

Nearly half a century after its first publication, the status of Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* as one of the most esteemed and well-known literary works of modern times remains assured. It has never been out of print, it has been translated into several languages, and it has become a part of literary curricula around the world. Moreover, it continues to figure prominently in literature surveys and polls. In 1999, for instance, it was voted the best novel of the twentieth century by the readers of the *Library Journal*. Even more recently, it came in at number one in a survey conducted online to find the fifty best novels of all time.¹ Furthermore, Lee has received numerous honors since her novel was first published, including the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 and culminating in the highly prestigious Presidential Medal of Freedom in November, 2007. It is entirely in keeping with this that the 1962 film adaptation of the same name has become almost as famous as the original novel, garnering a string of Oscars including Best Actor for Gregory Peck in the role of Atticus Finch.²

Yet, for all this, the novel itself has not been the object of much literary criticism and analysis over the years, as Claudia Johnson, among others, has remarked (*Boundaries*, 20). Johnson made this observation in the early nineties, but the number of literary studies concerning this novel has not increased markedly since then. Similarly, there are few full-length biographies of Harper Lee. Of course there is an obvious reason for this; like J. D. Salinger, author of another celebrated twentieth century American novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Lee is thought of as being reclusive. Even more intriguingly, and unlike Salinger, she has produced virtually no other literature of any note. However, the impact of her one novel has never been in doubt, as Johnson recognizes. "*To Kill a Mockingbird* is unquestionably one of the most widely read, best-selling, and influential books in American literature. It has made a significant difference in the lives of individuals and in the culture as a

whole" (*Casebook*, 9). Johnson goes on to note that the novel came in second only to the Bible in one readers' list of books that were felt to contribute most significantly to individual people's lives (*Casebook*, 9). *Mockingbird* is one of those relatively rare single works of literature that can truly be said to have attained a mythical status; it is ultimately lauded less for its brilliance in terms of literary art than for the way in which it seems to impress people on a deeply human level. Of course in the simplest sense it is an appealing tale of the fight against injustice, a play on the age-old theme of good versus evil.

Although the book is seen to have such a universal and lasting appeal, it does of course have a special historical significance. Lee's native state of Alabama, where the story is set, provided one of the flashpoints for the burgeoning American Civil Rights movement of the 1950s, with such momentous events as the Montgomery bus boycott which began in 1955, five years before the book's publication. Given its overriding theme of racial oppression in the South, Lee's novel, not unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the previous century, has taken on strong political dimensions. This, in turn, has led to the common but misleading association between Lee and the Civil Rights struggle—despite the fact that she took no actual part in it (*Boundaries*, xi-xiv). Of course, she drew on the current climate of racial tension and unrest for her material, as well as incorporating her own memories of growing up in Monroeville during the thirties. It has been suggested that Tom Robinson's plight was inspired by the real-life, protracted case of the Scottsboro Boys, who in 1931 were falsely accused of rape by two white women (*Boundaries*, 7-11). Patrick Chura has also closely examined the highly emotive case of Emmett Till, who was brutally murdered by a gang in Mississippi for flirting with a white woman. In addition, Charles Shields recounts in his biography of Lee how Lee's own father, an attorney, unsuccessfully defended two black men in 1919 and thereafter never tried another criminal case (120-121). It might be said that the book takes much of its potency from the way in which it fuses together autobiographical ele-

ments with high-profile cases of injustice and brutality which were continuing to fuel racial tensions at the time of its publication. Certainly there was something opportune about its timing. As Fred Erisman's analysis makes clear, this work, with its portrayal of small-town Southern life and its host of quirky characters, can be viewed as being primarily a "regional" novel, something in the so-called "Southern Gothic" tradition.³ It might be characterized therefore as a regional novel that, by reason of its temporal and geographical proximity to the Civil Rights movement, became elevated to a position of national importance. As already remarked, however, its influence continues to be felt many years later and in different countries; it has transcended its original contexts.

