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HARPER LEE

Born: Monroeville, Alabama; April 28, 1926

Died: Monroeville, Alabama; February 19, 2016

*Lee's reputation rests on her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a moving account of a Southern lawyer's battle against prejudice and injustice.*

BIOGRAPHY

Nelle Harper Lee was born in Monroeville, Alabama, on April 28, 1926. Her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, was the son of a Confederate veteran and a Florida legislator. A. C. Lee himself was a prominent citizen of Monroeville, a practicing lawyer who served in the Alabama legislature for twelve years. He was also involved in the management of the local newspaper. Harper Lee's mother was Frances Finch Lee, whose family had moved from Virginia to Alabama, where they founded Finchburg.

With her sisters, Alice and Louise, and her brother, Edwin, Harper grew up in the quiet little town of Monroeville. In her childhood, like Jean Louise (Scout) Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Harper used to go up to the courthouse balcony to watch her father appear in court. Like Scout, Harper and Edwin had a friend from the city, Truman Capote, who spent much of his childhood with elderly relatives in Monroeville and who was later to become a distinguished writer. Harper herself had begun writing by the time she was seven.

After attending the public schools in Monroeville, Lee went to Huntington College in Montgomery, Alabama, for one year, then in 1945 transferred to the University of Alabama, where she remained from 1945 to 1950, except for one year

spent as an exchange student at the University of Oxford. At the University of Alabama, Lee continued her writing, contributing to various campus publications. Then she made her decision. She must be a writer. Much to her father's disappointment, Lee left the University of Alabama six months short of a law degree. She moved to New York, where she supported herself by working as an airline reservations clerk for Eastern Airlines and British Overseas Airways. Eventually, she took some of her work to a literary agent. He was particularly interested in one of the short stories, and he suggested that she expand it to a novel.

Quitting her job, Lee began working full time on what was to be *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In 1957, she had a manuscript completed; however, the editors at the publishing committee to which she submitted it asked her to rework it, tightening the structure. She did, and the book was published in 1960. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a best seller. It was a Literary Guild Selection, a Book-of-the-Month Club alternate, and a *Reader's Digest* condensed book.

The novel also gained critical acclaim; in 1961, it won the Pulitzer Prize. The following year, it was made into a motion picture, which won an Academy Award. At that time, Harper Lee announced that she was working on a second novel. During the next three decades, several essays and articles appeared, but Lee published no more fiction. Lee still lives in her native Monroeville.

ANALYSIS

To Kill a Mockingbird is a novel of childhood, but it is not told by a child. The narrator, Jean Louise (Scout) Finch, is an adult, recalling events

that occurred in the mid-1930's, when her older brother Jem Finch was nearing his teens and she was four years younger. This narrative stance has several advantages. By using the first person, Lee gains immediacy and dramatic effect; by placing the events in the past, she can evaluate incidents that have become much clearer over the years.

The novel concerns innocence and experience, and its theme is more complicated than it might appear. Scout, Jem, and their friend from Meridian, Mississippi, Dill Harris, are not naturally cruel; however, they have not yet learned to empathize with others. To them, outsiders have no feelings.

Therefore, it is all right to run up to the porch of a recluse, as a game; it is all right to rub a poor boy's nose in the schoolyard dirt; it is all right to make a snowman in the image of a neighbor; and it is all right to make fun of crabby old ladies. Although Atticus Finch, the father of the motherless Scout and Jem, is not particularly concerned with proper clothes for them, he is concerned about teaching them to imagine themselves in the position of others, even of people who are not particularly friendly or appealing. In this sense, then, the children's innocence, which dictates instinctive aversion, must be modified. On the other hand, Atticus hopes that his children will preserve another form of innocence—that they will not learn the prejudices that society is so willing to teach them.

Structurally, then, the novel is organized to show the development, or the moral education, of Atticus's children. In episode after episode, the pattern is repeated. The children (or one child) will assess someone by superficial standards; then, either on their own or, more often, in a conversation with Atticus, the children discover the truth—that the person whom they condemned has hidden sorrows and, often, hidden strengths.

Since the first-person narrator is the adult who, as a child, experienced all of these revelations, Harper Lee could have had her introduce the characters in these episodes with a full description and analysis. Instead, she chooses to let the readers follow the children to their discovery of the truth. This technique not only increases suspense, it also dramatizes the process through which the children themselves are going on their way to understanding.

One of those brief but significant episodes occurs at the end of part 1 of the novel, which is divided into two parts. It begins with the narrator's explaining the antipathy that both she and her brother feel toward Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose, a woman who lives alone and whose chief pleasure seems to be sitting on her front porch and shouting criticisms and insults at passing children, especially at Jem and Scout. They cannot understand why their father behaves in so courtly a manner toward Mrs. Dubose. As far as they are concerned, she deserves their hatred.

Finally, Mrs. Dubose hurls one insult too many at the children, this time one equating their father with the black people and poor white people for whom she says Atticus works. When the children pass her house again a short time after this diatribe, Jem notices that Mrs. Dubose has retreated from the porch: In a fury, he destroys every one of her camellias.

