

## Lecture Notes

### HARPER LEE AND *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

Many critics say that Harper Lee modeled the character of Scout after herself. Harper Lee was born in Monroeville, Alabama in 1926, so she would have been the same age as Scout when *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes place. Lee's father was a small-town lawyer, just like Atticus Finch, and Harper Lee spent many hours at the local courthouse with her father. Although there is no proof, it is rumored that a mysterious recluse lived in Lee's neighborhood on which the character of Boo Radley is based. Finally, Harper Lee's mother's maiden name was Frances Finch.

In April 1931, in Scottsboro, Alabama, nine African-American men—the youngest being twelve years old—were tried for raping two white women. Medical testimony showed that the two women had not been raped, but the all-white jury convicted the men and sentenced them to death. In six appellate trials, most of the convictions were overturned, and all but one of the men were subsequently freed or paroled. Even though she was only six years old when the first trial took place, this trial had a significant impact on Harper Lee, and it served as the basis for the trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Harper Lee's close childhood friend was the famous author Truman Capote. Lee and her brother spent their summers playing with Truman, and her friendship with him continued until his death in 1984. She worked as his research assistant when he went to Kansas to write his award-winning novel *In Cold Blood*. Many critics believe that Capote was the model for Lee's character Dill in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Capote supported Lee's book by writing the following for the front flap of the first edition's book jacket:

Someone rare has written this very fine first novel: a writer with the liveliest sense of life and the warmest, most authentic humor. A touching book; and so funny, so likeable.

### SOUTHERN SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE EARLY 1900S

Following the end of slavery after the Civil War, the social structure of the South changed. The plantation owners and professionals (doctors, lawyers, etc.) made up the upper class, and because farming was becoming much more commercialized, most land owners became prominent businessmen by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The middle class consisted of owners of small farms and small-town business owners. A new lower class emerged that included African-American farmers and unskilled laborers, such as mill workers.

In the 1930s, the South was immersed in the Great Depression. Poverty and unemployment were rampant, with over 13 million Americans having lost their jobs since 1929. Between 1929 and 1932, farm prices fell by over 50 percent, and the average income in 1929 was about \$750, but annual farm income was only about \$275.

Since the South was predominantly an agrarian culture, the element that divided the classes was land. Farming had a very significant impact on the United States economy, employing approximately 25 percent of the total workforce in the 1930s; to put this in perspective, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, only about two or three percent of the American workforce is employed in farming. Many white people owned acres of land, but they had very little cash. Because of the Great Depression and the collapse of the world trade market, farmers had a difficult time selling their crops, with the value of the crops dropping by as much as 27 percent in 1930.

The majority of African-American farmers worked as sharecroppers in the white people's fields, and if they owned any land at all, it was a small plot on which they could grow very little. In the sharecropping system, the landowner divided his land into shares, and he provided small houses, tools, and seeds for the sharecropper. Some landowners also fed, clothed, and provided medical care for the sharecropper families. Once the crop was harvested, the landowners received a percentage of the profits, after having taken out the expenses they had incurred on behalf of the sharecroppers. Because their livelihood depended on the success of the crop, the landowners watched the crops closely, and they often pushed the sharecroppers to use all of the leased land for farming, which meant that the sharecroppers did not have land on which to grow their own food. As a result, the sharecroppers bought food from the local grocery store, thus owing money to the store owner as well as the landowner. By the time the Great Depression hit, the sharecroppers were already deep in debt, and when it became difficult to sell the crops, they could not pay their bills. In reality, the sharecropping system was not much different from slavery.

The number of small farms grew between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the Depression. The farmers began to devote more of their land to cash crops, primarily cotton and tobacco, but they still committed enough of their land to growing their own food that they were almost self-sufficient. These farmers relied on their family members, including young school-aged children, to work in the fields during planting and harvesting times. Again, although the farmers provided food for their families, they did not have much cash, so the children often did not have the supplies they needed for school, if they even got to attend classes. In the 1930s, tractors and other farm equipment were becoming more readily available, but most farmers could not afford to buy them. The government began providing agricultural subsidies that allowed the farmers to buy the equipment. However, as the Great Depression set in, the farmers could not sell their crops, so like the sharecroppers, they became mired in debt.