For all its fame, however, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has not had a unanimously favorable reception. For one thing, as Johnson has discussed at length, it has frequently fallen afoul of the censors for such reasons as its use of slang, reference to sexual activity, and "expression of anti-establishment attitudes" (*Casebook*, 197). In fact, objections continue to be raised even at the turn of the twenty-first century—for example, by Isaac Saney—which is a measure of its lasting impact. Most of the issues raised by the censors probably have never much troubled the majority of readers. However, the portrayal of black characters in the novel has attracted a fair bit of criticism. For instance Roslyn Siegel takes issue with the fact that Tom Robinson, in the tradition of many writings by Southern whites, is seen to be abjectly helpless and wholly reliant on whites. It is true that he can be viewed as a flat character, who really appears only in the capacity of victim—a role which is of course necessitated by the book's plot. Other blacks appear in much the same light, endowed with "Biblical patience" (Lee, 228), full of humble gratitude toward Atticus for fighting their cause and delivering masses of food to the Finch household in return "although times are . . . hard" (Lee, 232). There is undoubtedly truth in the assertion that Lee does not engage as fully with the black characters in the story as she does with the white (with the notable exception of Calpurnia, the Finches'

housekeeper); and there is an undeniable note of condescension at times toward blacks, as when Atticus blasts whites who would "take advantage of a Negro's *ignorance*" (Lee, 241, emphasis added). An even more striking instance of this comes from Miss Maudie, who points out that, despite appearances to the contrary, there are white people in Maycomb with some humility—"enough humility to think, when they look at a Negro, there but for the Lord's kindness am I" (Lee, 257). Such remarks do seem to provide fair ammunition for those who feel that Lee's depiction of black characters is decidedly limited and—for all the book's themes of tolerance and understanding—inherently racist.

To Kill a Mockingbird, then, is not a radical call to arms; it seems to stop well short of depicting, or even really advocating, proper racial integration. Even Calpurnia, who is the most individualized black character, is said to lead "a modest double life," an existence outside of the Finch household which is entirely "separate" (Lee, 136); when she takes the children to the Negro church, they notice that she even speaks in an entirely different way than usual, in the black people's idiom (Lee, 129). Of course, she makes the point that "it's the same God" (Lee, 129) in reply to one of the black women who complains about her bringing white children to the Negro church; but the sense of division remains. All the same, it is worthwhile remembering that the only time the book ever descends to the level of crude caricature of blacks is in Mrs. Merriweather's comments at the missionary meeting following the trial, about her servant girl Sophy (Lee, 252-253); and these comments are deliberately meant to reflect back upon the speaker. In fact all the members of the white missionary circle unconsciously reveal themselves to be the most narrow-minded "hypocrites" (Lee, 254) through their supposedly genteel conversation around the tea table. And while it is true that Lee does generally keep a certain distance from the black section of Maycomb society, it might be pointed out that she is merely reflecting the world in which she grew up, where social divisions along racial lines remained rigid. In this way the novel gives

readers today a vivid picture of what everyday life really was like in the American South in that era. Overall, although Lee's portrayal of blacks has attracted complaints, it is neither an unduly negative nor over-sentimentalized picture that she gives, and generally speaking, readers do not seem to feel that it pulls the book down very sharply.

In any case, it is important to bear in mind that Lee's portrayal of race and race issues is not the whole story. Edgar Schuster states the case as follows:

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

Tom Robinson's trial, which highlights the racism endemic in Maycomb, is the most dramatic and emotionally charged element of the novel, but it forms only a small part of the larger theme of prejudice in general. It is therefore a tad misleading to describe the novel (as it often is) as dealing predominantly with the issue of racial injustice. Atticus's oft-repeated maxim illuminates the wider purpose of the story: "You never really understand a person until you . . . climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee, 31). He constantly exhorts his children to put themselves in other people's shoes in order to see things from different perspectives. This is salutary advice in a community as riddled with prejudices as Maycomb, which harbors fixed ideas about how people behave (or ought to behave) according to their race, gender, and class; and Maycomb can be taken as a microcosm of the world at large. For Scout, narrator of the story, this lesson begins and ends with Boo Radley, the mysterious and reclusive neighbor about whom she and her brother Jem and friend Dill spin wild fantasies. But as the novel pro-

gresses, her understanding and compassion grow, and she gradually realizes that far from the “malevolent phantom” (Lee, 13) that she once imagined him to be, he is actually an eminently decent human being—despite the strange conditions of his life—and she is finally able to recognize him as being a true “gentleman” (Lee, 304). She comes to see the world, quite literally, from his point of view by standing on the Radley porch (Lee, 305)—a place that finally loses the sense of terror it once caused her.

Atticus’s injunction to walk around in another person’s shoes in order to understand them extends even to the likes of Bob Ewell, the villain of the piece, as when Atticus explains to his children why Ewell feels the need to threaten him in the aftermath of the trial; Atticus fully understands that, despite the positive outcome of the trial for Ewell, any “credibility” Ewell ever had was destroyed by Atticus’s rigorous cross-examination (Lee, 238). In a similar way, and much more poignantly, a stark comprehension of Mayella Ewell’s position suddenly dawns on Scout during the trial. Living among the lowest of the low in the white community, at the mercy of her brutal father, ostracized by white people as “trash,” and shunned by blacks because she is white, Mayella, as Scout realizes, “must have been the loneliest person in the world. She was even lonelier than Boo Radley, who had not been out of the house in twenty-five years” (Lee, 209). At this point Scout, for a few moments at least, is able to empathize very clearly with Mayella and to understand the basis of her actions in helping to convict an innocent man. The book is nothing if not a call for the enlightenment of empathy, a plea not to judge too quickly and certainly not on the basis of unreasoning prejudice. At the same time it does not take this to maudlin extremes; the Finches display a measure of understanding for the Ewells but do not harbor any particular compassion for them as they are willfully responsible for the great wrong done to Tom Robinson (and Bob Ewell, at least, is seen to be beyond redemption if he can do something as cowardly as attacking children in the dark). *Mockingbird* simply suggests that people should try to live by a basically decent set

of values. There are no unrealistic hopes or expectations that radical changes can take place in people or that miraculous events—like Tom Robinson being acquitted—can happen, but simply an appeal for people to try and understand each other as far as possible. This is the message that continues to resonate with readers worldwide. On one of the rare occasions on which she has broken her silence on the novel, in a 1966 letter to the *Richmond News-Leader*, Lee herself remarked that “Surely it is plain to the simplest intelligence that *To Kill a Mockingbird* spells out in words of seldom more than two syllables a code of honor and conduct, Christian in its ethic, that is the heritage of all Southerners.” It is interesting to note that she puts a distinctly “regional” slant on things here, and invokes a broadly Western (Christian) moral framework for her story; but the novel’s relevance certainly does not appear to be limited to any one time or place, or to people of any one particular religious or social background. As Shields says, its “lessons of human dignity and respect for others remains fundamental and universal” (1).

Atticus is not the only enlightened adult figure in the book: there are others, like the straight-talking Miss Maudie (who refuses to conform to ladylike notions by spending most of her time outdoors working in her garden and wearing overalls). Mr. Underwood, the editor of the local paper, is another example; he denounces the shooting of the physically disabled Tom Robinson during an escape attempt simply on the grounds that it is “a sin to kill cripples, be they sitting, standing or escaping” (Lee, 262). It is Atticus who absorbs much of the character interest in this regard, however. He has become one of the best-known fictional characters in modern times and functions as a moral exemplar, not least for members of the legal profession, as Alice Petry notes: “Atticus has become something of a folk hero in legal circles and is treated almost as if he were an actual person” (xxiii). Yet at first glance he does not appear as a typical hero. His physical shortcomings are carefully enumerated; his children chafe against the fact that he is older than their classmates’ parents so that he is unable to play football with

