

To Kill a Mockingbird

Lecture Notes for students

Introduction

When I was Associate Professor at the University of Western Norway in 2017/2018, I taught English literature to Norwegian student teachers. One of the novels we read was Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I will post my lecture notes here so that other students around the world can have access to FREE study material.

Working as a university lecturer in Norway, one does not have much time for research or to proofread one's own lecture notes, due to the fact that one spends much of one's time in the lecture rooms, assessing students, and so on. So the following notes are not meant to be 'definitive study notes' but rather 'draft notes'.

*To Kill a Mockingbird*¹

Introduction

When *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published in 1960, it brought its young first-time author, Harper Lee, a startling amount of attention and notoriety. The novel replays three key years in the life of Scout Finch, the young daughter of an Alabama town's principled lawyer. The work was an instant sensation, becoming a best-seller and winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Scout's narrative relates how she and her elder brother Jem learn about fighting prejudice and upholding human dignity through the example of their father. Atticus Finch has taken on the legal defense of a black man who has been falsely charged with raping a white woman. Lee's story of the events surrounding the trial has been admired for its portrayal of Southern life during the 1930s, not only for its piercing examination of the causes and effects of racism, but because it created a model of tolerance and courage in the character of Atticus Finch. Some early reviewers found Scout's narration unconvincing, its

¹ "To Kill a Mockingbird." Novels for Students. . Retrieved August 30, 2017 from Encyclopedia.com: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/kill-mockingbird>. Access date: 30 August 2017.

style and language too sophisticated for a young girl. Since then, however, critics have hailed Lee's rendering of a child's perspective—as told by an experienced adult—as one of the most technically proficient in modern fiction. A regional novel dealing with universal themes of tolerance, courage, compassion, and justice, *To Kill a Mockingbird* combined popular appeal with literary excellence to ensure itself an enduring place in modern American literature.

Author Biography

Although Harper Lee has long maintained that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not autobiographical, critics have often remarked upon the striking similarities between the author's own childhood and that of her youthful heroine, Scout Finch. Nelle Harper Lee was born in 1926, the youngest of three children of Amasa Coleman Lee, a lawyer who practiced in the small town of Monroeville, Alabama. Like Scout, who could be bullied into submission with the remark that she was "gettin' more like a girl," Lee was "a rough 'n' tough tomboy," according to childhood friends. Summers in Monroeville were brightened by the visits of young Truman Capote, who stayed with the Lees' next-door neighbors and who later became a famous writer himself. The games young Nelle and her brother played with Capote were likely the inspiration for the adventures Scout and Jem had with Dill, their own "summer" friend.

After graduating from the public schools of Monroeville, Lee attended a small college in nearby Montgomery before attending the University of Alabama for four years. She left school six months short of earning a law degree, however, in order to pursue a writing career. In the early 1950s, the author worked as an airline reservations clerk in New York City, writing essays and short stories in her spare time. After her literary agent suggested that one of her stories might be expanded into a novel, Lee quit her airline job. With the financial support of some friends, she spent several years revising the manuscript of *To Kill a Mockingbird* before submitting it to publishers. Several more months of revision followed the feedback of her editors, who found the original version more like a string of short stories than a cohesive novel. The final draft

was finally completed in 1959 and published in 1960. The novel was a dramatic success, earning generally positive reviews and achieving bestseller status. Lee herself attained considerable celebrity as the novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1961 and was made into an Oscar-winning film in 1962. Since then, aside from a few magazine pieces in the early 1960s, the reclusive author has published nothing, although she has been reported to have been working on a second novel. Despite the lack of a follow-up work, Lee's literary reputation remains secure and even has grown since the debut of her remarkable first novel.

Plot Summary

Part One

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* depicts the life of its young narrator, Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, in the small town of Maycomb, Alabama, in the mid-1930s. Scout opens the novel as a grown woman reflecting back on key events in her childhood. The novel covers a two-year period, beginning when Scout is six and ending when she is eight. She lives with her father, Atticus, a widowed lawyer, and her older brother, Jem (short for Jeremy). Their black housekeeper, Calpurnia, tends to the children. Scout and Jem's summer playmate, Dill Harris, shares the Finch children's adventures and adds imagination and intrigue to their game playing. In the novel, we see Scout grow in awareness and come to new understandings about her town, her family, and herself.

During the summer before Scout enters school, the children become fascinated with Arthur "Boo" Radley, a reclusive neighbor. Radley's father, a religious fanatic, confined Boo to the house because he was arrested for youthful pranks as a teenager. Some years later, Boo casually stabbed his father in the leg with a pair of scissors, confirming people's worst fears about him. The children are naturally afraid of and intrigued by such a "malevolent phantom," as Scout calls him. Yet they only approach the house once, when Jem runs and touches the porch on a dare.

Scout enters first grade the following September and must confront new challenges and learn new ways to deal with people. She cannot understand, for instance, her young teacher's lack of familiarity with the town families and their peculiarities, such as the Cunningham children's poverty and pride. Later, Atticus explains to Scout that she must put herself in others' places before judging them, one of the many lessons she learns by making mistakes.

With summer's return, Dill arrives and the children's absorption with Boo Radley begins again in earnest. Ultimately, they attempt to look in the house to see Boo, but a shotgun blast from Nathan Radley, Boo's brother, drives them off. In their panic, Jem catches his overalls in the Radley fence and must abandon them. Later that night, he returns to retrieve them and finds them neatly folded on the fence with the ripped fabric poorly re sewn.

Their contact with Boo Radley continues into the school year. Before the previous summer, Scout and Jem had discovered gum and Indian head pennies in a knot-holed tree by the Radley house. Now more objects begin to appear in the knothole, including replicas of Scout and Jem carved in soap. They decide to leave a note for whoever is leaving the objects, but before they can, Nathan Radley fills the hole with cement, upsetting Jem.

Scout soon encounters trouble at school when a schoolmate condemns Atticus for "defending niggers." Atticus confirms that he is defending a black man named Tom Robinson, who is accused of raping a white woman, and that his conscience compels him to do no less. He warns her that she will encounter more accusations of this kind and to remember that despite their views, the people who cast slurs at them are still their friends. Atticus later tells his brother Jack that he hopes he can guide his children through this time without them becoming bitter and "without catching Maycomb's usual disease" of racism.

That Christmas, Atticus gives the children airrifles and admonishes them to shoot no mockingbirds. Miss Maudie Atkinson, their neighbor,

explains Atticus's reasons when she says that "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy." Hence, it is a sin to kill them. At this time, the children feel disappointed in Atticus because he is old (almost fifty) and does nothing of interest. They soon learn, however, about one of their father's unique talents when he shoots a rabid dog that threatens the neighborhood, killing the beast with one shot. The neighbors tell them that Atticus is the best shot in the county, he just chooses not to shoot a gun unless he must. Scout admires Atticus for his shooting talent, but Jem admires him for his gentlemanly restraint.

Part Two

The family's involvement in Tom Robinson's trial dominates Part Two of the novel. One personal inconvenience of the trial is the arrival of Aunt Alexandra, Atticus's sister, who comes to tend to the family. Scout finds her presence unwelcome because Aunt Alexandra disapproves of her tomboyish dress and activities and tries to make Scout wear dresses and attend women's socials.

The time for the trial arrives, and Atticus guards the jail door the night Tom Robinson is brought to Maycomb. The children, including Dill, sneak out to watch over him and soon become involved in a standoff. Carloads of men drive up and demand that Atticus let them have Tom Robinson, and he gently refuses. Scout recognizes a schoolmate's father, Mr. Cunningham, and asks him polite questions about his legal debt to Atticus, who did work for him, and about his son. Scout's innocent questioning of Mr. Cunningham shames him, and he convinces the men to leave.

The children also sneak to the courthouse to attend the trial. They sit in the balcony with the black townspeople because no seats are available on the ground floor. Atticus's questioning of Bob Ewell and Mayella Ewell, both of whom claim Tom Robinson beat and raped Mayella, reveals their lies. Mayella was beaten primarily on the right side of her body by a left-handed man. By having Bob Ewell sign his name, Atticus shows him to be lefthanded. Tom Robinson's left arm, however, is

crippled from a boyhood accident. Tom's story rings truer. He contends that Mayella invited him into the house and tried to seduce him, a story made credible by Mayella's and Tom's descriptions of her lonely life. Tom resisted her advances, but before he could leave Bob Ewell discovered them. Tom ran and Ewell beat Mayella. To avoid social disgrace, the Ewells claimed Tom had raped her.

Despite the evidence, Tom is convicted. Atticus has expected this verdict and believes he can win on appeal. Jem has difficulty accepting the injustice of the verdict. Others, however, remain angry over Atticus's sincere defense of Robinson, particularly Bob Ewell. Ewell confronts Atticus, threatens him, and spits on him. Soon after, Tom Robinson's story ends in tragedy as he is shot trying to escape from prison. He ran because he believed he could find no justice in a whitedominated legal system.