All social classes are represented in the story line of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The Finch family is part of the upper-middle class in the town of Maycomb. Atticus owns a nice home, and he is college-educated as a lawyer. They are sufficiently affluent to have an African-American housekeeper. Although they are considered upper-middle class and well-off, they are like the other families in Maycomb in that they have very little cash. However, the Finch family is much better off than families like the Cunninghams, who own farmland, but cannot sell their crops, which means they have no money and cannot afford to buy the essentials for living. The Ewells are considered nothing more than "poor white trash," because they live in a run-down shack next to the city dump, Bob Ewell uses his welfare check to buy liquor rather than feed his children, and the Ewell children do not attend school. The African-American class, which is seen as the lowest class in the social structure, is represented by two main characters—Calpurnia, the Finches' housekeeper, and Tom Robinson, the accused rapist. Both of these characters have jobs working for upper-middle class white families.

## SOUTHERN HERITAGE

The upper class consisted of people whose families had lived in the same area for generations, and they either owned huge plantations or were educated as white-collar professionals. The amount of money they had was not as important as their appearance of comfort, which included having African-American servants in their homes, much like owning slaves. The lack of money served as a trigger to further separate socioeconomic classes in the South. Since money could not be the differentiating factor, Southerners tended to use their ancestry as a way to separate the elite from the common folk. For example, in June 1915, Mrs. Mary Nowlin Moon wrote about the importance of being a Daughter of the Confederacy, saying:

A part of my heritage was that I came into this world with the blood of a soldier in my veins...a soldier who may have had nothing more to leave behind to me and to those who come after me except in heritage...a heritage so rich in honor and glory that it far surpasses any material wealth that could be mine. But it is mine, to cherish, to nurture and to make grace, and to pass along to those yet to come.... I am a member of The United Daughters of the Confederacy because I feel it would greatly please my ancestor to know that I am a member. It would please him to know that I appreciate what he did and delight his soldier love to know that I do not consider the cause which he held so dear to be lost or forgotten. Rather, I am extremely proud of the fact that he was a part of it and was numbered among some of the greatest and bravest men which any such cause ever produced.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, several of the characters exhibit this attitude toward Southern heritage, most notably Aunt Alexandra and the women of her missionary circle. The Finches have been landed gentry in the South for many generations, living on the family homestead called Finch's Landing. Atticus and his brother Jack broke family tradition by leaving the homestead to become a lawyer and doctor, respectively. They left the house to their sister, Alexandra. Neither Atticus nor Jack put much stock in the importance of their family heritage; they see people as individuals rather than descendants of some great soldier. Alexandra, however, makes most decisions about the people with whom she associates based on their heritage.

## RACISM IN THE SOUTH

The most significant social issue of the South during the 1930s was segregation. Laws forbid African-Americans and whites from mixing in any public areas, such as schools, restrooms, buses, or trains. African-Americans had a separate school system, but "colored" schools did not have books or supplies, and the children had very little opportunity to attend, because they were needed to work the fields.

Although the fifteenth amendment of the Constitution was ratified on February 3, 1870, giving African-American people the legal right to vote, many of the Southern states circumvented this law by having stringent voter registration requirements, such as literacy tests and poll taxes, by intimidating African-Americans, and by making voting locations difficult to find. Literacy tests did not legally refer to race, but illiterate white men could vote by invoking a grandfather clause, which stated that any man was allowed to vote if he could prove that his grandfather had voted; because the grandparents of African-American men had not been allowed to vote, they could not use the grandfather clause if they were illiterate. Poll taxes also prevented most African-Americans from voting, because they did not have the money to pay the required tax.

Although poverty was prevalent throughout the South, African-American people suffered the most. As textile mills began to open, the majority of jobs—both skilled and unskilled—were reserved for whites. Only the most menial jobs were offered to African-Americans, often at salaries that kept them below the poverty level. Because of their lack of education, most African-Americans worked in farming or domestic jobs. The Social Security Act, passed in 1935, provided retirement and unemployment compensation for all American workers, with the exception of those working in farming and domestic positions. Also, when the GI Bill was passed in 1944 to provide education and low-interest mortgage loans for veterans returning from World War II, the rules for lending money favored segregated suburban areas as opposed to minority neighborhoods in the city. These subtle interpretations of laws helped to keep African-Americans immersed in poverty.

One of the most tragic ramifications of segregation was that any African-American person who questioned or fought this obvious bias was in jeopardy of being killed, and the murderers would not even stand trial for their crime. A frequent consequence for testing authority was lynching, originally a term used to refer to any form of punishment outside the judicial system, such as tar-and-feathering a person or running someone out of town. By the 1930s, however, a lynching meant killing the prey, usually hanging him, from a tree until dead. After the Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was founded by Confederate army veterans to oppose changes that occurred during the Reconstruction period. As laws providing equal opportunity for African-Americans were passed, the KKK used lynching as a means of intimidating African-Americans. Then, as white men lost jobs during the Depression, their anger and bitterness began to fester, and many joined the secret brotherhood of the KKK. The KKK, which reached its peak in the 1920s, was very involved in politics and in judicial processes. For example, Leo Frank, a Jewish factory worker, was convicted of raping a white girl who worked with him in the factory. The Klan intimidated the jury and the judge to the point that the judge asked that Frank and his lawyer not be present for the reading of the verdict. Before his sentencing, a group of Klansmen kidnapped Frank from prison and lynched him. No one was ever brought to trial for Leo Frank's murder.

