes of understanding the history of racial inequality, then its curriculum must include deep historical lessons and progressive analysis alongside the novel.

The following curriculum is a significant update in perception of *Mockingbird* from the reviews in the 1960s. Even so, there is more historical context necessary to completely inform

students interpretation of *Mockingbird*. A non-profit education organization called “Facing History and Ourselves” produces a curriculum and necessary materials to teach *Mockingbird* in a way that addresses many of the social and historical factors that influence the novel. The organization sets out to reframe the literature classroom curriculum so that students become critical and inclusive thinkers, interpreting novels with respect to this country’s diverse population.<sup>19</sup> The *Mockingbird* curriculum focuses on two themes: the development of personal identity and the unbreakable relationship a person has with his or her social environment.<sup>20</sup> For example, one section’s guiding questions is: How does our identity influence the choices we make and how does analyzing character help us understand the choices characters make in literature? This is important because students learn about the events in *Mockingbird* and the allusions to the Jim Crow South by interpreting the significance of characters’ point of view. First, the curriculum guides students through the narrative itself by breaking down and analyzing the two plot lines: Atticus’s effort to break the unwritten rules of the Jim Crow criminal justice system, and the socialization of Scout and Jem through negotiations with spoken and unspoken rules of their community. The students are reminded to develop an understanding of how the text creates characters’ unique experiences in the town. Specifically, as students dissect this plot’s many components the curriculum guide identifies main theme objectives: identity, individual morals, social obligation, justice, and differing perspectives. Having an emphasis on identity in relation to the specific individual’s perspective, morals, and society, sets up the student to read

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<sup>19</sup> Facing History and Ourselves, “About Us,” Facing History and Ourselves, 2020, <https://www.facinghistory.org/about-us>.

<sup>20</sup> Facing History and Ourselves, “Teaching *Mockingbird* Curriculum,” Facing History and Ourselves (Facing History and Ourselves Foundation, Inc., 2014), <https://www.facinghistory.org/mockingbird>), p. 166.

this novel with an understanding that the book's message is dependent upon the narrator's perspective.

The curriculum's structure also breaks up the book into thematic sections with critical guiding questions that require students to read the novel as sociological. In each of the sections the class starts off with a guiding question that aims to answer a major query or theme in the reading. Then, the class is filled with an abundance of historical context and critical questions tying the initial thematic query and context together. There are multiple sections that follow the format of critical reading, historical context, and personal reflection. For example, there is the investigation into social obligations alongside the historical context of segregation and the Jim Crow South. These materials are discussed as the students read about Scout and Jem dealing with the community's negativity towards their father, Atticus Finch, defending a black man against a white family. This method of contextualizing the detailed analysis of the novel's form, structure, and diction is very important because students will learn to analyze the novel through a perspective that is both socially and historically informed.

The specific historical context of the "Facing History and Ourselves" curriculum focuses on the Great Depression in the South during the 1930s. The harsh conditions of economic distress during the Depression led to the residents of these small southern towns placing high significance on social hierarchy through heritage. At this point the students will talk through the implications of segregation and social discrimination historically and in the context of *Mockingbird* in order to fill in the time gap that students experience reading this book half a century after its publication.

Next, a long history lesson fills in the context of the 1930s Scottsboro Affair and the similarities to the Tom Robinson rape trial. It is crucial that students understand the historical

context of the Tom Robinson trial so that they can go outside of the narrator's perspective and comprehend all of the effects of the injustice in Tom Robinson's trial. For context, the Scottsboro Boys are nine teenagers falsely accused of raping two white women on a train in Alabama in 1931.<sup>21</sup> This context is particularly important because this trial went through a decade of hearings and verdicts that reveal numerous perspectives on the alleged crime. The curriculum uses a key concept, a "courtroom lynching," to describe the court's due-process, or lack there-of, during the Scottsboro trials. Years after the Scottsboro boys were found guilty, the U.S. Supreme Court decides that an all-white jury is in violation of a person's 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment's equal protection of the law. Eventually four of the nine boys were acquitted after a long fight in the criminal justice system. In contrast, *Mockingbird* kills Tom Robinson while in prison before any pleas can be made. Furthermore, there are three points of similarity between these two cases. First, the Tom Robinson trial is also an unfair jury as it is an all-white panel of jurors. Second, and just like the Scottsboro case, the witnesses contradict themselves on the stand and there is abundant evidence in favor of Tom's innocence. Lastly, the Tom Robinson trial matches the characteristics that make Scottsboro Affair a "courtroom lynching".<sup>22</sup> A courtroom lynching refers to the racial inequality and unwritten rules of the Jim Crow South that lead to the unfair trial conditions. Without the proper conversation about racial inequality's effects in the law, the lessons the *Mockingbird* teaches can be read over with the casual memory of a child. Regardless, the point here is that the Scottsboro Affair is a clear precedent for the Tom Robinson case, and helps students understand Lee is writing in a time when the Jim Crow South maintains racial inequality through precedents made in the courts, even when it is in violation of the Constitution.

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<sup>21</sup> Facing History and Ourselves handout that provides a five-part summary of the Scottsboro Boys trials and journey during the 1930s, written by Harvard University law professor Michael Klarman.

<sup>22</sup> Facing History and Ourselves, "Teaching *Mockingbird* Curriculum," p. 166.

In short, this curriculum's structure builds upon many historically relevant and socially difficult topics that help students learn from *Mockingbird* in the classroom today. However, the curriculum hinders student's understanding of the novel by focusing exclusively on the history of the 1930s, when the novel is set, to the exclusion of the 1950s, when the novel was written. While the historical context of the 1930s is obviously important, is clearly not the only historical context necessary for understanding the book. Lee publishes *Mockingbird* in 1960. This means that the 1950s, the time in which Lee writes *Mockingbird*, is an important historical context. One might also argue for the importance of the 1960s, when the nation reads *Mockingbird*. In order for a curriculum to capture the full identity of *Mockingbird* and its sociological themes, students need to understand the historical context of the novel's composition and reception, not just its setting.

By ignoring the 1950s, this curriculum overlooks the civil rights era: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, etc. But the particular historical event that illuminates the most about both *Mockingbird*'s story and its original reception is the case of Emmett Till in 1955.<sup>23</sup> Emmett Till was fourteen years old when he was kidnapped, beaten, shot and killed by a group of white men in Mississippi. Till was then strapped to a cotton gin fan and thrown into the river, not to be found for a week. Till's murder case went to trial in a segregated court and by an all-white jury. The accused kidnapers and killers were acquitted because Till's body was too mutilated to identify. Not only was Till's trial a violation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments right to a fair trial, one with an

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<sup>23</sup> Margaret Spratt, Cathy Ferrand Bullock, Gerald Baldasty, Fiona Clark, Alex Halavais, Michael Mccluskey, and Susan Schrenk, "News, Race, and the Status Quo: The Case of Emmett Louis Till," *Howard Journal of Communications* 18, no. 2 (2007): 169-92.

integrated jury, the guilty were let to live freely because the crime was so inhumane that the evidence was destroyed.