The following October, Scout dresses as a ham for the school Halloween pageant. On the way home from the pageant, she and Jem are followed, then attacked. Scout cannot see their assailant because of her costume, but she hears Jem grappling with him and hears Jem being injured. After the confused struggle, she feels a man lying on the ground and sees another man carrying Jem. She follows them home. The doctor arrives and assures her that Jem is alive and has suffered only a broken arm. The man who carried him home is standing in Jem's room. To Scout's tearful amazement, she realizes that he is Boo Radley. Sheriff Heck Tate informs them that Bob Ewell attacked them and that only Scout's costume saved her. Ewell himself now lies dead, stabbed in the ribs. Atticus believes Jem killed Ewell in self-defense, but Tate makes him realize that Boo Radley actually stabbed Ewell and saved both children's lives. The men agree to claim that Ewell fell on his knife in order to save Boo the spectacle of a trial. Scout walks Boo home:

He had to stoop a little to accommodate me, but if Miss Stephanie Crawford was watching from her upstairs window, she would see Arthur Radley escorting me down the sidewalk, as any gentleman would do.

We came to the street light on the corner, and I wondered how many times Dill had stood there hugging the fat pole, watching, waiting, hoping. I wondered how many times Jem and I had made this journey, but I entered the Radley front gate for the second time in my life. Boo and I walked up the steps to the porch. His fingers found the front doorknob. He gently released my hand, opened the door, went inside, and shut the door behind him. I never saw him again.

Neighbors bring food with death and flowers with sickness and little things in between. Boo was our neighbor. He gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives. But neighbors give in return. We never put back into the tree what we took out of it; we had given him nothing, and it made me sad.

She returns home to Atticus, who stays up all night waiting for Jem to awake.

Characters

Aunt Alexandra

See Alexandra Finch Hancock

Miss Maudie Atkinson

Maudie Atkinson is a strong, supportive woman who lives across the street from the Finches. A forthright speaker, she never condescends to Jem and Scout, but speaks to them as equals. It is Miss Maudie who affirms that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird, since "they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us." A respected community member who often teasingly reproaches the children, Miss Maudie nevertheless has a impish streak: she likes to quote scripture back to conservative religious folk who frown on her brightly colored garden. Miss Maudie provides another example of bravery to the children when her home bums down. Instead of lamenting her fate, she tells Jem she looks forward to rebuilding a smaller house which will have more room for her flowers.

Mr. Avery

A good-natured if somewhat coarse neighbor of the Finches who helps fight the fire at Miss Maudie's house at risk to his own life.

Calpurnia

One of several strong female figures in the lives of the Finch children, Calpurnia is the family's black housekeeper. She has helped to raise Jem and Scout since their mother's death four years ago. Like Atticus, Calpurnia is a strict but loving teacher, particularly in regard to Scout, whose enthusiasm sometimes makes her thoughtless. On Scout's first day of school, for example, Calpurnia scolds Scout for criticizing the table manners of Walter Cunningham Jr., whom the children have brought home as a lunch guest. That day after school, however, Calpurnia prepares Scout's favorite food, crackling bread, as a special

treat. Calpurnia also gives Scout her first awareness of the contrast between the worlds of black and white. During a visit to Calpurnia's church, her use of black dialect with her friends makes Scout realize that Calpurnia has a wider life outside the Finch household. Calpurnia also helps Scout understand how people can serve as a bridge between these differing worlds. Although the majority of parishioners welcome them during their church visit, one woman challenges the white children. Calpurnia responds by calling them her guests and saying "it's the same God, ain't it?"

Stephanie Crawford

The "neighborhood scold" who is always ready to gossip about anything or anyone.

Walter Cunningham Jr.

A poor but proud classmate of Scout's.

Walter Cunningham Sr.

Walter Cunningham, Sr., is a member of a poor family who "never took anything they couldn't pay back." A former client of Atticus's, he paid for legal service with goods such as firewood and hickory nuts. After Scout recognizes him in the potential lynch mob and speaks to him of his son, he leads the crowd away from violence.

Link Deas

A local farmer who hires a lot of black help and once employed Tom Robinson.

Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose

According to Scout, Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose is "the meanest old woman who ever lived." She regularly insults and harasses the children as they walk by. When Jem wrecks her garden in retaliation for a nasty remark about his father, Atticus punishes him by forcing him to spend

many hours reading to her. She dies later that year, and Jem learns that his reading helped her to courageously defeat an addiction to morphine.

Bob Ewell

The head of family who's been "the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations," Bob Ewell is despised by Maycomb society as a shiftless drunkard. He is unable to keep a job, spends all his relief money on alcohol, and traps animals outside of hunting season. He provides little support to his large, motherless family, and is reputed to beat his children (and perhaps sexually abuse them too, as Mayella's testimony hints). Angered and shamed by his exposure on the witness stand, Ewell makes threats to Atticus and others involved in the trial, but never risks direct confrontation. This cowardice reaches its peak in his violent attack on Scout and Jem, during which he is killed by Boo Radley.

Mayella Ewell

The eldest daughter of Bob Ewell, Mayella Ewell lives a lonely life keeping house for her father and seven siblings without assistance. Although she can only afford small gestures such as a potted plant, Mayella tries to brighten her situation and the lives of her siblings. During the trial it is revealed that Tom Robinson's occasional stops to help her with heavy chores were her only contact with a sympathetic soul. When Bob Ewell discovers Mayella's attempt to seduce the unwilling Tom, his violent outburst leads her to accuse Tom of rape. Despite her situation, she loses the reader's sympathy when she repays Tom's kindness with open contempt and a lie that costs him his life. The fact that the jury accepts her word over his, even when it is demonstrated to be false, further illustrates the malicious power of racist thinking.

Mrs. Gertrude Farrow

One of the hypocritical members of Aunt Alexandra's missionary circle.

Atticus Finch

Atticus Finch, Scout's widowed father, is a member of one of Maycomb County's oldest and most prominent families. Nevertheless, he refuses to use his background as an excuse to hold himself above others and instead is a model of tolerance and understanding. Atticus is a lawyer and also a member of the state legislature, elected by townspeople who respect his honesty even if they don't always approve of his actions. For example, when Atticus is appointed the defense attorney for Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman, the town disapproves because he aims to do the best job he can. As a father Atticus is affectionate with Jem and Scout, ready with a hug when they need comfort and available to spend time reading to them. Although he allows his children freedom to play and explore, he is also a firm disciplinarian, always teaching his children to think of how their actions affect others and devising punishments to teach his children valuable lessons. When Jem damages the camellia bushes of Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose, a neighbor who scolds and insults the children, Atticus sentences him to read to her each day. As Jem reads, he and Scout witness the dying woman's battle against her morphine addiction and learn the true meaning of courage: "it's when you know you're licked before you begin but you see it through no matter what," Atticus tells them. Atticus's own actions in arguing the Robinson case demonstrate this kind of courage, and his behavior throughout embodies values of dignity, integrity, determination, and tolerance. Although Atticus's character is somewhat idealized, critic William T. Going calls Lee's creation "the most memorable portrait in recent fiction of the just and equitable Southern liberal."

Jack Finch

See John Hale Finch

Jean Louise Finch

The narrator of the novel, Jean Louise "Scout" Finch is almost six years old at the time her story begins. A tomboy most frequently clad in overalls, Scout spends much of her time with her older brother Jem and

is constantly trying to prove herself his equal. Throughout the book Scout maintains an innocence and an innate sense of right and wrong that makes her the ideal observer of events, even if she doesn't always fully understand them. She naturally questions the injustices she sees instead of accepting them as "the way things are." For instance, she doesn't understand why her aunt makes social distinctions based on "background" when Scout thinks "there's just one kind of folks: Folks." Her independence and outspokenness often get Scout into trouble, however; she is quick to respond to insults with her fists and frequently opens her mouth at inappropriate moments, as when she rudely remarks on the table manners of a guest. By the end of the novel, however, eight-year-old Scout has learned a measure of restraint, primarily through the influence and example of her father Atticus.