Many critics believe that Harper Lee based Robinson's trial on the famous 1931 trial of the "Scottsboro Boys," a trial that exemplified the lack of equal justice in the South. Young African-Americans and whites often caught free rides on the railroads through the South to investigate possible jobs about which they had heard. On a train from Chattanooga to Memphis, four African-American teenaged boys and four young whites (two boys and two girls) began throwing rocks at each other after one of the white boys stepped on an African-American boy's hand. The African-Americans eventually forced the other boys off the train. When the white boys reported the incident at the nearest station, a posse of white men stopped the train, arrested every African-American teenaged boy on the train, and took them to a jail in Scottsboro, Alabama. Two girls on the train said they had been raped by the boys, with one accusing five of the boys of raping her at knife-point. The jail's guard assumed that if five had raped one of the girls, then the other boys must have raped the other girl. In the original trials, the teens were sentenced to terms ranging from 75 to 99 years in prison, with several receiving the death penalty. The US Supreme Court overturned the verdicts twice—once because the African-American defendants had been given inadequate legal counsel, and once because the trial and grand juries did not have any African-American people on them. The youths were retried in Alabama, and one of the women recanted her testimony. The boys

were again found guilty, but the judge set the verdict aside due to lack of sufficient evidence. The state finally dropped charges against five of the men in 1937, paroled two in 1944, paroled one in 1951, and pardoned one in 1976. The racial issues that Harper Lee presents in Tom Robinson's trial mirror the issues raised in the Scottsboro trial.

#### PUBLICATION OF *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

*To Kill a Mockingbird* was first published in 1960, a time of turbulent civil protest in this country, with Alabama seen as a predominantly segregated state. Even though slavery had been outlawed for nearly a century, racial discrimination was still rampant in the South. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Brown vs. Board of Education* that racial segregation in public schools was illegal. In 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give her seat to a white person on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Her arrest sparked a city-wide boycott of the public transit system led by Martin Luther King. In 1956, Autherine Lucy, an African-American woman, was admitted to the University of Alabama, but after three days of violence on the campus, she fled and was not allowed to return by the school's Board of Trustees. The courts re-admitted Autherine to the University, but the Board of Trustees expelled her. Episodes such as these were repeated at schools, restaurants, and other establishments across the South as the Civil Rights movement became a highly publicized and angrily debated social issue of the 1960s.

With the Civil Rights movement as its background, *To Kill a Mockingbird* quickly rose to the top of every bestseller list and stayed there for over a year and one-half. Harper Lee won the Pulitzer Prize in 1961, and over fifteen million copies of the book were sold in the early years of the book's publication. Many critics hailed *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an accurate portrayal of the racist discrimination in the South. In *World Literature Criticism*, Edgar H. Shuster says,

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.

However, not all critics praised the book. Some found Lee's use of a young child as the narrator unrealistic and the tone of the book very moralistic.

Since its publication, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been quite controversial for use in school settings. Through the years, school boards across the country have banned it from required reading lists, libraries, and class discussions. These moves have been justified because of the book's use of violence and its messages about race and social justice. Advocates of the novel claim that it is an appropriate vehicle to teach these issues because most of the characters, particularly Atticus, demonstrate high moral values and strong ethics. Recently, however, critics have begun to describe Atticus as a white, paternalistic figure, and Lee's presentation of the African-American people as passive and submissive, needing a white man to rescue them from injustice. These critics see Atticus as never really trying to change the racism that permeates Maycomb, but living his life comfortably within the Southern social structure.

## HARPER LEE'S REACTION TO SUCCESS

Following the success of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee published a few short nonfiction pieces in national magazines. Then she disappeared and did not publish anything else. Lee was surprised and according to some sources, frightened by the book's success. Her expectation was that *To Kill a Mockingbird* would not be well received by the critics, yet she hoped the public would enjoy it enough to encourage her to continue to write.

In an interview with Roy Newquist in 1964, Lee talked about writing another book. Responding to a question about her progress, Lee said it was going very slowly, saying, "I like to write. Sometimes I'm afraid that I like it too much because when I get into work I don't want to leave it. As a result I'll go for days and days without leaving the house or wherever I happen to be. I'll go out long enough to get papers and pick up some food and that's it. It's strange, but instead of hating writing, I love it too much."