Jem, nor does he hunt, drink, play poker, or do anything else glamorous in their eyes; he simply “(sits) in the living room and read(s)” (Lee, 97). Furthermore—in a wry twist on his sister Alexandra’s “preoccupation with heredity” (Lee, 141)—he is virtually half-blind, apparently owing to the fact that “left eyes (are) the tribal curse of the Finches” (Lee, 97). He is deliberately conceived as a foil to the popular image of the macho, gun-toting type of American hero—although ironically, for all his expressed antipathy to guns,⁴ he proves to be a deadly shot in the incident of the mad dog (Lee, 104). Unfortunately he is not so successful in fighting the “mad dog” of racism;⁵ as Scout waits for the trial verdict to be announced she feels as though she is watching him walk into the street to shoot the dog all over again “but this time knowing that the gun was empty” (Lee, 230). Of course, his attempt to fight for what he knows is a lost cause is admirable, although it is only the most visible part of his work as lawyer. He also deals with more routine and mundane tasks such as sorting out tax matters (Lee, 126) or “making a will so airtight can’t anyone meddle with it” (Lee, 98). On the face of it there is actually nothing very remarkable about his character; it is simply his principles of hard work, honesty, humility and tolerance, which he always tries to put into practice and also to inculcate in his children, that make him noteworthy. It is precisely because he is, essentially, such an ordinary person that readers identify with him and look to him as a role model; he is manifestly not superhuman.

Some might argue, however, that Atticus appears altogether too good and noble, occupying too much of the moral high ground as a man “who does (his) best to love everybody” and who disregards insults from others as it is only a sign of “how poor they are” (Lee, 118). Certainly he has appeared in a less positive light in some revisionist readings of the novel. A notable case of this was an Alabama editorial in 1992 that opined he should not be looked up to because, for all his good points, he still served a racist and sexist legal system. This editorial provoked many replies from lawyers who vehemently disagreed (Petty, xxv-xxvii). Another and more recent example is a critical arti-

cle by Steven Lubet in the *Michigan Law Review*; again, the strength of the response to Lubet in defense of Atticus illustrates how the character continues to fulfill an important role outside of merely literary discussion. He has come to be accepted as an embodiment of basic decent values which anyone, both in legal work or in day-to-day living, can strive to emulate.

The stalwart character of Atticus Finch, then, remains a prime reason for the lasting success and cultural significance of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Another is the novel's style. The issues it deals with are serious, so much so that R. A. Dave has likened it to classical tragedy or epic in its depiction of the defeat of innocence, for which the mockingbird functions as a symbol. Tom Robinson's death (Lee, 262) and the treatment of Boo Radley (Lee, 202) are both explicitly compared to the shooting of mockingbirds—"which don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us," as Miss Maudie remarks (Lee, 98). The story is also about the loss of innocence in the sense that the children—Scout, Jem, and Dill—come to recognize the nature and the power of evil active in the world as they grow older. However, the book is not weighed down with these themes. Instead it opts for a lively and frequently very humorous mode of narration, from Scout's perspective as a small child. In using a child-narrator to explore themes of adult prejudices and hypocrisy and racial oppression, the book is comparable to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and, like Twain's celebrated novel, its style has proved a hit with readers. It is a refreshing and easy-to-read narrative which is also quite subtly done, as Scout's child-view is aided by the reflections of her older self. And, in fact, we do not get just Scout's double perspective but also that of her older brother Jem, to whom she constantly refers; his point of view is more developed than that of the young Scout but still immature compared to that of adults. Therefore the novel meshes together child, adolescent and adult perspectives, which makes for a certain richness in the storytelling and much amusement as the children struggle to come to terms with the adult world. Scout's tomboyish ways—beating up Dill and other schoolmates,

swearing, and rebelling at the prospect of living in “a pink-cotton penitentiary” (Lee, 148-149)—provide plenty of scope for humor, particularly in the face of the constant disapproval of her prim-and-proper Aunt Alexandra and other ladies in the neighborhood. All three of the children also spend much of their time speculating about the adults who inhabit their small world, which, as Theodore and Grace-Ann Hovet have discussed, provides the reader with entertaining glimpses into a varied and fascinating gallery of characters in a small Southern town.