This case centers on a deeply disturbing crime that Till's mother, Mamie Till, pushed into the minds of the entire nation in order to expose the reality of racism's brutality. Mamie Till selflessly allowed the media to photograph and publicize Emmett Till's open casket funeral to shape the future of the civil rights movement.<sup>24</sup> Only five years after this horrifying event, *Mockingbird* is published. Many readers would undoubtedly know of the journey of Emmett Till through the media, as Till's murder and trial flooded the nation's press. As professor and author Darryl Mace explains in his book, *In Remembrance of Emmett Till: Regional Stories and Media Responses to the Black Freedom Struggle*, "Americans' impressions of the Till lynching, and in many ways their dispositions toward civil rights and integration efforts, were shaped by the coverage of the Till crisis they found in local newspapers and national publications."<sup>25</sup> The Till case is crucial in the narrative of the fight for racial equality and justice during the 1950s and 1960s. Published in the heart of the civil rights movement, *Mockingbird* is a part of the same conversations as the Emmett Till case.

The Till case is paramount to understanding the historical context of *Mockingbird* because it reverses the races of the defendants. On the one hand, the Till Case has a guilty, white defendant who is acquitted. On the other hand, *Mockingbird* has an innocent, black defendant who is convicted. Furthermore, the Till case shows students today that structural racism is not only about sins against black people. In fact, structural racism is about vesting an immense amount of power and invincibility in white people. Subsequently, the relation these two cases

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<sup>24</sup> Mace, Darryl. "Introduction." In *Remembrance of Emmett Till: Regional Stories and Media Responses to the Black Freedom Struggle* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 1-10.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.



have to one another makes the following statement by Lee problematic. Lee claims the Tom Robinson case is only “a comment on what happened and what can happen in the South. It is a part of one’s existence in that day.”<sup>26</sup> So, this statement is shocking alone because the Tom Robinson case represents an unjust legal system that prioritizes white supremacy over the constitutional right to a fair trial. Even more, the Till case makes it clear that Lee writes a novel that reflects and reinforces the racial inequality happening in the 1950s and 1960s.

In all, the two trials are relevant to the political and social implications of *Mockingbird*. While *Mockingbird* is adored by many in classrooms, as it is still taught today as an important novel about society, there is far too much hidden about this book until students know the historical context of its composition and reception.

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<sup>26</sup> "Novelist Harper Lee Sees Dixie Racial Progress 'Not Fast enough'." *The Chicago Defender*, 1963.

## Chapter 2

### The Structure of Racism in *To Kill A Mockingbird*

It is clear today that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a novel littered with racism. There are small plot points such as Scout's Aunt Alexandria's constant disapproval of the children for having a relationship with the family's housekeeper because she is black. Or there is the presence of derogatory labels like "negro." Then there is the more systematic racism of the Tom Robinson trial and conviction. In like manner, the conversation among critics of *Mockingbird* is wide, but critics today are conclusive that the novel's plot has several racist themes. In general, scholars suggest that *Mockingbird* is a literary work that closes itself off to readers whose race, class, and gender and not of the mainstream represented in the novel. Some critics find the racist and misogynist theme to be so severe that they argue the book should be banned<sup>27</sup>. Meanwhile, there is a strong concern with the portrayal of Atticus as the white male savior.

The plot points that fall short of racial justice pose a controversial lesson of *Mockingbird* to its youth audience<sup>28</sup>. Left up to open interpretation, a student reader could criticize how the characters treat racial injustice, or they could accept the reality of southern tradition's consequences. This chapter analyzes how the racism of the novel's plot and characters can go easily unnoticed without explicit guidance. Moreover, to read *Mockingbird* today without the influence of the concepts of racism and social order, is to ignore key themes in the novel that can help a student understand that its perspective is exclusive to the white community<sup>29</sup>. *Mockingbird*

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<sup>27</sup> Naa Baako Ako-Adjei, "Why It's Time Schools Stopped Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*."

<sup>28</sup> Porsdam, "Literary Representation and Social Justice in an Age of Civil Rights: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*," 255-72.

<sup>29</sup> Macaluso, "Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* Today: Coming to Terms With Race, Racism, and America's Novel," 279-87.

has maintained popularity half a century after its release. Naturally, the introduction of Lee's second novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, brought reexamination of *Mockingbird* by educators and scholars alike<sup>30</sup>. As a result, new analysis of the two novels read together reveals each narrative to have many themes of racism. Even so, the reasons why this novel is still taught varies by curriculum and teacher. Nevertheless, the literature on *Mockingbird*'s possible benefit continues with the conversations on the utility of this novel<sup>31</sup>.

The characteristics of *Mockingbird* that make this novel concerning for the rights of racial minorities are also the factors that make this novel worth teaching. First, Lee does an effective job of capturing many different personalities and variations of perspectives in this novel. However, the point of view that Scout has on the community of Maycomb is far less mature than the point of view her older brother Jem. Second, as a literary object, *Mockingbird* is beneficial for students to understand how the perspective of an individual character changes the meaning of a story. Accordingly, this chapter discusses a thought experiment regarding the differences in *Mockingbird*'s conclusions based on the perspective of Jem instead of Scout. Third, this novel has many components that help students understand how to analyze and critique literature. Although this chapter aims to demonstrate that *Mockingbird* requires a demanding close reading because of its narrator. Finally, the perspective of its child narrator puts the burden of reflection onto the reader. Therefore, the narrative and the narrator alone do not fill in the gaps of meaning in the novel.

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<sup>30</sup> Henninger, "My Childhood Is Ruined!: Harper Lee and Racial Innocence," 597–626; Kelley, "Reading To Kill A Mockingbird and Go Set A Watchman as Palimpsest," 236–39: both sources present sound arguments for the close plot proximity of the two novels.

<sup>31</sup> Facing History and Ourselves, "Teaching Mockingbird."

*Mockingbird* follows the story of the Finch family: a lawyer, Atticus Finch, and his two children, Scout and Jem. The story includes fun snippets of Scout and Jem causing childish mischief in the summers and lamenting the task of going to school. Atticus Finch is the town lawyer and a man highly respected by both the white and black communities. The plot concerns one specific trial that shakes the town equilibrium. Atticus is the defense counsel for a black man named Tom Robinson who is accused of raping a young white woman. As one can easily imagine, a town in the Jim Crow South is not keen on the town lawyer defending a black man accused of rape. Multiple chapters describe the buildup to the trial and the trial itself. In these chapters, the integrity of each member of the family is tested with regards to the trial and the structurally racist town order. It is in these moments of character change that are worthy of closer analysis.

Far from being anti-racist, however, the novel hides much of its racism from the students reading it today because the perspective of the narrator, a child starting at the age of 6 and ending the novel at age 8, can neither capture nor analyze fully the racist dynamics of her town. Specifically, the construction of the novel through its characters, narrator, and language all depict racially and social inequality that is neither directly critiqued, nor applauded. This ambiguity leaves too much up to interpretation, especially given that it is primarily young adult readers who must reckon with the peculiar nature of a child narrator. In this chapter, I argue that the perspective of Scout as a child narrator clouds the understanding that a student can gain about racism's negative impact on American society.

To begin this section, I will analyze a supporting character, Mr. Raymond. The interactions between Scout and Mr. Raymond set the foundation for the complexities of a child learning about race and racism. Primarily, Mr. Raymond is an important object of the novel

because he successfully crosses racial boundaries. In the South during the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, any form of racial integration was taboo. *Mockingbird* provides an image of this taboo in the character Mr. Raymond. Mr. Raymond is the local taboo because he is a white man who owns a great deal of land and has a strong family history, but his societal downfall is being married to a black woman. For a character like Mr. Raymond, we can extract a crucial lesson about the themes on race in *Mockingbird*. Mr. Raymond is a white man who married a black woman, had many mixed-race children, and lives with the black community in Maycomb. Mr. Raymond is also allegedly a drunk. The community criticizes Mr. Raymond's choice to live with the black community because he crosses a clear social boundary of the community. However, the town does not criticize his racial mixing, but rather criticizes his constant state of inebriation. There are two reasons that explain why the town has this interaction with Mr. Raymond. The first, and less important, is that Mr. Raymond's family comes from one of the oldest and wealthiest families in Maycomb. This respect for the few wealthy families in Maycomb is deeply rooted in the town's morals.