As soon as he has done it, Jem begins to anticipate his father's rebuke. What he does not expect is the punishment that he receives: Atticus not only makes Jem apologize, he also has him offer amends. What Mrs. Dubose decides that she needs of Jem is to have him read to her every day but Sunday for a month. Atticus finds that penalty appropriate and makes sure that Jem lives up to the contract. Even when Jem reports Mrs. Dubose's continuing insults about Atticus helping black people, Atticus will not relent. Finally, the month is up, and Jem thinks that he is free of Mrs. Dubose. Some time later, however, Mrs. Dubose dies; Atticus then feels free to explain to Jem why, despite her prejudice and her crankiness, he considers Mrs. Dubose one of the bravest people he has ever known. Mrs. Dubose was addicted to morphine; however, when she knew that she was dying, she was determined to break that habit, even though by doing so she would ensure herself an agonizing death. Atticus does not have to explain further to his son; Jem now knows that he will never be free of Mrs. Dubose, will never forget the lesson he has learned.

In brief episodes such as this, Lee chronicles the children's moral development. The fact that generally she has her adult narrator move through events like the child she was when they occurred is one reason that *To Kill a Mockingbird* so effectively

dramatizes the journey from innocence to experience, from amorality to morality.

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

First Published: 1960

Type of work: Novel

Three children learn about goodness and courage from the small-town Alabama lawyer who defends an innocent black man in court despite community disapproval.

To Kill a Mockingbird has been discussed by many critics simply in terms of racial prejudice; however, it is clear that in both the novel and the film the theme is more universal than a portrayal of the evil of racial prejudice. That evil is shown as an example of humankind's intolerance. In all of its forms, people's inhumanity to others is the real antagonist of the enlightened. In the novel, there are many minor instances of prejudice, including the encounter between Jem and Mrs. Dubose, with which part 1 of the book ends. These incidents prepare for the concentration on the two major plot lines in part 2. Neither of the plot lines dominates the novel. Structurally, they are brilliantly interwoven. Thematically, they complement each other.

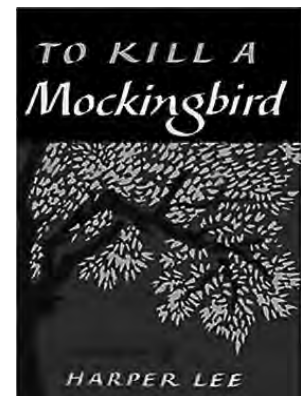
The first of these plots is introduced in the first few sentences of the novel, when the narrator says that the story to be told really began when Dill Harris got the idea of getting Arthur (Boo) Radley to come out. The setting is the small town of Maycomb, Alabama; the time is the mid-1930's. Boo Radley is the neighbor of the Finches. When he was a teenager, he got into minor trouble, and since that time, he has been imprisoned in his home by his father, who is a religious fanatic. Because no one in the community ever sees Boo, much less gets to know him, everyone has come to fear him.

At first, the children share this fear. They dare each other to run up to the house where Boo is incarcerated, as if he were a supernatural monster. Gradually, however, they become aware that Boo is observing them and that he wishes them no harm. Indeed, in his loneliness, he reaches out to the children. He keeps Jem from getting in trouble by returning his torn pants, mended; he leaves the

children little presents in a hollow tree; he even gets near enough to put a blanket around Scout when she is standing outside to watch a neighbor's house burn. Once the children begin to share secrets with Boo, they have admitted him to their world. He is no longer a stranger; he is a friend. The children have surmounted the prejudice of their community.

There are many parallels between this plot line and the second plot line, which involves a black man, Tom Robinson. Like Boo, Robinson is imprisoned within his community, but unlike Boo, Robinson has never committed any action that might produce punishment.

His only crime is to have been born black in a society that has certain assumptions about black people—among them, the assumption that black men always desire white women. That assumption is based on another assumption: that white people are always superior to black people.



Like Boo Radley, Tom Robinson is a kind person, drawn toward those he perceives as helpless. Certainly the white girl Mayella Ewell is pitiable. The entire community, black and white, looks down upon the Ewell tribe, which is headed by the despicable Bob Ewell, Mayella's father. Bob Ewell is the only character in *To Kill a Mockingbird* who has no virtues. He is mean, abusive, filthy, and shiftless.

When he is drunk or simply in a bad mood, he beats his children. Given this family situation, it would be natural for anyone to respond to a plea from one of those children. From time to time, when Tom is passing by the Ewell place, Mayella asks him to help her with some heavy task that her father has assigned her to do, and innocently, Tom does what she asks. Unfortunately, like Boo Radley, Mayella is desperately lonely, and she does the unthinkable: She makes a sexual advance to Tom.