Jem Finch

See Jeremy Finch

Jeremy Finch

Four years older than his sister Scout, Jeremy "Jem" Finch seems to have a deeper understanding of the events during the three years of the novel, for his emotional reactions to them are stronger. As the story begins, Jem is a quick-witted but fun-loving ten year old who spends a lot of time in creative play with Scout and Dill Harris, a summer visitor to the neighborhood. Jem is frequently exasperated by his sister, and requires her to keep her distance during school hours. Nevertheless, for the most part Jem is an understanding and encouraging older brother, allowing Scout to join in his games and even dignifying her with an occasional fistfight. He is anxious to please his father, and hates to disappoint him. When Jem loses his pants in the "raid" on the Radley house, he insists on returning for them during the middle of the night—not so much to avoid the pain of punishment, but because "Atticus ain't ever whipped me since I can remember. I wanta keep it that way." As he approaches adolescence, however, Jem becomes quieter and more easily agitated: he reacts angrily when Mrs. Dubose leaves him a small peace

offering after her death. Although more socially aware than Scout, he is genuinely surprised at Tom Robinson's guilty verdict. The trial leaves Jem a little more withdrawn and less self-confident, and he spends much of the following fall concerned for his father's safety. He demonstrates his own courage, however, when he protects his sister from the attack of Bob Ewell without regard for his own safety.

John Hale Finch

Atticus's younger brother, a doctor who left Maycomb to study in Boston.

Scout Finch

See Jean Louise Finch

Miss Caroline Fisher

Scout's first-grade teacher who is a newcomer to Maycomb. She misunderstands the social order of Maycomb and punishes Scout for trying to explain it. She also comes into conflict with Scout because of the girl's reading ability.

Miss Gates

Scout's hypocritical third-grade teacher who condemns Hitler's persecution of the Jews even as she discriminates against her own students and complains about blacks "getting above themselves."

Mr. Gilmer

The circuit prosecutor from Abbottsville who leads the case against Tom Robinson.

Alexandra Finch Hancock

Atticus's sister, Alexandra Finch Hancock, is a conservative woman concerned with social and class distinctions and bound to the traditions of the South. She tries to counteract her brother's liberal influence on his

children by reminding them of their family's eminence and by trying to make Scout behave in a more ladylike manner. When she moves in with Atticus's family, her efforts to reform Scout include requiring her attendance at regular meetings of a "missionary circle," whose discussions focus on improving the lives of "heathens" in distant Africa rather than on the needy in their own town. Aunt Alexandra is not completely unsympathetic, however; she also shows—in private—some anger towards the hypocrites in her missionary circle. Although she disapproves of Atticus's role in the Robinson case, she becomes upset upon hearing news of Robinson's death during one of her parties. Her ability to continue on leads Scout to state that "if Auntie could be a lady at a time like this, so could I."

Francis Hancock

Scout and Jem's cousin and Alexandra's grandson.

Charles Baker Harris

Small and devilish, Charles Baker "Dill" Harris is Scout and Jem's summer friend. He instigates much of the children's mischief by daring Jem to perform acts such as approaching the Radley house. He seems to have a limitless imagination, and his appeal is only enhanced by his firsthand knowledge of movies such as *Dracula*. Seemingly ignored (but not neglected) by his parents, Dill enjoys his yearly visits to his aunt, Rachel Haverford, who lives next door to the Finches—he even runs away from home one summer to come to Maycomb. A year older than Scout, Dill has declared he will one day marry her, a statement she seems to accept matter-of-factly.

Dill Harris

See Charles Baker Harris

Rachel Haverford

Dill Harris's sympathetic aunt, who lives next door to the Finches.

Grace Merriweather

A member of Alexandra's missionary circle who has a reputation as the "most devout lady in Maycomb" even though she is a hypocritical bigot.

Arthur Radley

Arthur "Boo" Radley has a strong presence in the novel even though he isn't seen until its last pages. A local legend for several years, Boo is rumored to wander the neighborhood at night and dine on raw squirrels and cats. He has spent the last fifteen years secluded in his own house. An adolescent prank led his late father to place him under house arrest. His sinister reputation stems from a later incident, when it was rumored that he stabbed his father in the leg with a pair of scissors. Boo becomes a central figure in the imaginations of Scout, Jem, and their neighbor Dill Harris, for their summers are occupied with dramatic re-creations of his life and plans to lure "the monster" out of his house. Despite his history of being abused by his father, Boo is revealed to be a gentle soul through his unseen acts: the gifts he leaves in the tree; his mending of Jem's torn pants; the blanket he puts around Scout the night of the fire; and finally, his rescue of the children from Bob Ewell's murderous attack. The children's fear of Boo Radley, based on ignorance rather than knowledge, subtly reflects the prejudice of the town against Tom Robinson—a connection mirrored in the use of mockingbird imagery for both men.

Boo Radley

See Arthur Radley

Nathan Radley

Boo's hardhearted older brother who spoils Boo's secret game with the children by filling the empty treehole with cement.

Dolphus Raymond

A local man from a good white family with property who has a black mistress and children. He fosters a reputation as a drunk to give townspeople a reason to excuse his flaunting of social taboos.

Tom Robinson

Tom Robinson is a mild-mannered, conscientious black man whose kind acts earn him only trouble when Mayella Ewell accuses him of rape. Because he saw she was left alone to maintain the household without any help from her family, he often performed small chores for her. During his testimony, he relates that he felt sorry for the girl. This remark affronts the white men in the jury, who see it as evidence that he is overreaching his social station. Although he is clearly proven innocent, the all-white jury convicts him of rape, a crime punishable by death. Unconvinced that he can find justice on appeal, Robinson attempts to escape from his prison camp and is shot dead.

Reverend Sykes

The minister of Maycomb's black church.

Heck Tate

The sheriff of Maycomb who is sympathetic towards Atticus and who insists on keeping Boo Radley's role in the death of Bob Ewell a secret.

Judge John Taylor

The deceptively sleepy but fair judge whose sympathy for Tom Robinson can be seen in the fact that he appointed Atticus, whom he knew would do his best, as Robinson's public defender.

Uncle Jack

See John Hale Finch

B. B. Underwood

See Braxton Bragg Underwood

Braxton Bragg Underwood

The owner and editor of the local newspaper who was ready to defend Atticus and Tom Robinson from the lynch mob with a shotgun even though he is known to "despise" black people.

Media Adaptations

- To Kill a Mockingbird was adapted as a film by Horton Foote, starring Gregory Peck and Mary Badham, Universal, 1962; available from MCA/Universal Home Video.
- It was also adapted as a full-length stage play by Christopher Sergel, and was published as *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird: A Fulllength Play*, Dramatic Publishing Co., 1970.

Themes

Prejudice and Tolerance

Comprising the main portion of the book's examination of racism and its effects are the underlying themes of prejudice vs. tolerance: how people feel about and respond to differences in others. At one end of the spectrum are people who fear and hate, such as the members of the jury who convict an innocent man of rape because of his race. Atticus and Calpurnia, on the other hand, show understanding and sympathy towards those who might be different or less fortunate. When Scout brings a poor classmate home for dinner and then belittles his table manners, for instance, Calpurnia scolds her for remarking upon them and tells her she is bound to treat all guests with respect no matter what their social station. Atticus similarly bases his opinions of people on their behavior and not their background. Unlike Alexandra, who calls poor people like the Cunninghams "trash" because of their social station, Atticus tells his children that any white man who takes advantage of a black man's ignorance is "trash."

Guilt and Innocence

Closely linked to these themes of prejudice are issues of guilt and innocence, for the same ignorance that creates racist beliefs underlies assumptions of guilt. The most obvious instance is the case of Tom Robinson: the jury's willingness to believe what Atticus calls "the evil assumption ... that *all* Negroes are basically immoral beings" leads them to convict an innocent man. Boo Radley, unknown by a community who has not seen or heard from him in fifteen years, is similarly presumed to be a monster by the court of public opinion. Scout underscores this point when she tells her Uncle Jack he has been unfair in assigning all the blame to her after her fight with Cousin Francis. If he had stopped to learn both sides of the situation he might have judged her differently—which he eventually does. The novel's conclusion also reinforces the theme of guilt and innocence, as Atticus reads Scout a book about a boy falsely accused of vandalism. As Scout summarizes: "When they finally saw him, why he hadn't done any of those things. Atticus, he was real nice." To which Atticus responds, "Most people are, once you see them."

Knowledge and Ignorance

Because a lack of understanding leads to prejudice and false assumptions of guilt, themes of ignorance and knowledge also play a large role in the novel. Lee seems to suggest that children have a natural instinct for tolerance and understanding; only as they grow older do they learn to react to differences with fear and disdain. For example, Scout is confused when one of Dolphus Raymond's mixed-race children is pointed out to her. The child looks "all Negro" to Scout, who wonders why it matters that "you just hafta know who [the mixedrace children] are." That same day Dill is made sick during the trial by the way in which Mr. Gilmer, the prosecuting attorney, sneeringly crossexamines Tom Robinson. As Dolphus Raymond tells Scout, "Things haven't caught up with that one's instinct yet. Let him get a little older and he won't get sick and cry." Lee seems to imply that children learn important lessons about life through the examples of others, not through school. In an ironic commentary on the nature of knowledge, formal education—as

Scout experiences it—fails to teach or even contradicts these important lessons. Scout's first-grade teacher, Miss Caroline Fisher, is more concerned with making her students follow a system than in teaching them as individuals. This is why she forbids Scout to continue reading with her father, whose "unqualified" instruction would "interfere" with her education. Whatever the method, however, the most important factor in gaining knowledge is an individual's motivation. As Calpurnia tells Scout, people "got to want to learn themselves, and when they don't want to learn there's nothing you can do but keep your mouth shut or learn their language."