The second reason for the town's dismissal of Mr. Raymond's inebriation is far more interesting. To the reader's dismay, when Scout and her friend Dill venture outside the court room for a moment and discover the truth of Mr. Raymond:

Dill released the straws and grinned. "Scout, it's nothing but Coca-Cola."

Mr. Raymond sat up against the tree-trunk. He had been lying on the grass. "You little folks won't let on me now, will you? It'd ruin my reputation if you did."

"You mean all you drink in that sack's Coca-Cola? Just plain Coca-Cola?"

...

“Some folks don’t – like the way I live. Now I could say the hell with ‘em, I don’t care if they don’t like it. I do say I don’t care if they don’t like it, right enough – but I don’t say that with ‘em, see?”

Dill and I said, “No sir.”

“I try to give ‘em a reason, you see. It helps folks if they can latch on to a reason. When I come to town, which is seldom, if I weave a little and drink out of this sack, folks can say Dolphus Raymond’s in the clutches of whisky – that’s why he won’t change his ways. He can’t help himself, that’s why he lives the way he does.” (221)

Mr. Raymond puts on an act to create an alternative reality for the white community. His behavior is first revealed as a façade after Dill says, “it’s nothing but Coca-Cola,” and in response, Mr. Raymond admits with, “You little folks won’t let on me now, will you? It’d ruin my reputation if you did” (221). Moving forward, there are a few ways of reading this passage and the logic behind Mr. Raymond’s actions. Two come from the perspective of Mr. Raymond. The third will show how the construction of Mr. Raymond’s story is a racist element of *Mockingbird*.

At first glance, this scene simply shows that Mr. Raymond creates the perception that he is a lousy drunk to give a reason for his behavior that is easier for the white community to accept: “I try to give ‘em a reason, you see. It helps folks if they can latch on to a reason” (221). In Mr. Raymond’s eyes, he pretends to be a drunk so that the white community may assume that his constant state of inebriation explains his choice to live with the black community. This sentiment is quite hypocritical given that he fell in love with a black woman and has a family with her. Even though the white community condemns his relationship, he continues to shelter

them from the reality: “It helps folks if they can latch on to a reason.” This passage suggests that Mr. Raymond still favors his white comrades and chooses to protect them with this façade. As a result, the community is able to dismiss the possibility of accepting or engaging with Mr. Raymond’s entanglement of color lines by seeing him as a drunk.

Along the same lines, there is a sympathetic reading of Mr. Raymond. One could conclude his actions are not to protect the white community, but instead protect his family. Here, this interpretation gives credit to Mr. Raymond as a husband and a father. Mr. Raymond explains pretending to be drunk allows “folks [to] say Dolphus Raymond’s in the clutches of whisky – that’s why he won’t change his ways.” To change his ways implies that his family arrangement needs reform and are a mistake. By avoiding a conversation about his true feelings, he can divert the accusations and shelter his family from judgment. Mr. Raymond knows that without an explanation, the white community will try to help him turn away from his family. Mr. Raymond knows the white community is wrong; however, he may believe that the community is not worth the trouble of fighting. Mr. Raymond does not seem to view his actions as a sacrifice because his drunkenness provides cover for his family.

Either way, the game Mr. Raymond plays with the white community validates the racism around interracial marriage. The validation of racism is clear in how Mr. Raymond explains his actions. In order for Mr. Raymond to explain this social game to Jem and Scout, he slowly builds up to his purpose in being a fake drunk: “Some folks don’t – like the way I live. Now I could say the hell with ‘em, I don’t care if they don’t like it. I do say I don’t care if they don’t like it, right enough – but I don’t say that with ‘em, see?” (220). Mr. Raymond toys with claiming he doesn’t care what people think about his life, as he says “Now I could say the hell with ‘em.” However, it is suspicious that he would care enough about what the white community thinks to lie about his

conscious choice to love and live in the black community. The sentiment becomes slightly more convincing when he vocalizes his apathy: “I do say I don’t care if they don’t like it, right enough.” However, the conversation takes a turn for the worst when Mr. Raymond says, “but I don’t say that with ‘em, see?” Mr. Raymond attempts to explain that it is easier to know that the race boundaries are wrong than to tell the people who enforce them that the boundaries are wrong. On that note, ‘wrong’ may be too accusatory for Mr. Raymond. When he admits “but I don’t say that with ‘em,” Mr. Raymond send the message to Jem and Scout that confronting racism is not worth the energy. This message is highly problematic for a student reading this novel and interpreting the different ways to combat racism.

But more importantly, Mr. Raymond pretends to be drunk not just to give people a reason to latch on to, but also to give himself a way to justify his lifestyle. If Mr. Raymond truly believed nothing was wrong, would he not soberly live his life against the social grain? A few lines beyond this passage, Mr. Raymond responds to Scout accusation of his dishonesty: “It ain’t honest but it’s mighty helpful to folks. Secretly, Miss Finch, I’m not a drinker, but you see they could never, never understand that I live like I do because that’s the way I want to live” (221). Mr. Raymond reinforces the racial hierarchy in Maycomb by hiding his true life behind a protective lie. Mr. Raymond believes he is helping everyone through his dishonest act. What he fails to understand, and what he thus cannot teach to his listeners, Jem and Scout, is that the drunk act ensures that white people will “never, never understand” that racial segregation has negative consequences. Mr. Raymond is only able to endure crossing racial boundaries by pretending to be drunk. The next person who does not know the “drunk act” will be attacked by the white community because he will not just assume “He can’t help himself, [drinking is] why he lives the way he does.” The lesson learned from this scene is not that Mr. Raymond is making



a sacrifice, but that he is a part of the prolonged problem of structural racism in the South. He creates a perception for himself and his family that does not give the white community a chance to accept his interracial home. The ignorant bliss that these characters continue to protect is the reason behind the discomfort in reading about Mr. Raymond's self-fraud.

Lastly, Scout's interaction with Mr. Raymond is simply an intermission from the heat of the courthouse trial scenes. The dialogue we see here is the meat of it. In other words, the scene is not important to the novel's plot, so it might go unanalyzed in a classroom. To that end, the perspective Scout brings to this book often results in incomplete reflection. The minimal reflection is certainly characteristic of a child. However, Scout's quick movement between scenes does not give her the capacity to analyze this scene at all. The point is that it is very easy for a young adult reader to come away from the first two interpretations instead of the last. Furthermore, the following section will illuminate this uncertainty and minimal reflection by the child Scout through a comparison with adult Scout.

#### Jean Louise and Scout: The Character and Narrator

The second novel by Harper Lee, *Go Set A Watchman*, takes place some twenty years after *Mockingbird* and features twenty-six-year-old Scout returning home. There are undeniable similarities between the characters in the two novels, which suggest that *Watchman* is in fact the sequel to *Mockingbird*<sup>32</sup>. These similarities include instances of direct plot replication (often in a memory), character similarities, and overt references to the stories in *Mockingbird*. What is most striking is the continuity between adult Scout, Jean Louise Finch, and the child Scout Finch.