Shocked and terrified, he leaves; shocked at her own conduct, she connives with her father to accuse Tom of rape. Thus it is Tom's compassionate attempt to transcend community prejudice, to treat an outcast white girl as a friend,

which puts him in peril and which finally, despite the impassioned legal defense by Atticus Finch, costs Tom his life. There is no question that both Boo Radley and Tom Robinson are acting correctly when they reach out to others. By example, Atticus Finch is attempting to teach this kind of behavior to both his children and his community. Yet Atticus would be the first to admit that there is danger in defying prejudice, in breaking down barriers that have been erected over the years and throughout the generations. Tom's moral action is misinterpreted; to believe him would be to admit that a white girl could desire a black man, and thus to upset the entire social hierarchy. Therefore the community must doom Tom, even though many people secretly do believe him. Boo Radley, too, runs a risk by befriending the children, not only from his tyrannical father but also from the law. When Bob Ewell ambushes Jem and Scout, planning to maim or kill them as a revenge upon Atticus, Boo goes to their defense and in the scuffle kills Bob Ewell.

Atticus Finch—the man of honor, no matter what the consequences—believes that he must turn Radley over to the sheriff; however, the sheriff refuses to prosecute Radley and persuades Atticus on this occasion to put justice ahead of the letter of the law and to let Radley go free. If the timid recluse had been sent to prison, he would have died as surely as Tom Robinson dies when he attempts to flee.

If compassion in the midst of prejudice costs Tom Robinson his life and puts Boo Radley in peril, it can nevertheless sometimes win a victory. During Tom's arrest and trial, the community tension mounts, and with it, hostility toward Atticus. Finally, a mob gathers at the jail where Tom is being held; outside the jail, Atticus is on guard. Undoubtedly, he would have been attacked, even killed, if a past kindness had not been remembered. Scout had befriended the child of one of the members of the mob. Innocently unaware of the danger, Scout runs to her father and singles out that other father with inquiries about his son. Shamefacedly, he answers, the anger is dispelled, and Atticus is safe. Although she is a realist, Harper Lee refuses to be a cynic. If there is evil in humanity, there is also good, and sometimes the good is recognized and even defended.

GO SET A WATCHMAN

Type of Work: Novel

First Published: 2015

Three children learn about goodness and courage from the small-town Alabama lawyer who defends an innocent black man in court despite community disapproval.

Published more than fifty years after Harper Lee's lauded masterpiece *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Go Set a Watchman* was remarkable upon its release for a myriad of reasons, including the hype surrounding its marketing. The novel, published by Harper Collins in the United States, was promoted as a sequel to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, rather than what it actually was: an earlier draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Despite the controversy caused by the book's marketing, *Go Set a Watchman* was highly popular and sold extremely well, an indicator of Lee's strength as writer and *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s importance in North American culture.

One of the key differences between this earlier draft and its more successful incarnation is the age difference in its protagonist; Jean Louise "Scout" Finch is twenty-six years old, rather than a child. The novel follows her as she returns home to Alabama from New York amidst severe racial tensions and dramatic change. Despite her own ambivalences, Jean Louise is shaken when she witnesses her father introduce a hate speaker at a racist Citizen's Council meeting; she exits loathing him.

Fortunately, Jean Louise's Uncle Jack provides her with further context and motivations of her father's actions, showing Jean Louise that racial politics and history are complex and perilous in the American South; Jean Louise's father, Atticus, is not a bigot, he insists, but rather attempting to prevent federal government involvement. Simultaneously, Jean Louise finds herself contending with the racial intolerances of her romantic suitor, Henry. By the novel's end, Jean Louise confronts both her father's and friend's ideological differences, coming to a fuller understanding of both them and herself. In the story's final lines, Jean Louise begins to see her father as a man, rather than a figure. And that is what lies at the heart of *Go Set a Watchman*; while attempting to present

a revealing narrative about racial tensions in the American South, Harper Lee provides her reader with an emotionally complex story of a daughter and her father. Artistically inferior to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, it has provoked widespread speculation about Lee's editor's decision not to publish this draft but rather to encourage her to rework it into one of the most beloved novels of the twentieth century. Lee was aged and ailing at the time the manuscript of *Go Set a Watchman* was discovered, and her reputation has suffered from the decision she and her advisors made to publish it.

SUMMARY

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee not only captured the essence of what it was like to grow up in a small Southern town in the 1930's, but she also showed what it was to grow up in such a society with a father who was a man of principle, who would risk his reputation and his life to defend a black man accused of a crime that violated the most sacred taboos of his society.

By making Tom Robinson's story only one of a number of episodes in the novel, all with a similar pattern, Lee broadened the subject of her work and expanded its theme. What Atticus is endeavoring to give to his children and to his community is the power to empathize with others and the courage to defend them against injustice.

Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman

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By the Author

LONG FICTION:

To Kill a Mockingbird, 1960

Go Set a Watchman, 2015

DISCUSSION TOPICS

- What does *To Kill a Mockingbird* gain from being narrated retrospectively? What qualities are lost in this type of narration?
- How does Harper Lee develop the character of Boo Radley?
- What principles of plot construction does Lee master most thoroughly in her novel?
- Does the film version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* magnify the character of Atticus Finch beyond his status in the novel?

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