Courage and Cowardice

Another important theme appearing throughout the novel is that of cowardice and heroism, for Scout observes several different kinds of courage during her childhood. The most common definition of bravery is being strong in the face of physical danger. Atticus demonstrates this when he stops in the path of a rabid dog and drops it with one rifle shot. Other kinds of courage, however, rely more on moral fortitude. For instance, Atticus talks pleasantly to Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose, even though she regularly heaps verbal abuse on him and his children. At times like these, Scout says, she thought "my father, who hated guns and had never been to any wars, was the bravest man who ever lived." Mrs. Dubose teaches the children another lesson in courage when Jem is sentenced to spend two hours a day reading to her as repayment for the flowers he damaged. Scout tags along as Jem visits after school to read Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, a tale of chivalry and heroism. Mrs. Dubose's behavior seems strange; she often drifts off during the readings and begins to drool and have seizures. After her death some months later, the children discover that she was trying to overcome an addiction to morphine, a painkiller. Jem's reading served as a distraction that helped her die free from addiction. Atticus tells his children that despite her faults, Mrs. Dubose was the bravest person he ever knew, for real courage is "when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what." Atticus shows the

same type of bravery in fighting the Robinson case; although he knows it would be nearly impossible for a white jury to return a verdict of "not guilty," he nonetheless argues the case to the best of his ability. In contrast to Atticus's bravery stands the cowardly behavior of Bob Ewell, who never directly faces those whom he thinks have wronged him. He vandalizes Judge Taylor's home when he thinks no one is there; he throws rocks and harasses Helen Robinson, Tom's widow, from a distance; and assaults Atticus's children as they walk alone on a deserted street at night.

Style

Point of View

The most outstanding aspect of *To Kill a Mockingbird's* construction lies in its distinctive narrative point of view. Scout Finch, who narrates in the first person ("I"), is nearly six years old when the novel opens. The story, however, is recalled by the adult Scout; this allows her first-person narrative to contain adult language and adult insights yet still maintain the innocent outlook of a child. The adult perspective also adds a measure of hindsight to the tale, allowing for a deeper examination of events. The narrative proceeds in a straightforward and linear fashion, only jumping in time when relating past events as background to some present occurrence. Scout's account is broken into two parts: the two years before the trial, and the summer of the trial and the autumn that follows. Some critics have proposed that Part II itself should have been broken into two parts, the trial and the Halloween pageant; William T. Going suggests that this arrangement would keep the latter section from "seeming altogether an anticlimax to the trial of Tom."

Setting

The setting of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is another big factor in the story, for the action never leaves the town of Maycomb, Alabama. Maycomb is described variously as "an old town," "an ancient town," and "a tired old town," suggesting a conservative place that is steeped in tradition and convention. Scout's description of the local courthouse reinforces this impression. The building combines large Greek-style pillars—the only remnants from the original building that burned years ago—with the early Victorian design of its replacement. The result is an architectural oddity that indicates "a people determined to preserve every physical scrap of the past." The time of the novel is also significant, for the years 1933 to 1935 were in the midst of the Great Depression. These economic hard times affected the entire town, for if farmers and other laborers made barely enough money to survive, they had no extra money with which they could pay professionals like doctors and lawyers. When

Atticus renders a legal service for Walter Cunningham Sr., a farmer whose property rights are in question because of an entailment, he is repaid with goods such as firewood and nuts instead of cash. This history between the two men influences events during the novel; when a lynch mob appears at the local jail, Scout recognizes Cunningham as her father's former client. The conversation she strikes up with him recalls him to his senses, and he sheepishly leads the mob away.

Symbolism

As the title of the novel implies, the mockingbird serves as an important symbol throughout the narrative. When the children receive guns for Christmas, Atticus tells them it's all right to shoot at blue jays, but "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." As Miss Maudie Atkinson explains, it would be thoughtlessly cruel to kill innocent creatures that "don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy." The mockingbirds are silent as Atticus takes to the street to shoot the rabid dog, and Scout describes a similar silence in the courtroom just prior to the jury pronouncing Tom Robinson guilty. The innocent but suffering mockingbird is recalled in an editorial B. B. Underwood writes about Robinson's death, and again when Scout tells her father that revealing Boo Radley's role in Bob Ewell's death would be "like shootin' a mockingbird." Another powerful symbol is contained in the snowman Scout and Jem build after Maycomb's rare snowfall. Because there is very little snow, Jem makes the base of the figure from mud; they then change their "morphodite" from black to white with a coating of snow. When Miss Maudie's house catches fire that night, the snow melts and the figure becomes black once again. Its transformation suggests that skin color is a limited distinction that reveals little about an individual's true worth.

Humor

One element of the novel's construction that shouldn't be overlooked is Lee's use of humor. The serious issues the novel grapples with are lightened by episodes that use irony and slapstick humor, among other techniques. Just prior to Bob Ewell's attack on the children, for instance,

is a scene where Scout misses her cue during the Halloween pageant, only to make her entrance as a ham during Mrs. Merriweather's sober grand finale. Scout's matter-of-fact, childish recollections also provide entertainment; she recalls that when Dill ignored her, his "fiancee," in favor of Jem, "I beat him up twice but it did no good." Other characters are full of wit as well, Miss Maudie Atkinson in particular. When exasperated by Stephanie Crawford's tales of Boo Radley peeking in her windows at night, she replies, "What did you do, Stephanie, move over in the bed and make room for him?" Including such humorous portrayals of human faults enlivens a serious plot, adds depth to the characterizations, and creates a sense of familiarity and universality, all factors that have contributed to the success and popularity of the work.

Historical Context

Civil Rights in the 1950s

Despite the end of slavery almost a century before *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published in 1960 (President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863), African Americans were still denied many of their basic rights. Although Lee sets her novel in the South of the 1930s, conditions were little improved by the early 1960s in America. The Civil Rights movement was just taking shape in the 1950s, and its principles were beginning to find a voice in American courtrooms and the law. The famous 1954 U.S. Supreme Court trial of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* declared the long-held practice of segregation in public schools unconstitutional and quickly led to desegregation of other public institutions. However, there was still considerable resistance to these changes, and many states, especially those in the South, took years before they fully integrated their schools.

Other ways blacks were demeaned by society included the segregation of public rest rooms and drinking fountains, as well as the practice of forcing blacks to ride in the back of buses. This injustice was challenged by a mild-mannered department store seamstress named Rosa Parks.

After she was arrested for failing to yield her seat to a white passenger, civil rights leaders began a successful boycott of the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 5, 1955. The principal leader of the boycott was the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Along with other black pastors, such as Charles K. Steele and Fred Shuttlesworth, King organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in January, 1957, one of the leading organizations that helped end legal segregation by the mid-1960s. The same year that Lee won a contract for the unfinished manuscript of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which provided penalties for the violation of voting rights and created the Civil Rights Commission. African Americans would not see protection and enforcement of all of their rights, however, until well into the next decade, when the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Civil Rights Bill of 1968 were passed. These laws banned racial discrimination from public places, workplaces, polling places, and housing.

Compare & Contrast

- **1930s:** During the Great Depression, unemployment rose as high as 25%; the New Deal program of government-sponsored relief leads to a deficit in the federal budget.
1960: After a decade of record-high American production and exports, unemployment dips to less than 5 percent, while the federal government runs a small surplus.
Today: Unemployment runs between 5 and 6 percent, while the federal government works to reduce a multi-billion dollar deficit amidst an increasingly competitive global economy.
- **1930s:** Schools are racially segregated; emphasis in the classroom was on rote learning of the basics.
1960: Although backed up by force at times, school integration laws were being enforced; the 1959 launch of the Soviet satellite *Sputnik* leads to math and science gaining increased importance.

Today: School populations are as racially diverse as their communities; classes include a focus on combining subjects and problem-solving skills.

- **1930s:** Only property owners who were white and male could serve on juries.

1960: Women and minorities could now serve on juries; while the Supreme Court ruled that eliminating jurors from duty on the basis of race is unconstitutional, many trials still exclude blacks and Hispanics.

Today: All registered voters are eligible to serve on juries, although in many cases prosecution and defense teams aim to create a jury with a racial balance favorable to their side.

- **1930s:** A big trial serves as a entertainment event for the whole town and a child who has been to the movies is unusual.

1960: Television was becoming the dominant form of popular entertainment, while families might see films together at drive-in movie theaters.