While reading *Watchman* will reveal blunt racism because Jean Louise Finch completely digests

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<sup>32</sup> Henninger, "My Childhood Is Ruined!: Harper Lee and Racial Innocence," 597–626.

the racism around her. *Mockingbird* has many aspects of racism that can be easily read over because Scout the child narrator covers it up. Although the lapse in time shows a matured Scout, the final conclusion this beloved main character reaches is equally disappointing. In order to show this, I expose the acceptance of racism in Scout and Jean Louise Finch. Then, I demonstrate a comparison between the endings of *Watchman* and *Mockingbird*. The result shows that the blunt racism in *Watchman* is more visible because it is not hidden by the complexities of the child narrator's perspective in *Mockingbird*.

First, reading *Watchman* reinforces the divide between child and adult perspective because the voice of Jean Louise mirrors the voice of Scout, but has long, reflective monologues that young Scout could not produce. Naturally, a child will not have the critical reflection of an adult, but the lack of reflection in *Mockingbird* is often overlooked because Scout observes many characters around her who share their personal reflections while she distains any type of reflective judgement. Of course, each novel has a different approach to telling the story of Jean Louise Finch. However, there are more similarities between the conclusions than one would expect. Specifically, both Scout and Jean Louise surrender in times of ideological conflict because it is easier. Even though Scout's is a deferral of judgement until later in life, the final decision in *Watchman* is to agree to disagree with the supporters of the racist social structures in the South. To illustrate, Scout in *Mockingbird* says that she will never understand people: "Well, I hoped Jem would understand folks a little better when he was older; I wouldn't" (173). Here, Scout takes on the role of narratorial consciousness as well as the main character. When she hopes that Jem would understand people when he is older it is because Jem continuously questions society, people, and justice. When Scout comments, "I wouldn't," the brevity of the comment makes it easy for the reader to read over and ignore her assumed inability to understand

others who think differently than her. Even more, Scout chooses to delay any type of stance for social justice because in order to do so she would have to work against the people in her community. So, she turns to silence to avoid difficulty and confrontation. This perspective is dangerous to overlook because Scout's deferral of judgement is also an unconscious, acceptance that injustice will continue.

In *Watchman*, Jean Louise uses the same type of language to signal her defeat. Even more, with Jean Louise it is clear she compromises her views to take the easy way out to appease her family. At the end of *Watchman*, after she compares her father to Hitler and accuses him of being a white supremacist, Jean Louise chooses to make up with him. At first, there is the language of resentment in response to her father's easy forgiveness. Atticus says, "I said I'm proud of you," which Scout responds with, "I don't understand you. I don't understand men at all and I never will" (277). As with Scout, here Jean Louise admits that she does not understand men, and by extension she also does not understand their political views. Then, she says "I never will." This language is very similar to the proclamation Scout makes in *Mockingbird*. At first it seems as if Jean Louise stands her ground against her father and the injustice of the social system he seeks to maintain. To the contrary, Jean Louise accepts that people simply see the world differently than she does. The key difference here is that Jean Louise gives all of the reflection and judgement necessary to take a stance against social injustice. Instead, she chooses to avoid further confrontation and remain at peaceful odds with her father, and the community he represents. This kind of moment is typical of *Watchman*, blunt and disappointing. The following continues the blunt language and strengthens the unfortunate surrender to the racist ideas in Maycomb, Alabama. Scout Finch says to herself:

Dear goodness, the things I learned. I did not want my world disturbed, but I wanted to stamp out all the people like him. I guess it's like an airplane: they're the drag and we're the thrust, together we make the thing fly. Too much of us and we're nose-heavy, too much of them and we're tail heavy – it's a matter of balance. I can't beat him, and I can't join him.

The sentiment here is simple; without racism, the anti-racists will crash society with too much reform too fast. However, why the constant tone of defeat? Why can society not adjust while remaining progressive? This is the last monologue by Scout before the novel ends with her driving off with her father. The final message of the novel is her surrender. “Dear goodness, the things I learned. I did not want my world disturbed, but I wanted to stamp out all the people like him.” She learns that the people in her life are not the loving and fair people she thought them to be. Jean Louise fights to show her father why he is wrong and cruel. Jean Louise fights until she is broken and tries to leave her family behind. Then, Jean Louise concedes to the ways of tradition: “it's a matter of balance. I can't beat him, and I can't join him.” The balance Jean Louise talks about is compromise between the beliefs of Atticus and her beliefs, which Atticus takes as representative of the attitudes in New York City, where she lives. Atticus believes that each side of the argument on racial integration must coexist, otherwise there would be an imbalance in certain parts of the country. The plane analogy shows that if the nose has more weight than the back of the plane, then the plane crashes. In his view, the fight for racial equality is acting without the consideration of the South's traditional system. On account of Jean Louise's mature mind, she receives this information in a way that makes the political situation clear. Jean Louise gives the reader a lot of reflection and judgement on the socio-political debate in *Watchman*. Even though Jean Louise makes it clear she disagrees with her Father and the

Maycomb community, she still ends the story with a concession to the southern social structure. There is once again a lackluster lesson at the end of Lee's novel. Jean Louise chooses to keep her relationship with her childhood home instead of fighting to defend the humanity of those oppressed because of the color of their skin.

After I read *Watchman* and returned to *Mockingbird*, I found so many lines from Scout that are concerning for a novel that is taught as a starting point in the fight for social justice. For example, in the moments following Jem's fit of outrage over the injustice of the Tom Robinson case, Scout says, "I came to the conclusion that people were just peculiar. I withdrew from them, and never thought about them until I was forced to" (268). The word "peculiar" itself is curious, because it does not reveal Scout's judgement of the people in her town. Peculiar means odd or strange, but not bad or good. In other words, the morals of the people around Scout are only odd to her because they are different than her father's. Next, Scout continues to retreat away from any type of conflict regarding discussions around race and injustice. She says, "I withdrew from them, and never thought about them until I was forced." To retreat away from conversations regarding racial prejudice and the trial is an acceptance of prejudice. Injustice will continue unless action is taken to change the norms of a society. Furthermore, the narrator delays the moment of judgement since Scout withdraws from people until she is forced to engage. Eventually, Scout will presumably have such conversations, but this novel does not represent those conversations and thus is not interested in certainty and judgement on inequality and injustice. If people do not talk about the Tom Robinson case in a way that highlights Tom's innocence, then cases of injustice will continue to happen. And the direct line to this story seems to naturally fall in line with the tone of retreat and acceptance of the town's inability to change through the wrongful conviction of Tom Robinson. Scout's perspective leads to these attitudes of

acceptance in order to avoid the conflicts in strong adverse reactions from her friends and family. As a result, there is an uphill battle if teachers want to use this novel with its child narrator as a spark to develop students sense of racial justice.

### The peculiarity of Scout as a child narrator

The child narrator is central to a critical understanding of *Mockingbird*. I start with a discussion of the nature of child narrators and how this trend manifests in Scout. Then, I show the importance that a reader analyzes *Mockingbird* as dependent on Scout's perspective. In other words, the story this novel tells would be different if Scout was an adult, or old enough to have a higher level of maturity in her reflection of the events in the plot. Next, I break down the effect of Scout as the child narrator into two sections: beneficial and inhibiting. I concede that Scout is beneficial as a child narrator because she presents a curious and new perspective on the complex nature of the social and political issues in the Jim Crow South. On the other hand, Scout's childness inhibits the novel because she does not reflect critically on the events in the novel. As a result, the reader must inform him or herself of the story in between the lines. Thus, Scout does not deliver the wholistic picture of Maycomb, but rather one perspective.