More pertinent to the central purpose of the novel is the way in which the straightforwardness of a child’s perspective shows up the irrationality of adult prejudices and preconceptions. Scout is perpetually bemused by her aunt’s ideas on background and class: “Somewhere, I had received the impression that Fine Folks were people who did the best they could with the sense they had, but Aunt Alexandra was of the opinion, obliquely expressed, that the longer a family had been squatting on one patch of land the finer it was” (Lee, 141). This is made to look ridiculous by Jem who points out that, by this definition, the Ewells are also “fine folks” as they have been living in the same dump for generations (Lee, 141). Such an approach allows Lee to use humor to make some valid points about the essential superficiality of many social distinctions. The tone becomes more serious, though, when Scout wonders how her teacher Miss Gates can speak out against Hitler for persecuting Jews and at the same time persist in her animosity toward blacks in her own neighborhood: “how can you hate Hitler so bad and then turn around and be so ugly about folks right at home?” (Lee, 268). Indeed, to the young Scout, the adult world sometimes appears utterly incomprehensible: “I came to the conclusion that people were just peculiar. I withdrew from them and never thought about them unless I was forced to” (Lee, 264). Lee therefore turns a sharp eye on virtually every aspect of Maycomb society; she targets notions on race, gender, class, and also criticizes social institutions—not just the judiciary (which is obviously gravely at fault in a case like Tom Robinson’s) but also organized religion (the missionary circle, as seen above)

and education.⁶ However, the humor of the book, although often ironic and verging on the satirical, never becomes too uncomfortable or sardonic; the tone generally remains warm and pleasant, which is why it continues to hold so much appeal for readers. Scout, Jem and Dill simply have to learn to come to terms with the adult world, the world of Maycomb, for all its follies and inconsistencies. This does not mean that they should tamely submit to it; they can continue to view it critically, as the older Scout obviously does—but they do not repudiate it altogether.

At the core of the novel appears to lie a belief in the innate goodness of human beings; as Atticus tells his daughter at the end, “Most people are [nice] Scout, when you finally see them” (Lee, 307). The book therefore concludes on a positive note. Although it provides a thoroughgoing critique of society, it does not do so in an angry and confrontational way, making it easier to assimilate for the majority of readers. It does not surrender human ideals or despair either of society or of individuals. It is moralistic but does not preach at its readers, instead making its observations in a generally sly and humorous manner. It is a novel that combines humor and social comment with a strong and stirring plot, a hero (and villain), and moments of genuine pathos. These are the ingredients of its continuing widespread significance well into the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Reported in *The Telegraph* newspaper.
2. There have, however, been no other really well-known adaptations, excepting the play by Christopher Sergel that has been performed annually in Lee’s hometown of Monroeville since 1990, and which had become a tourist draw.
3. The novel can also be considered a bildungsroman as it charts the moral and emotional development of its central character, Scout Finch.
4. Atticus impresses upon his children that “having a gun is an invitation for someone to shoot you” (Lee, 237). He also mentions guns when he tells them that Mrs. Dubose, the fierce and dying old lady who attempts to cure herself of her morphine addiction, is an example of true courage as opposed to the “idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand” (Lee, 121).

5. See Carolyn Jones for a full discussion of the mad dog as a symbol of racism in the novel.

6. Having been taught to read by Atticus at home, Scout finds it difficult to adjust to her school's teaching methods, with the comic result that she is not allowed to read there at all to begin with, so that her official education leaves her with "the prospect of spending nine months refraining from reading and writing" (Lee, 30).

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