Today: Although television and film are still large presences, computers and computer games swiftly gain a share in the entertainment market. Trials still provide public entertainment and are featured on their own cable channel.

The justice system was similarly discriminatory in the 1950s, as blacks were excluded from juries and could be arrested, tried, and even convicted with little cause. One notable case occurred in 1955, when two white men were charged with the murder of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American youth who had allegedly harassed a white woman. Like the jury in Tom Robinson's trial, the jury for the Till case was all white and all male; the trial was also held in a segregated courtroom. Although the defense's case rested on the unlikely claims that the corpse could not be specifically identified as Till and that the defendants had been framed, the jury took only one hour to acquit the

men of all charges. The men later admitted their crimes to a journalist in great detail, but were never punished for the murder.

The Great Depression and Race Relations

The events surrounding race relations in the 1950s and 1960s have a strong correspondence with those in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is set nearly thirty years earlier. The South, which was still steeped in its agricultural traditions, was hit hard by the Great Depression. Small farmers like Lee's Walter Cunningham Sr. often could not earn enough cash from their crops to cover their mortgages, let alone living expenses. Lee's novel captures the romanticism many white people associated with the Southern way of life, which many felt was being threatened by industrialization. Part of this tradition, however, protected such practices as sharecropping, in which tenant farmers would find themselves virtually enslaved to landowners who provided them with acreage, food, and farming supplies. The desperation sharecroppers felt was brilliantly depicted in Erskine Caldwell's 1932 novel, *Tobacco Road*. The racism of the South—many blacks were sharecroppers—is also portrayed in Richard Wright's novel *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938).

There was little opportunity for African Americans to advance themselves in the South. Schools were segregated between whites and blacks, who were not allowed to attend white high schools. Blacks were therefore effectively denied an education, since, in the early 1930s, there was not a single high school built for black students in the South. The result was that nearly half of all blacks in the South did not have an education past the fifth grade; in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Calpurnia tells the children she is only one of four members of her church who can read. Ironically, the Depression helped to change that when northern school boards began integrating schools to save the costs of running separate facilities. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal also led to the creation of the National Youth Administration (founded in 1935) and its Division of Negro Affairs, which helped teach black students to read and write. The Depression was particularly painful to blacks, who, in the 1920s, were already grossly underemployed. With

worsening economic times, however, they found that even the menial jobs they once had—like picking cotton—had been taken by whites. The New Deal helped here, too, with the creation of the Federal Housing Administration, the Works Progress Administration, and other agencies that assisted poor blacks in obtaining jobs and housing.

Yet the oppressive society in the South often prevented blacks from taking advantage of this government assistance. Racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Shirts terrorized blacks out of their jobs. The vigilante practice of lynching was still common in the South in the early 1930s. Only North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, and Alabama had laws specifically outlawing lynching as an illegal activity. (Surprisingly, only two northern states had similar laws.) By 1935, however, public outrage had reached a point where lynchings were no longer generally tolerated, even by whites. In Lee's novel, for instance, the local sheriff tries to warn Atticus Finch of a possible lynch mob while a concerned citizen, B. B. Underwood, is prepared to turn them away from the jail with his shotgun.

Critical Overview

Although *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a resounding popular success when it first appeared in 1960, initial critical response to Lee's novel was mixed. Some reviewers faulted the novel's climax as melodramatic, while others found the narrative point of view unbelievable. For instance, *Atlantic Monthly* contributor Phoebe Adams found Scout's narration "frankly and completely impossible, being told in the first person by a six-year-old girl with the prose style of a well-educated adult." Granville Hicks likewise observed in *Saturday Review* that "Miss Lee's problem has been to tell the story she wants to tell and yet stay within the consciousness of a child, and she hasn't consistently solved it." In contrast, Nick Aaron Ford asserted in *PHYLON* that Scout's narration "gives the most vivid, realistic, and delightful experiences of child's world ever presented by an American novelist, with the possible exception of Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*."

Other early reviews of the novel focused on Lee's treatment of racial themes. Several observers remarked that while the plot of *To Kill a Mockingbird* was not particularly original, it was well executed; *New Statesman* contributor Keith Waterhouse, for instance, noted that Lee "gives freshness to a stock situation." In contrast, Harding LeMay asserted in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* that the author's "valiant attempt" to combine Scout's amusing recollections of her eccentric neighborhood with the serious events surrounding Tom Robinson's trial "fails to produce a novel of stature, or even of original insight," although "it does provide an exercise in easy, graceful writing." Richard Sullivan, on the other hand, claimed in the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* that *To Kill a Mockingbird* "is a novel of strong contemporary national significance. And it deserves serious consideration. But first of all it is a story so admirably done that it must be called both honorable and engrossing." The Pulitzer Prize committee agreed with this last opinion, awarding the novel its 1961 prize for fiction.

Later appraisals of the novel have also supported these favorable assessments, emphasizing the technical excellence of Lee's narration and characterizations. In a 1975 article, William T. Going called Scout's point of view "the structural *forte*" of the novel, adding that it was "misunderstood or misinterpreted" by most early critics. "Maycomb and the South, then," the critic explained, "are all seen through the eyes of Jean Louise, who speaks from the mature and witty vantage of an older woman recalling her father as well as her brother and their childhood days." Critic Fred Erisman interpreted the novel as presenting a vision for a "New South" that can retain its regional outlook and yet treat all its citizens fairly. He praised Atticus Finch as a Southern representation of the ideal man envisioned by nineteenth-century American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson: "the individual who vibrates to his own iron string, the one man in the town that the community trusts 'to do right,' even as they deplore his peculiarities." R. A. Dave similarly found the novel a success in its exploration of Southern history and justice. He claimed that in *To Kill a Mockingbird* "there is a complete cohesion of art and morality. And therein lies the novelist's success. She is a

remarkable storyteller. The reader just glides through the novel abounding in humor and pathos, hopes and fears, love and hatred, humanity and brutality—all affording him a memorable human experience of journeying through sunshine and rain at once.... The tale of heroic struggle lingers in our memory as an unforgettable experience."

Criticism

Darren Felty

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

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

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

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

After Boo saves the children's lives, Scout can direct her sympathy toward a real person, not a spectral presence. Because of this last

encounter with Boo, she learns firsthand about sacrifice and mercy, as well as the more general lesson that Atticus has been trying to teach her: "You never understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." Boo left the safe environment of his home to risk his life for hers, and she knows that his essential goodness and vulnerability need protecting. Hence, he is like a mockingbird, and to assail him with public notice would be comparable to destroying a defenseless songbird who gives only pleasure to others. As she stands on his porch, she reflects on her former behavior and feels shame: "Boo was our neighbor. He gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives. But neighbors give in return. We never put back into the tree what we took out of it; we had given him nothing, and it made me sad." Scout feels remorse over the children's isolation of Boo because of their fear and the prejudices they had accepted at face value. As a result of her experiences with Boo, she can never be comfortable with such behavior again.

What Do I Read Next?

- In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest Gaines's 1983 novel, a white Cajun work boss is found shot in a black man's yard. Nineteen elderly black men and a young white woman all claim responsibility for the murder in order to thwart the expected lynch mob.
- Nobel Prize-winner Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) is the story of Milkman Dead's quest for identity and how he discovers his own courage, endurance, and capacity for love and joy when he discovers his connection with his ancestors.
- Mark Twain's 1884 popular and sometimes controversial classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* follows the satirical adventures and moral development of Huck Finn, a young white boy, as he accompanies Jim, an escaped slave, down the Mississippi River in a quest for freedom.
- *Uncle Tom's Children*, a 1938 collection of stories by Richard Wright, relates how African Americans struggle for survival in a racist world and explores themes of fear, violence, flight, courage, and freedom.

- Taylor Branch's social history *Parting the Waters: American in the King Years, 1954–63*, which won the 1988 National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction, looks at the state of the American civil rights movement between World War II and the 1960s. While focusing on the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., the work also includes profiles of other important leaders and traces key historical events.

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

Many of the lessons Tom Robinson's story dramatizes escape Scout's comprehension, but the reader still recognizes them, as does the older

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

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

resolve and sympathy, Lee lyrically communicates the need to cherish and protect those who, like mockingbirds, do no harm but are especially vulnerable to the violent injustices of our society.

Source: Darren Felty, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Claudia Durst Johnson

In the following excerpt, Johnson explores the role of stories, art, and other forms of communication in Lee's novel

The subject of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is also song, that is, expression: reading and literacy; both overt and covert attempts at articulation; and communicative art forms, including the novel itself. The particulars of setting in the novel are children's books, grade school texts, many different local newspapers and national news magazines, law books, a hymnal, and the reading aloud of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. Much of the novel's action is actually reading, for as the locals and the children believe, that is Atticus Finch's only activity. These expressions are not only attempts to have the self broadcast and realized; more significantly, they are attempts to establish connections beyond or through boundaries.