To begin, Scout is a peculiar narrator because she observes Jem grow up throughout the course of the novel. If she is not the one experiencing a major change and growth throughout the novel, then why is she both the character and narrator?

First, the child narrator is inherently ironic. There is irony in the sense that the voice of a child narrator is not the voice of a child at all, but the voice of an adult writer mimicking the voice of a child. So, the literary tradition of the child narrator in young adult novels is

fundamentally ironic because the voice of a child narrator can never be truly authentic.<sup>33</sup> A child will never be the one writing the novel. Instead, an adult author assumes the child perspective in the plot and informs this position with his or her own memories. Regardless of the accuracy in an author's mimicking of the child perspective, there is always a divide in the age of the author and narrator that cannot and should not be ignored. Scout would not be a good child narrator if she were to reflect on many of the political and social events in the book with the perspective of an adult. Moreover, part of the author's job is to make it possible for readers to understand things that the narrator does now. Lee writes a character that holds back on most, if not all, of the substantial reflection and judgement. So, the ironic child narrator manifests in Scout because she gives adult and young readers the naïve, child's perspective on the controversial topic of segregation.

Consequently, the nature of Scout as a child narrator restrains the amount of reflection on the events in the book that can take place. Furthermore, the student audience must identify how Scout provides a perspective less mature than others in the novel. To explain, the typical audience for *Mockingbird* now is middle school and early high school students from eighth to ninth grade, or thirteen to fifteen-year-olds. The young audience can easily relate to Scout's childish adventures, trials and tribulations of school, and the comical events in the Finch home. However, Scout's naïve and childish mind does not give the reader a full understanding of racism in the novel because Scout is unaware of weight of many of the novel's events. *Mockingbird* as a novel tells the story of social injustice and racial divides in the community of Maycomb, Alabama through the eyes of Scout Finch. Let us imagine that this novel is narrated by a character of similar age to Jem, who ages from 10 to 13 throughout the novel. Jem grapples

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<sup>33</sup> Mike Cadden, "The Irony of Narration in the Young Adult Novel," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2000): 146-154, doi:10.1353/chq.0.1467.

with the social constructs of race and class, while Scout deals with the exciting adventures of early childhood. Granted, Scout's very young age and perspective makes *Mockingbird* an inviting and enjoyable novel to read. However, the impressionable age of Scout shines through as a major characteristic of her narratorial perspective. So, the irony of Scout as the narrator caters to the acceptance of racism in *Mockingbird* because the creation of this innocent child's voice is a distraction from the harsh realities of social and racial inequalities in the 1930's South. The reader must be careful to analyze this text with the understanding that Scout diminishes the depiction of racism in the novel because of her childish nature. Therefore, it is peculiar that Scout is the narrator of *Mockingbird* because an adult can comprehend Scout's innocence, but a young student may not, especially without sufficient guidance.

The perspective a child has on the events in this novel is twofold: exciting because it is new, muted because the point of view is not mature enough to reflect on life experiences. Harper Lee creates a child narrator who recounts the events in *Mockingbird* without the social awareness of an adult would impose on the story. However, Scout's nature is to have simple observations with minimal reflection. Even though the lack of critical reflection by Scout is characteristic of a child, Scout diminishes the opportunity for an author to explain what the narrator does not. To explain, Harper Lee projects very little mature reflection on to the child narrator that typically could not racism's negative effects socially. However, Scout's nature as a child creates a perspective that accepts racist norms and traditions because she does not face them head on. Scout has stale observation and neglects the need for interpretation of events such as the Tom Robinson trial or everyday encounters with Mr. Raymond. Although, there are some critics who find Scout to be beneficial in her relatable nature to the young adult reader because of the



comical childness and “her unusual combination of objectivity and local color.”<sup>34</sup> This perspective is problematic because the novel has many people who reference it as being an introduction to the fight against racial inequality. For the purpose of this discussion of *Mockingbird*, Scout is a narrator that neither matures or shows reflective growth. While Scout is an entertaining narrator, she can digress the conversation around racial and social inequality. Likewise, this is a narrator who has less knowledge than a young teen reader. Scout has little judgement and limited experience to inform a reflection of racial inequalities in the story.

To continue, Scout has an innocent, naïve perspective throughout the novel that forces the reader to fill in the gaps of critical reflection. The most reflection the reader gets from Scout still hints that she does not understand the social implications of the events occurring. The following scene is an example that shows Scout’s childish instincts and emotional immaturity. To set the scene, it’s the night before the Tom Robinson trial begins, and Jem and Scout watch their father, Atticus, have a meeting on the front lawn with some familiar towns people. Then moments later Atticus gets in the car and leaves. Out of pure curiosity, and because Atticus told Jem not to follow him, Jem leads Scout and her friend Dill to find Atticus. They discover Atticus sitting outside the county jail surrounded by a group of men. Scout narrates, “I made to run, but Jem caught me. ‘Don’t go to him,’ he said, ‘he might not like it. He’s all right, let’s go home. I just wanted to see where he was.’” (166) Now, Jem and Dill do not make a move, probably using their intuition to realize these are not the same friendly faces from before. But this intuition is not shared by Scout. Even after Jem attempts to stop her, Scout races forward and plops herself into the center of the herd, only to come to the realization that these people are strangers. Once in the

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<sup>34</sup> Holly Blackford, "Uncle Tom Melodrama with a Modern Point of View: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*," 165-86.

circle, Scout and Jem fight Atticus's pleas to leave this mob threatening to harm Tom Robinson and anyone that gets in the way. Scout fights against the mob in the way she would any normal scenario: she talks her way out of it, leaving these men astonished and apologetic no less. But the situation was serious: the night's events consisted of Scout blindly jumping into a lynch mob. Scout does not realize their purpose until much later that evening: "The full meaning of the night's events hit me and I began crying. Jem was awfully nice about it: for once he didn't remind me that people nearly nine years old didn't do things like that" (172). Instead of explaining what she believes the lynch mob to mean, she cries to her brother as she falls asleep, imagining Atticus alone and vulnerable. Granted, the emotional reaction of crying is natural. Scout's minimal reflection in the text and her physical reaction of tears is preceded by a memory of her father's nightly routine being disturbed: "the memory of Atticus calmly folding his newspaper and pushing back his hat became Atticus standing in the middle of an empty waiting street" (171). Scout's reflection and her tears are from the sadness she experiences when thinking about her father being vulnerable to harm. A true reflection of the meaning of the night would consist of the terrible nature of a lynch mob. However, there is no analysis of the group of strangers willing to harm her father in order to kill Tom Robinson. There is a conversation between Jem and Atticus that hits some of the important details about the lynch mob itself, but Scout only observes this conversation and does not say a word. As a result, Scout's child perspective portrays the lynch mob as important because it threatens her white, middle-class father, not because it represents a pinnacle of racial violence.

A child narrator tends to dramatize the gap between children and adults. The scene described above demonstrates this gap through the important sibling relationship: Scout is naïve and has childish tendencies, Jem shows signs of growth and maturity relative to his kid sister.