Contrary to the notion that language and art are cold (for example, the Dracula theme frequently expresses the cold tendency of artists to sacrifice everything, even their own humanity, for their art), in *TKM*, language and art are usually borne of love and linked to expressions of charity and affection. The Gothic degeneracy of *TKM* derives from love's opposite—imprisonment and insularity, producing, in the extreme, incest and insanity, a gazing in or a gazing back. Its opposite is the social self, which is civilized in its high and positive sense, and reaches out in the love that overcomes ego in language and art.

Language and other modes of communication are usually not only civilizing in a very positive way, but are avenues of benevolence, and even charity and love. In the novel, we remember Scout reading in Atticus's lap, Atticus reading as he keeps vigil beside Jem's bed, Atticus armed only with a book as he plans to protect Tom Robinson from a lynch mob. The society that imprisons Tom Robinson is the same one that imprisons Scout in the "Dewey Decimal System," Jem's garbled version of the pedagogical theories of the University of Chicago's father of progressive education, John Dewey, which are being faddishly inflicted on the children of Maycomb. The practical result of Dewey's

system on Scout is to diminish or hinder her reading and writing, and along with it, her individuality. Each child is herded into a general category that determines whether he or she is "ready" to read or print or write ("We don't write in the first grade, we print"). The life of the mind and reading in particular is replaced in this progressive educational world with Group Dynamics, Good Citizenship, Units, Projects, and all manner of clichés. As Scout says, "I could not help receiving the impression that I was being cheated out of something. Out of what I knew not, yet I did not believe that twelve years of unrelieved boredom was exactly what the state had in mind for me."

As it is in a black man's account of slavery (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*), reading and writing are major themes in *TKM*. Reading is first introduced with Dill's announcement that he can read, and Jem's counterboast that his sister, Scout, has been reading for years:

"I'm Charles Baker Harris," he said. "I can read."

"So what?" I said.

"I just thought you'd like to know I can read. You got anything needs readin' I can do it..."

The theme continues with Scout's difficulty with her first grade teacher, who resents that Scout is already able to read when she enters school. The heartfelt importance of reading to the child is considered as she contemplates its being denied to her. One notes in the following passage that reading is inextricably connected with her father and with the civilizing, everyday business of this world, that it is somehow as natural as breathing, and that she has learned that it is a crime in the view of her teacher, possibly because reading and writing (the latter taught to her by Calpurnia) are means of empowerment that place her beyond the control of her teacher:

I mumbled that I was sorry and retired meditating upon my crime. I never deliberately learned to read, but somehow I had been wallowing illicitly in the daily papers. In the long hours of church—was it then I

learned? I could not remember not being able to read hymns. Now that I was compelled to think about it, reading was something that just came to me, as learning to fasten the seat of my union suit without looking around, or achieving two bows from a snarl of shoelaces. I could not remember when the lines above Atticus's moving finger separated into words, but I had stared at them all the evenings in my memory, listening to the news of the day, Bills To Be Enacted into Laws, the diaries of Lorenzo Dow—anything Atticus happened to be reading when I crawled into his lap every night. Until I feared I would lose it, I never loved to read. One does not love breathing.

Atticus's civilizing power comes from his reading, a power he has taken on in place of the power of the gun. It is his sole pastime. The narrator reports, "He did not do the things our schoolmates' fathers did: he never went hunting, he did not play poker or fish or drink or smoke. He sat in the living room and read." Atticus is reading under the light outside the jail, with only a book and without a gun for protection, when the mob from Old Sarum arrives to harm his client, Tom Robinson. The novel closes with Atticus reading a book in Jem's room as he watches over his son. Members of The Idler's Club, the old men whose chief activity is attending court sessions together, know him as a lawyer whose skill arises from his being "'a deep reader, a mighty deep reader.'" They disparage his reluctance to depart from the civilizing force of the law by saying, "'He reads all right, that's all he does.'" The love of reading is also true of Jem, for "no tutorial system devised by man could have stopped him from getting at books."

The theme of reading and writing as emblems for civilization are shown further in Jem's and Scout's discussion of what determines a "good" or "quality" or "old" family, and Scout's recognition of the importance of literacy: "'I think its how long your family's been readin' and writin'. Scout, I've studied this real hard and that's the only reason I can think of. Somewhere along when the Finches were in Egypt one of 'em must have learned a hieroglyphic or two and he taught his boy.'" To this Scout replies: "'Well, I'm glad he could, or who'da taught Atticus and them, and if Atticus couldn't read, you and me'd be in a fix.'"

By contrast, the more powerless Old Sarum residents and black citizens of Maycomb County are rarely literate; they are generally able only to sign their names. Calpurnia is one of the few black people in the area who can read. She shocks the children with the information that only four members of her church can read, and one, whom she has taught to read, "lines" the hymns from the hymnbook for all the others to follow. And finally, in contemplating the meaning of "Old Families," Scout realizes that literacy has little to do with intelligence. What she doesn't realize is that it has a great deal to do with power of an intellectual sort.

While reading threads the narrative as surely as the subject of the law does, its meaning is less consistent and more elusive. Despite Scout's reservation about Jem's speculation that reading is connected to "Old Families," it is apparent that, in that it is connected to Atticus, reading denotes a pinnacle of civilized progress. The most civilized, the most humane, the wisest character is the one who reads obsessively.

The continuing powerlessness of the black and poor white people of Maycomb County is incidental to their inability to read, and their children, in contrast to Scout, are taken out of school, and thus denied their only access to power. A related idea is the control that Mrs. Dubose has over narcotics through forcing Jem to read to her. On the other hand, Zeebo, who leads the singing in the black church, is an example of one who imbues his reading with spirit and offers it as a gift to his people. Like Calpurnia, he has learned to read from Blackstone's *Commentaries*, but he uses the language he has been given from the cold letter of the law and imbues it with the warmth and life of the spirit, as he alone is able to lead his church congregation in singing hymns like "On Jordan's Stormy Banks." For the three children, reading, as we have seen, is a way of sharpening the imagination and gaining knowledge of the Other.

The children obsessively make attempts to communicate verbally with Arthur Radley, first by leaving a message for him in the tree, and then, in a blundering fashion, by sticking a note to his window.

Like other dispossessed people in the novel, Boo is doomed to communicate without language, though we suspect him to be literate, for he gives the children a spelling bee medal and is rumored to have stabbed his father in the leg while clipping articles from the newspaper. This begs the question of whether his assault on his father is provoked while he is reading the newspaper because it reminds him of his forced prohibition from establishing an intercourse with the world. So Boo attempts to reach out to the world through other means, and he is thwarted again. A real tragedy of Jem's boyhood, and most likely of Boo's life, is the severing of their channel of communication, the hole in the oak tree, which Boo's older brother cements up. The presents that he leaves in the tree appear to be Boo's last attempt to reach outside his prison. And each present, which is a means of communication, has significance. The chewing gum seems to be a way of proving that he isn't poisonous. The penny, an ancient medium of exchange, is something from the past. The spelling medal is also connected with literacy and communication. The carvings are works of art, communication, and love. The aborted mail profoundly affects Jem, who has played the part of Boo in the childhood dramas with conviction. Right after Jem's discovery of the cemented hole in the tree, Scout observes that "when we went in the house I saw he had been crying." For in shutting off Boo's avenue of expression, Mr. Radley, his brother, has thwarted Jem's as well, and has, more importantly, committed what would be a mortal sin in this novel—he has attempted to silence love.

Art forms other than literary ones occur in the novel, sometimes inadvertently communicating messages that the children don't intend. There is the Radley drama, performed for their own edification, which the neighbors and Atticus finally see. And there is the snow sculpture of Mr. Avery, which the neighbors also recognize. Perhaps because these are self-serving art works, created without a sense of audience, as if art's communicative essence could be ignored, the effects of the play and the snow sculpture are not entirely charitable. On the other hand, Boo's art—the soap sculptures—are lovingly executed as a means of extending himself to the children.

Then there is the story the narrator tells, which, again, unites art with love, somehow making up for the novel's missed and indecipherable messages, like those so frequently found in the Gothic. The novel is a love story about, a love song to, Jem and Atticus, and to Dill, the unloved child, and Boo Radley, whose love was silenced.