First, Scout is clearly a child in her uncalculated decision to run and jump into what was a lynch mob surrounding Atticus. Second, Jem shows growth within a matter of pages from youthful curiosity to his personal growth in comforting Scout. Scout is a child and her role in this novel shows to be observation, not reflection. Furthermore, Scout's actions focus the attention of this passage not on the danger of the lynch mob but rather on how easy she is able to navigate and diffuse the situation. In other words, this scene shows that Scout as the narrator changes the center of focus away from the extreme dangers a lynch presents to black people and towards Scout's childish adventures.

Nonetheless, the power of childishness proves to be both beneficial and inhibiting to the progression of events in *Mockingbird*. Scout's naive and innocent choices show that a child's young mind can diffuse adult confrontations. However, the childishness of Scout's perspective is inhibiting because it gives a skewed perspective on many events of the Jim Crow South. Even more, Scout's lack of reflection throughout the novel removes a lot of opportunity to see the flaws in Atticus. For example, the night when Scout and Jem find Atticus surrounded by a lynch mob in front of the jail inspires further discussion between Atticus and Jem. The children fight off the lynch mob, but Scout continues to remain in the dark on the meaning behind the mob of people. The next morning, Atticus explains that everyone has his or her own perspective worth giving credit to. This is a theme Atticus continues to teach about children and humanity that has later consequences, but Scout does not push back.

Atticus placed his fork beside his knife and pushed his plate aside. "Mr. Cunningham's basically a good man," he said, "he just has his blind spots along with the rest of us."

Jem spoke. "Don't call that a blind spot. He'da killed you last night when he first went there."

“He might have hurt me a little,’ Atticus conceded, ‘but son, you’ll understand folks a little better when you’re older. A mob’s always made up of people, no matter what. Mr. Cunningham was part of a mob last night, but he was still a man. Every mob in every little Southern town is always made up of people you know – doesn’t say much for them, does it?”

“I’ll say not,” said Jem.

“So it took an eight-year-old child to bring ‘em to their senses, didn’t it?” said Atticus.

“That proves something – that a gang of wild animals can be stopped, simply because they’re still human. Hmp, maybe we need a police force of children...you children last night made Walter Cunningham stand in my shoes for a minute. That was enough.”

Well, I hoped Jem would understand folks a little better when he was older; I wouldn’t.

(173)

Atticus reflects here a key aspect of the novel; children remind adults of their humanity. In this quarrel between father and son, one line ends the conversation, “that a gang of wild animals can be stopped, simply because they’re still human.” The children are the ones who can remind the most inhumane adults that everyone is human. Everyone was a child or has a child. Everyone, at one point, did not have the opinions or concerns that this mob has. Why is that? As Atticus puts it, they are all human and can have a little bit of empathy for once.

On the other hand, the language Atticus uses to explain the lynch mob to his children reduces the stakes of the situation. Atticus labels the lynch mob’s actions to be a result of the “blind spot” in folks. Instead of Scout, Jem pushes back against this explanation immediately. When Jem responds to Atticus by saying, “Don’t call that a blind spot. He’d killed you last night when he first went there,” Jem heightens the stakes. His explicit words, “He’d killed you,”

moves the point of view on the scene through language that perceives a lack of empathy to be simply savagery by the town folks. Jem shares his reflections through a critique of Atticus's words by saying that a blind spot reduces the effect of the mob's bad intentions. Furthermore, Atticus reduces the stakes as a way to teach his children that people are not to blame because "A mob's always made up of people, no matter what. Mr. Cunningham was part of a mob last night, but he was still a man." Here Atticus explains the actions of Mr. Cunningham and the people in the mob because he realizes that his neighbors have faults. In other words, Atticus is more concerned with teaching his children to be respectful of people that they disagree with. He wants to teach them that the lynch mob is made up of humans too, that their perspective seems reasonable in their minds. This is another moment in which this novel's lessons are embedded in racist themes. Atticus's conclusion does not give a helpful lesson to children of color. To reduce the lynch mob's intention to kill a man for the color of his skin as a fault of being human is offensive to people of color reading this book. In any case, since Atticus is the voice of reason for his children, or at least Scout, this language of accepting people despite their moral differences carries over into the perspective of the narrator.

Lastly, the repetitions of the word "folks" throughout the entire text reinforces the feeling of a community and neighborhood when referring to the lynch mob. Overall, the exact language that Scout uses distances herself from any sort of conflict. This similar language is seen again in the conclusion of the novel is when Scout decides to avoid people who pose differences in her life: "I came to the conclusion that people were just peculiar. I withdrew from them, and never thought about them until I was forced to" (268). Furthermore, it is especially harmful for Scout to be exclusively uninterested the negative impacts "peculiar" people can have on others because she is the eyes and ears for the reader to gain access to this story's historical context. As a result

of reading things like “folks” in relation to the perpetrators of a potential lynching, there is an alarming normalcy in the way neighbors with harmful, racist beliefs are framed. Scout says folks and shows little concern with her lynch mob neighbors in the end of this passage, “Well, I hoped Jem would understand folks a little better when he was older; I wouldn’t” (173). Jem questions the humanity of the lynch mob, and rightfully so, but Atticus defends the mob by blaming Jem’s adolescence. Conversely, Scout does not question these men. Instead, Scout uses “folks.” just like her father, to comment on the abnormal behavior of a lynch mob filled with townspeople. Then she states that she will never understand the behavior of these people even when she is older. Given the conclusion shown above, the reader’s interpretation determines if this line is Scout rebelling against Atticus if she is simple uninterested in conflict that does not directly affect her. However, the chronology of these two scenes suggests the latter. Scout gives very little thought and effort to reflecting on the lesson Atticus delivers in this scene following the lynch mob and moves on to a new topic. Later, as we have seen, Scout brings this language of people’s differences again and chooses to disengage. In all, Scout as the narrator is more than just a peculiar choice, but an inhibiting factor of *Mockingbird* because many people experience the novel as the starting point in a fight for social justice.

As a first-person narrator, Scout takes on a dual role as a character in the novel and the voice of the narrator. The dual role of Scout the child narrator and funny, child character takes away from the plot’s full development as a social justice novel because it is a distraction from the substantial points in the story:

‘Aw, she doesn’t know what we’re talkin’ about,’ said Jem. ‘Scout, this is too old for you ain’t it?’

‘It most certainly is not, I know every word you’re saying.’ Perhaps I was too convincing, because Jem hushed and never discussed the subject again.’

(230)

Here, Scout admits that she is too young to understand what is going on in the Tom Robinson trial and it is clear her voice is simply a tool for observing the complex scenes unfold. At this moment, Jem is asking Scout if she knows about rape laws and statutes. The truth is obviously that Scout, a carefree eight-year-old, has no idea what any of this means. And yet her childish tendencies allow her to act quickly and cause a halt in the dialogue. For instance, Scout lets her emotional competitiveness with Jem take over her actions in saying, “It most certainly is not, I know every word you’re saying.” Then, she admits her lie to the reader with, “Perhaps I was too convincing.” The dialogue, which consists of Jem and the Reverend discussing the legal and the social implications of black man and a white woman regarding alleged rape, stops because of Scout: “Jem hushed and never discussed the subject again.” The conversation may have continued elsewhere, but Scout is the sole eyes and ears in to this story the reader does not get exposure to the discussion and its potential analysis.