The reader of the Gothic, according to William Patrick Day [in *In the Circles of Fear and Desire*] is "essentially voyeuristic." He further states, "Just as when we daydream and construct idle fantasies for ourselves, the encounter with the Gothic [as readers] is a moment in which the self defines its internal existence through the act of observing its fantasies." Not only are characters in the Gothic enthralled, but the reader of the Gothic is as well. In the case of *TKM*, readers learn of the enthrallments of Jem, Dill, and Scout. But the reader of their story is also enthralled, not by the horror of racial mixing or the Dracularian Boo, but by the reminders of a lost innocence, of a time past, as unreal, in its way, as Transylvania. We, as readers, encounter the ghosts of ourselves, the children we once were, the simplicity of our lives in an earlier world. While the children's voyeurism is Gothic, our own as readers is romantic. In either case, the encounter is with the unreal. The children's encounter is in that underworld beneath reality, and ours is in a transcendent world above reality, which nostalgia and memory have altered. It is a world where children play in tree houses and swings and sip lemonade on hot summer days, and in the evenings, sit in their fathers' laps to read. Reality and illusion about the past is blurred. Within the novel's Gothicism and Romanticism, we as readers are enthralled with the past, and, like the responses elicited by the Gothic, we react with pain and pleasure to an involvement with our past world and our past selves.

Source: Claudia Durst Johnson, "The Mockingbird's Song," in *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries*, Twayne Publishers, 1994, pp. 107–14.

Jill May

In the following excerpt, May looks at the history of censorship attempts on To Kill a Mockingbird, which came in two onslaughts—the first from conservatives, the second from liberals.

The critical career of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a late-twentieth-century case study of censorship. When Harper Lee's novel about a small southern town and its prejudices was published in 1960, the book received favorable reviews in professional journals and the popular press. Typical of that opinion, *Booklist's* reviewer called the book "melodramatic" and noted "traces of sermonizing," but the book was recommended for library purchase, commending its "rare blend of wit and compassion." Reviewers did not suggest that the book was young adult literature, or that it belonged in adolescent collections; perhaps that is why no one mentioned the book's language or violence. In any event, reviewers seemed inclined to agree that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a worthwhile interpretation of the South's existing social structures during the 1930s. In 1961 the book won the Pulitzer Prize Award, the Alabama Library Association Book Award, and the Brotherhood Award of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. It seemed that Harper Lee's blend of family history, local custom, and restrained sermonizing was important reading, and with a young girl between the ages of six and nine as the main character, *To Kill a Mockingbird* moved rapidly into junior and senior high school libraries and curriculum. The book was not destined to be studied by college students. Southern literature's critics rarely mentioned it; few university professors found it noteworthy enough to "teach" as an exemplary southern novel.

By the mid-sixties *To Kill a Mockingbird* had a solid place in junior and senior high American literature studies. Once discovered by southern parents, the book's solid place became shaky indeed. Sporadic lawsuits arose. In most cases the complaint against the book was by conservatives who disliked the portrayal of whites. Typically, the Hanover County School Board in Virginia first ruled the book "immoral," then withdrew their criticism and declared that the ruckus

"was all a mistake" (*Newsletter [on Intellectual Freedom]* 1966). By 1968 the National Education Association listed the book among those which drew the most criticism from private groups. Ironically it was rated directly behind *Little Black Sambo* (*Newsletter* 1968). And then the seventies arrived.

Things had changed in the South during the sixties. Two national leaders who had supported integration and had espoused the ideals of racial equality were assassinated in southern regions. When John F. Kennedy was killed in Texas on November 22, 1963, many southerners were shocked. Populist attitudes of racism were declining, and in the aftermath of the tragedy southern politics began to change. Lyndon Johnson gained the presidency; blacks began to seek and win political offices. Black leader Martin Luther King had stressed the importance of racial equality, always using Mahatma Gandhi's strategy of nonviolent action and civil disobedience. A brilliant orator, King grew up in the South; the leader of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], he lived in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1968, while working on a garbage strike in Memphis, King was killed. The death of this 1965 Nobel Peace Prize winner was further embarrassment for white southerners. Whites began to look at public values anew, and gradually southern blacks found experiences in the South more tolerable. In 1971 one Atlanta businessman observed [in *Ebony*], "The liberation thinking is here. Blacks are more together. With the doors opening wider, this area is the mecca...." Southern arguments against *To Kill a Mockingbird* subsided. *The Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* contained no record of southern court cases during the seventies or eighties. The book had sustained itself during the first period of sharp criticism; it had survived regional protests from the area it depicted.

The second onslaught of attack came from new groups of censors, and it came during the late seventies and early eighties. Private sectors in the Midwest and suburban East began to demand the book's removal from school libraries. Groups, such as the Eden Valley School Committee in Minnesota, claimed that the book was too laden with profanity (*Newsletter* 1978). In Vernon, New York, Reverend Carl Hadley

threatened to establish a private Christian school because public school libraries contained such "filthy, trashy sex novels" as *A Separate Peace* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Newsletter 1980). And finally, blacks began to censor the book. In Warren, Indiana, three black parents resigned from the township Human Relations Advisory Council when the Warren County school administration refused to remove the book from Warren junior high school classes. They contended that the book "does psychological damage to the positive integration process and represents institutionalized racism" (Newsletter 1982). Thus, censorship of *To Kill a Mockingbird* swung from the conservative right to the liberal left. Factions representing racists, religious sects, concerned parents, and minority groups vocally demanded the book's removal from public schools. With this kind of offense, what makes *To Kill a Mockingbird* worth defending and keeping?

When Harper Lee first introduces Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she is almost six years old. By the end of the book Scout is in the third grade. Throughout the book events are described by the adult Scout who looks back upon life in the constricted society of a small southern town. Since it is the grown-up Scout's story, the young Scout Finch becomes a memory more than a reality. The book is not a vivid recollection of youth gone by so much as a recounting of days gone by. Yet, Scout Finch's presence as the events' main observer establishes two codes of honor, that of the child and of the adult. The code of adult behavior shows the frailty of adult sympathy for humanity and emphasizes its subsequent effect upon overt societal attitudes. Throughout the book Scout sees adults accepting society's rules rather than confronting them. When Scout finds school troublesome, Atticus tells Scout that they will continue reading together at night, then adds, "you'd better not say anything at school about our agreement." He explains away the Maycomb Ku Klux Klan, saying, "it was a political organization more than anything. Besides, they couldn't find anybody to scare." And when he discusses the case of a black man's word against a white man's with his brother, Atticus says, "The jury couldn't possibly be expected to take Tom Robinson's word against the Ewells' ... Why reasonable people go

stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don't pretend to understand." The author tells us that Atticus knew Scout was listening in on this conversation and purposely explained that he had been court appointed, adding, "I'd hoped to get through life without a case of this kind...." And when the jury does see fit to try and condemn Tom Robinson, Scout's older brother Jem and good friend Dill see the white southern world for what it is: a world of hypocrisy, a world burdened with old racist attitudes which have nothing to do with humanity. Jem says, "I always thought Maycomb folks were the best folks in the world, least that's what they seemed like." Dill decides he will be a new kind of clown. "I'm gonna stand in the middle of the ring and laugh at the folks.... Every one of 'em oughta be ridin' broomsticks."

The majority of white adults in Maycomb are content to keep blacks, women and children in their place. Atticus's only sister comes to live with the family and constantly tells Scout she must learn how to act, that she has a place in society: womanhood with its stifling position of prim behavior and wagging tongues is the essence of southern decorum. Even Atticus, the liberal minded hero, says that perhaps it's best to keep women off the juries of Alabama because, "I doubt if we'd ever get a complete case tried—the ladies'd be interrupting to ask questions." By the end of the book Scout has accepted the rules of southern society. The once hated aunt who insisted upon Scout's transformation into a proper young lady becomes an idol for her ability to maintain proper deportment during a crisis. Scout follows suit, reasoning "if Aunty could be a lady at a time like this, so could I."

The courtroom trial is a real example of Southern justice and Southern local color storytelling. Merrill Skaggs has analyzed the local color folklore of southern trials in his book *The Folk of Southern Fiction*. Skaggs comments that there is a formula for court hearings, and he suggests that local color stories show that justice in the courtroom is, in fact, less fair than justice in the streets. He discusses justice in terms of the black defendant, saying, "Implicit in these stories ... is an admission that Negroes are not usually granted equal treatment before the law, that

a Negro is acquitted only when he has a white champion." During the trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird* Tom Robinson says he ran because he feared southern justice. He ran, he says, because he was "scared I'd hafta face up to what I didn't do." Dill is one of Lee's young protagonists. He is angered by the southern court system. The neglected son of an itinerant mother, Dill is a stereotype of southern misfits. Lee doesn't concentrate upon Dill's background; she concentrates upon his humanity. The courtroom scene is more than local humor to him. It is appalling. When he flees the trial, Scout follows. She cannot understand why Dill is upset, but the notorious rich "drunk" with "mixed children" can. He sees Dill and says, "it just makes you sick, doesn't it?" No one, save Jem and his youthful converts, expects Atticus to win. The black minister who has befriended the children warns, "I ain't ever seen any jury decide in favor of a colored man over a white man." In the end Atticus says, "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." And Miss Maudie tells the children, "as I waited I thought, Atticus Finch won't win, he can't win, but he's the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that." Then she adds, "we're making a step—it's just a baby-step, but it's a step."