Yet Scout also has some beneficial qualities as a child narrator because she has the ability to see things unencumbered by previous experience. Children offer a different type of understanding than adults. For example, Scout as a young girl presents an impressionable mind that yearns for curiosity which fascinates. We can see this in many instances, but let us focus again on her interaction with Mr. Raymond outside the courthouse. Mr. Raymond has cheerily shared his secret game he plays on the community of Maycomb with Scout and Dill. Scout’s first reaction is a clear sign of what her community has conditioned her to feel: “I had a feeling that I shouldn’t be here listening to this sinful man who had mixed children and didn’t care who knew

it” (221). Today, readers would critique a community that believes fathering a mixed-race child constitutes sin. Here, Scout exhibits a judgmental, adult perspective on interracial relations by repeating the lessons of racial hierarchy that her white community upholds. Although this is an unfortunate line to imagine coming out of a young child’s mouth, we do see a shift immediately in the same sentence. Scout continues, “but he was fascinating. I have never encountered a being who deliberately perpetrated fraud against himself” (221-2). Scout is confused and challenged in this moment. Her Aunt Alexandra constantly voices her disapproval of the integration of whites and blacks. In fact, she finds it immoral, as she says prior to this conversation, “Mr. Dolphus Raymond was an evil man” (220). Scout’s adult influences lead her to hold these popular opinions and morals. But then we see Scout also imitate her father’s better moments when she questions the mode of operation in her town. Scout is able to contemplate what it means for Mr. Raymond to choose to live with a community that is not socially his own. As a result of her conflicting emotions Scout must question Mr. Raymond further: “But why has he entrusted us with his deepest secret I asked him?” (222.) Finally, Scout and Dill find out that Mr. Raymond discloses his balancing act “because they’re children and [they] can understand it” (222). The implication is, in fact, that children are not yet set in their moral ways and can be more accepting of differences. The values which one holds eventually take shape, but at some stage these values have to develop. The development period is during childhood. Thus, Scout and Dill are willing to talk to Mr. Raymond, making them the perfect audience.

In this scene, then, Mr. Raymond takes on the role of an unconventional source of wisdom. His wisdom is that children are unencumbered by society’s influence, so he can be honest about his intentions of pretending to be drunk. His wisdom is unconventional because the novel also has a contradictory attitude toward children. On the one hand, children do not



understand a lot of events because they have not grown up. On the other hand, the innocence gives children more opportunity to be accepting of racial equality and integration. Here, the fact that children have not grown up is what makes them the perfect audience for Mr. Raymond's secret. In other words, since his wisdom is unconventional there is no audience better than the unexperienced. And it is for this reason that Scout and Dill, the youngest characters of the bunch, are his audience. Furthermore, Scout and Dill are about to return to the court house when Mr. Raymond leaves them with one final piece of knowledge:

Mr. Raymond said, "I don't reckon it's – Miss Jean Louise, you don't know your pa's not a run-of-the-mill man, it'll take a few years for that to sink in – you haven't seen enough of the world yet. You haven't seen this town, but all you gotta do is step back inside the court-house." (222)

In this moment Mr. Raymond suggests that Scout is at the beginning of her journey with racism in world. Whether it be just in Maycomb or elsewhere, there will continue to be instances of unfairness and injustice. He hints that her first encounter with it will be coming soon: all she has to "do is step back inside the court-house." And yet, Scout does not take this piece of wise advice and start to form opinions the way Jem does from the trial. She is observant, but that is all. In the end, Mr. Raymond is important because he makes it obvious that Scout is a naïve child, open to impression but not yet ready to draw critical conclusions like her older brother, Jem.

The youthful reader of *Mockingbird* must be conscious of the impressionable and innocent nature of Scout. *Mockingbird* may be a white student's first encounters with racism and literary commentaries on racism. Additionally, since it is likely to be a first opportunity to read and analyze racism, the young reader could mirror the minor awakening that Scout goes through. Thus, accepting the sad realization that some people have opinions that seem morally wrong. The

path which a student could take in analyzing Scout offers a disappointing end. First, there is shock from the encounter with blunt racism. Second, there is confusion on why racism and racists exist. Third, the subject, the impressionable child, must find his or her opinion and understanding of racism and racial divides in society. The last step is where Scout's role as the narrator is disappointing. In other words, if Scout is modeling for young adult readers an encounter with racism and injustice, her trajectory is unfulfilling. When a reader sees the interaction of Scout with Mr. Raymond, it is easy for the young adult reader to react and question in the exact same manner as Scout. However, Scout does not go through significant growth on her morals, which we see when she does not make a final judgement in her concluding words. In other words, Scout does not demonstrate the shift from naive childish interest into probing investigation and questioning, particularly at the level of ethics.

What Jem's development reveals about growing up

A popular character for youthful reader to idealize is Atticus Finch. Yet, the perspective of Atticus Finch presents a confusing combination of integrity and apathy because his actions do not always follow suit with his words. This tension is most clearly seen between Atticus and Jem in the moments following the end of the Tom Robinson trial.

While both Scout and Jem go through respective scenes of character growth, Jem goes through more substantial growth. Jem reflects on many experiences in the novel that signal his encounters with the tough realities of growing up. Scout only observes Jem react, learn, and grow up in the span of the novel.

For the first time in his life, Jem Finch experiences an unfortunate reality with Tom Robinson's verdict of guilt in *Mockingbird*. Through the close observation of Atticus's reactions

and consolations, the meaning behind Jem's stiff reaction becomes clear. Jem displays an inability to comprehend how a seemingly innocent man could be proven guilty. This represents a point of growth for Jem out of childhood and paradoxically reveals a point of ethical regression for the overall novel.

Jem's character reveals the vulgar nature of society's influence on people through a structural contrast between Jem and Atticus in the moments following the Tom Robinson trial. Jem's heightened display of sensitivity is an important indicator of innocence because it shows the gravity of injustice in the trial. As can be seen in the first moments following the trial's end, Jem is physically overwhelmed by the unfortunate outcome: "It was Jem's turn to cry. His face was streaked with angry tears as we made our way through the cheerful crowd. 'It ain't right,' he muttered, all the way to the corner of the square where we found Atticus waiting" (234). First, the use of the informal "ain't" is possibly a result of the physical reaction setting to a default of the community vernacular. Then Jem begins to feel a physical frustration as he is thrown into an emotional trance. How could this child's community prioritize the color of a person's skin over the word of law? Jem's frustration and confusion physically upset him to the point of tears. The reaction grows stronger with the repetition of this line as Jem vocalizes his dismay in a mesmerized or possessed cadence of "It ain't right," all the way until the characters meet Atticus. The shock of an unjust verdict throws Jem a curve ball that he cannot possibly be prepared to face. Simultaneously, Jem's dismay is contradicted by the "cheerful crowd" outside the courthouse (234). The vivid and audible contrast between the townspeople and Jem is clear when he, the helpless muttering child, is met by Atticus "standing under the street light looking as though nothing had happened: his vest was buttoned, his collar and tie were neatly in place, his watch-chain glistened, he was his impassive self again" (234). The appearance of the three

different reactions here shows the impact of the trial verdict. Jem is unbearably distraught. The white community is joyous over its win. Atticus is disappointed, but unfazed by the loss to racial hierarchy. Moreover, the difference between a mature adult and a young, naïve child carries the story along to illustrate the difference in societal awareness. Jem's reaction captures the shock of one's first encounter with injustice, while Atticus acts like his proper and impassive self because he most likely has fought for justice and lost to the societal structure before. As a result of the contrast between father and son, Jem's reaction is heightened and seems to be one of a child's innocence being shattered. The trance that Jem falls into is the visceral reaction to moral rights and wrongs. The arguably more natural reaction in this case is shock, while the adult mind understands and accepts the social norms.