In his book, Skaggs points out that obtaining justice through the law is not as important as the courtroom play in southern trials and that because the courtroom drama seldom brings real justice, people condone "violence within the community." Atticus realizes that "justice" is often resolved outside of the court, and so he is not surprised when the sheriff and the town leaders arrive at his house one night. The men warn Atticus that something might happen to Tom Robinson if he is left in the local jail; the sheriff suggests that he can't be responsible for any violence which might occur. One of the men says, "—don't see why you touched it [the case] in the first place.... You've got everything to lose from this, Atticus. I mean everything." Because Atticus wants courtroom justice to resolve this conflict, he tries to protect his client. On the night before the trial Atticus moves to the front of the jail, armed only with his newspaper. While there, the local lynching society arrives, ready to take

justice into its own hands. Scout, Jem, and Dill have been watching in their own dark corner, but the crowd bothers Scout and so she bursts from her hiding spot. As she runs by, Scout smells "stale whiskey and pigpen," and she realizes that these are not the same men who came to the house earlier. It is Scout's innocence, her misinterpretation of the seriousness of the scene, her ability to recognize one of the farmers and to talk with guileless ease to that man about his own son which saves Tom Robinson from being lynched. The next morning Jem suggests that the men would have killed Atticus if Scout hadn't come along. Atticus who is more familiar with adult southern violence, says "might have hurt me a little, but son, you'll understand folks a little better when you're older. A mob's always made up of people, no matter what.... Every little mob in every little southern town is always made up of people you know—doesn't say much for them does it?" Lynching is a part of regional lore in the South. In his study of discrimination, Wallace Mendelson pointed out that the frequency of lynchings as settlement for black/white problems is less potent than the terrorizing aspect of hearing about them. In this case, the terrorizing aspect of mob rule had been viewed by the children. Its impact would remain.

After the trial Bob Ewell is subjected to a new kind of Southern justice, a polite justice. Atticus explains, "He thought he'd be a hero, but all he got for his pain was ... was, okay, we'll convict this Negro but get back to your dump." Ewell spits on Atticus, cuts a hole in the judge's screen, and harasses Tom's wife. Atticus ignores his insults and figures, "He'll settle down when the weather changes." Scout and Jem never doubt that Ewell is serious, and they are afraid. Their early childhood experiences with the violence and hypocrisy in southern white society have taught them not to trust Atticus's reasoning but they resolve to hide their fear from the adults around them. When Ewell does strike for revenge, he strikes at children. The sheriff understands this kind of violence. It is similar to lynching violence. It strikes at a minority who cannot strike back, and it creates a terror in lawabiding citizens more potent than courtroom justice. It shows that southern honor has been consistently dealt with outside of the courtroom.

Harper Lee's book concerns the behavior of Southerners in their claim for "honor," and Boo Radley's presence in the story reinforces that claim. When Boo was young and got into trouble, his father claimed the right to protect his family name. He took his son home and kept him at the house. When Boo attacked him, Mr. Radley again asked for family privilege; Boo was returned to his home, this time never to surface on the porch or in the yard during the daylight hours. The children are fascinated with the Boo Radley legend. They act it out, and they work hard to make Boo come out. And always, they wonder what keeps him inside. After the trial, however, Jem says, "I think I'm beginning to understand something. I think I'm beginning to understand why Boo Radley's stayed shut up in the house ... it's because he *wants* to stay inside."

Throughout the book Boo is talked about and wondered over, but he does not appear in Scout's existence until the end when he is needed by the children. When no one is near to protect them from death, Boo comes out of hiding. In an act of violence he kills Bob Ewell, and with that act he becomes a part of southern honor. He might have been a hero. Had a jury heard the case, his trial would have entertained the entire region. The community was unsettled from the rape trial, and this avenged death in the name of southern justice would have set well in Maycomb, Alabama. Boo Radley has been outside of southern honor, however, and he is a shy man. Lee has the sheriff explain the pitfalls of southern justice when he says, "Know what'd happen then? All the ladies in Maycomb includin' my wife'd be knocking on his door bringing angel food cakes. To my way of thinkin' ... that's a sin.... If it was any other man it'd be different." The reader discovers that southern justice through the courts is not a blessing. It is a carnival.

When Harper Lee was five years old the Scottsboro trial began. In one of the most celebrated southern trials, nine blacks were accused of raping two white girls. The first trial took place in Jackson County, Alabama. All nine were convicted. Monroeville, Lee's hometown, knew about the case. Retrials continued for six years, and with each new trial it became more obvious that southern justice for blacks was different

from southern justice for whites. Harper Lee's father was a lawyer during that time. Her mother's maiden name was Finch. Harper Lee attended law school, a career possibility suggested to Scout by well-meaning adults in the novel. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in 1935, midpoint for the Scottsboro case.

Scout Finch faces the realities of southern society within the same age span that Harper Lee faced Scottsboro. The timeline is also the same. Although Lee's father was not the Scottsboro lawyer who handled that trial, he was a southern man of honor related to the famous gentleman soldier, Robert E. Lee. It is likely that Harper Lee's father was the author's model for Atticus Finch and that the things Atticus told Scout were the kinds of things Ama Lee told his daughter. The attitudes depicted are ones Harper Lee grew up with, both in terms of family pride and small town prejudices.

The censors' reactions to *To Kill a Mockingbird* were reactions to issues of race and justice. Their moves to ban the book derive from their own perspectives of the book's theme. Their "reader's response" criticism, usually based on one reading of the book, was personal and political. They needed to ban the book because it told them something about American society that they did not want to hear. That is precisely the problem facing any author of realistic fiction. Once the story becomes real, it can become grim. An author will use firstperson flashback in story in order to let the reader live in another time, another place. Usually the storyteller is returning for a second view of the scene. The teller has experienced the events before and the story is being retold because the scene has left the storyteller uneasy. As the storyteller recalls the past both the listener and the teller see events in a new light. Both are working through troubled times in search of meaning. In the case of *To Kill a Mockingbird* the first-person retelling is not pleasant, but the underlying significance is with the narrative. The youthful personalities who are recalled are hopeful. Scout tells us of a time past when white people would lynch or convict a man because of the color of his skin. She also shows us three children who refuse to believe that the system is right, and she leaves us with the thought that most people will

be nice if seen for what they are: humans with frailties. When discussing literary criticism, Theo D'Haen suggested [in *Text to Reader*] that the good literary work should have a life within the world and be "part of the ongoing activities of that world." *To Kill a Mockingbird* continues to have life within the world; its ongoing activities in the realm of censorship show that it is a book which deals with regional moralism. The children in the story seem very human; they worry about their own identification, they defy parental rules, and they cry over injustices. They mature in Harper Lee's novel, and they lose their innocence. So does the reader. If the readers are young, they may believe Scout when she says, "nothin's real scary except in books." If the readers are older they will have learned that life is as scary, and they will be prepared to meet some of its realities.

Source: Jill May, "In Defense of *To Kill a Mockingbird*," in *Censored Books: Critical Viewpoints*, edited by Nicholas J. Karolides, Lee Burrell, John M. Kean, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993, pp. 476–84.

Topics for Further Study

- Research the 1930s trials of the Scottsboro Boys and compare how the justice system worked in this case to the trial of Tom Robinson.
- Explore the government programs of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" and explain how some of the characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird* could have been helped by them.
- Investigate the various groups involved in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and compare their programs to the community supports found in Lee's imaginary town of Maycomb.

For further study:

- Edwin Bruell, "Keen Scalpel on Racial Ills." *The English Journal*, Vol. 53, December, 1964, pp. 658-61.

An article that touches on Lee's "warm" portrayal of Scout and the ironic tone in Lee's treatment of the bigoted.

- Claudia Durst Johnson, *Understanding 'To Kill a Mockingbird': A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historic Documents*, Greenwood Press, 1994.

Johnson's book is the most thorough analysis of the novel to date. She discusses the literary and historical context of the book, then analyzes its form, its connections to Gothic tradition, its treatment of prejudicial and legal boundaries, and its focus on communication. Johnson provides a large collection of sources relating to the novel, including documents about the "Scottsboro Boys" trials, the Civil Rights Movement, issues of stereotyping, the debates over Atticus in legal circles, and the censorship of the novel.

- Frank H. Lyell, "One-Taxi Town," in *The New York Book Review*, July 10, 1960, pp. 5, 18.

Lyell praises Lee for her characterization and provides some limited criticism of her style.

- Edgar H. Schuster, "Discovering Theme and Structure in the Novel," in *The English Journal*, Vol. 52, 1963, pp. 506-11.

Schuster presents a practical classroom approach to the novel and an analysis of its themes and structure.

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YouTube links

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5FCcDEA6mY>

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