Jem comes by his confusion and grief over Tom Robinson's conviction honestly. Jem does not concede to the idea that the norms of racist structures will trump facts and law. It is the law, after all. In fact, Jem continues to remain in shock all the way home and until bedtime, when he barely gets the strength up to ask, "'Atticus –d'... 'How could they do it, how could they?'" (235). Here, Jem is in utter dismay when he bleakly asks Atticus how this outcome could possibly happen. Direct and concise, Atticus admits, "I don't know, but they did it. They've done it before and they did it tonight and they'll do it again and when they do it – seems that only children weep. Good night" (235). To start, Atticus says, "I don't know." Atticus cannot explain the reasoning behind convicting an innocent man because it is beyond the logic of law. Atticus has to accept defeat by conceding that jury has spoken once again. In short, the opinion of the court favors the protection of a racial hierarchy. For many reasons, Atticus fails to protect an innocent man in this system. A large reason is that the system of social ranking in the South is determined by the color of one's skin first and social class second. The all-white jury did not

want to deliver a decision that would change the social system they are comfortable with. Furthermore, Atticus shares this acceptance that he lost by saying that everyone might as well end the day and go to bed. However, this action of accepting defeat is problematic because it accepts the racist hierarchy will remain in place for the time being. The reaction Atticus has to the loss in comparison with Jem's reaction helps the reader understand the stark difference between passion and compliance.

Moreover, Atticus teaches Jem an important lesson indirectly through his concession to the racial injustice in Maycomb. The lesson is in the explanation Atticus offers his son regarding children: "seems that only children weep." Why wouldn't adults weep? Adults have experienced the "Tom Robinson Trial" many times over, each resulting in the same verdict. Atticus suggests that it is children who weep because they have never experienced it before. Since children only weep, it is reasonable to conclude that cases like this one can serve a turning point for children. The kids of the town struggle to understand the unfairness and injustice in the racial hierarchy as well as the weight it carries in the community until the injustice happens before their eyes. Specifically, the fact that Jem is able to comprehend and strongly objects the injustice in this trial and in his town shows the reader that the child's naïve mind could be worth listening too. The children cry because this is a deplorable aspect of the social norms. Jem cries, feels sick from distress, and fumbles through his words, all because a child is not numb to this reality. Jem's perspective is still childish in the way that he cries; however, Jem faces the reality of the trial's injustice and yearns to understand why the community could convict an innocent man. Therefore, it is the growth into adulthood that removes the unfiltered, uncultured perspective on society. In other words, Atticus knows the truth of the status quo and beyond fighting a battle

that is already lost. Even so, external social powers do not phase the like-minded adult because at the age of matured social awareness one can expect social norms to remain in place.

Finally, the child perspective is pure and uninhibited by the social expectations that first adults willingly accept then disregard. The naive perspective is the one which will not ignore injustice. Jem is stunned by the fact that an innocent man would be convicted under the law when his defense counsel demonstrates how objective the evidence is in favor of innocence. In contrast, Scout's naivety inhibits a deep understanding of the social injustice in the trial; so, her observations are inconclusive and uninterested in further explanation. To illustrate, the last part of this passage, "we walked home," reminds the reader that the entire scene is from the point of view of Scout. Scout, the narrator, simply observes others around her as they face the disappointment of racial inequality in the community. The only reflection we get from her in this pivotal scene is a narration of the emotions Jem and Atticus show. Scout is too young to analyze the deeper meanings of experiences like the wrongful conviction of Tom Robinson. With Scout as the child narrator, there is not as much sympathy for her older brother's emotional reaction. She finds Jem to be dramatic, while expressing that Atticus maintains poise at a time of loss because he is an adult. Indeed, the audible tentativeness in Jem's reaction is partially due to his age and experience, this being his first experience of an injustice that will directly determine the future course of a person's life. And the fact that Scout does not comprehend the maturity of Jem's grief means that she does not understand the gravity of social implications the trial has. Nevertheless, it would seem only human to feel grief and sadness when an innocent man is sent to prison, especially because in those days prison almost certainly lead to death. The white community, including Atticus, will continue to maintain racial hierarchy because the social structure is too powerful for one or a few people to overcome.

## Conclusion

The perspective of the child narrator perpetuates the acceptance of racism in *Mockingbird*. Scout as the child narrator diminishes a lot of the greater themes going on in this novel. The voice of Scout is not the only thing that keeps the reader from a clear reading of this racist novel. Scout does in fact show curiosity and personal reflection in this novel. However, this reflection is almost exclusive to the mental and physical state of her father and brother. In the climax of this novel, the delivery of Tom Robinson's verdict and conviction, Scout narrates the course of events in a way that ignores any discussion of race, justice, or legal implications. While an adult narrator may understand that Tom's guilty verdict is a sign that segregation is more important than constitutional rights to a fair trial. Instead, Scout is consumed by physical grief for her upset brother and solemn father. The moments leading up to the verdict are filled with words of anxiety from Jem, but the text breaks away to Scout's inner thoughts of narration to build up to the climax of the scene:

I saw something only a lawyer's child could be expected to see, could be expected to watch for, and it 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.

A jury never looks at a defendant it has convicted, and when this jury came in, not one of them looked at Tom Robinson. (233)

Scout is a lawyer's child; so, she knows to take her time and observe. She can notice little mannerisms and body language signs that tell what could possibly happen next. This trait of her intuition is a matter of her specific upbringing. She knew that Tom Robinson lost and that Tom would get a guilty verdict because "A jury never looks at a defendant it has convicted, and when this jury came in, not one of them looked at Tom Robinson."

Ironically, Scout does not react at all to the verdict of guilt regarding the emotions of Tom Robinson. Scout is frozen from the trial verdict for a reason one would not think: “Someone was punching me, but I was reluctant to take my eyes from the people below us, and from the image of Atticus’s lonely walk down the aisle” (233). While the immediate consideration of Tom Robinson seems reasonable, instead Scout is concerned with her father. She is probably concerned with her father because she is so young. Scout does not give thought to why it hurts for Atticus to have lost. Scout simply knows that he is alone as he walks out of the courtroom having lost. Atticus’s loss is a loss to legal precedent and to the unwritten laws of obligation to maintain white power. Scout is far too young to reasonably be able to comprehend the reasons for these tensions between the black community and the white community. Scout cannot understand what it means for her father to have lost even though he crafted an argument that eloquently displays the truth of the trial and its injustice. Scout cannot give a full picture of what happens in this novel because she is so young.

The reader of *Mockingbird* misses the full complexity of this novel if he or she turns away from the influence of the novel’s language and child’s perspective. While an adult reader picks this book up and reads between the lines to identify the complex social issues at hand, the young readers of twelve to fifteen will only continue to be less aware of the Jim Crow South when reading *Mockingbird*. To this end, young readers even at the age of twelve may not read between the lines of their own volition. Teachers need to expand the understanding of *Mockingbird* to its benefits and its faults by guiding students through the novel and its historical context with a heavy emphasis on the role of the child narrator, Scout.



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