This interview with Roy Newquist was the last interview that Harper Lee gave. Because she never published another book and became so reclusive, many critics theorized that Truman Capote was really the author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This rumor has finally been put to rest by the discovery of a letter that Capote wrote his aunt in Monroeville, Alabama, on July 9, 1959—a year before *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published. In the letter, he said,

Yes, it is true that Nelle Lee is publishing a book. I did not see Nelle last winter, but the previous year, she showed me as much of the book as she'd written, and I liked it very much. She has real talent.

In 2001, the University of Alabama began an annual essay contest for high school students on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and it was recently learned that Lee has attended the award ceremony each year, talked with the winners and their families, and signed autographs for anyone who asked. In 2006, she agreed to an interview with *The New York Times* as long as they only discussed the essay contest.

She currently lives with her 94-year-old sister in their hometown of Monroeville, Alabama, and she continues to decline interviews. She has never explained why she has not written another book or why she will not agree to be interviewed. One rumor that is credited to her sister, Alice, says that in the 1970s, Harper Lee had almost finished her second book, but someone broke into her home and stole the manuscript. Other rumors state that Lee doesn't grant interviews because she feels that reporters misunderstand her, and she doesn't get to talk about anything but the characters of her one book. None of these rumors has been proven or disproven.

Lee recently surprised the world by writing a piece in July 2006, that Oprah Winfrey published in *O* magazine. In the form of a letter to Oprah, Lee described her memories of reading as a child. This is the first piece that Lee has written since 1983 when she reviewed a book about Alabama history.

## POINT OF VIEW

Harper Lee chose to write *To Kill a Mockingbird* in first-person narrative. Scout Finch, a young girl who is six years old at the beginning of the novel, is the narrator. This is significant because it allows Lee to take advantage of a child's innocence to explain the complex social issues of racial prejudice and ignore the fears that so many Southern women had of being raped by an African-American man. At times in the novel, Scout has a clearer understanding of some of the social issues than the adults around her. For example, by having Scout explain the events surrounding Robinson's trial, her child-like innocence emphasizes the significance of simple justice for all.

Lee is successful in using such a young child as the narrator because she portrays Scout as a very bright child who has been taught by her father to think and reason much like an adult. Because of the neighborhood in which she lives, Scout spends most of her time with adults, and she does not hesitate to judge adults for their actions and attitudes. Scout says what she thinks, even if she is not capable of fully understanding a subject. By combining this inquisitive, adult-like role with the innocence of a six-year-old child, Lee develops a simple, but sophisticated, first-person narrative. Lee also adds complexity by having the narrator tell the story as a flashback, occasionally adding her adult perspective on the events she explains as a child.

Some critics, on the other hand, claim that, by using a child as the narrator, Lee presents the themes of the novel too simplistically. They say that if she had used third-person omniscient or first-person narrative from various people, Lee would have been able to share different perspectives of the issues. For example, the reader is left to infer Atticus' reasons for taking on Robinson as a client by reading Scout's explanation of her father's belief that all people should be treated with respect.

## THEME

Harper Lee has several themes that she has woven through *To Kill a Mockingbird*, all of which are emphasized by Scout's age and loss of innocence as she matures during the course of the story. Scout begins the story as an innocent six-year-old who believes her father's teaching that everyone is basically good. As she progresses through the events of the book, Scout has to reconcile her innocent view of people with the reality that evil exists in the world. Scout struggles with this theme as she begins to see that everything is not as simple as it appears, that appearances may be deceiving, that people often fear those who are different, and that bravery is more than shooting a mad dog.

*Deceptive Appearances*—Lee emphasizes that things are not always what they appear to be, and as Scout and Jem get older, they begin to understand this. Scout's exposure to this is illustrated through a wide variety of brief experiences, such as Miss Caroline's not wanting Scout to learn from her father; Mr. Underwood's hatred of African-Americans, but willingness to shoot anyone who tries to lynch Tom Robinson; Miss Gates' sympathetic attitude toward the Jews in Germany, but not toward the African-Americans in Maycomb; and Mr. Raymond's secret bottle of Coca-Cola. A particularly amusing illustration of Scout's increasing awareness of this hypocrisy is Mrs.

Merriweather's conversation at the missionary circle. However, Scout's evolving attitude toward Arthur (Boo) Radley is the clearest illustration of her increasing understanding of the inconsistency and complexity of the adult world. She begins the story seeing Radley as a blood-loving monster but changes her view when she realizes that he saved her life by killing Bob Ewell.

*Prejudice*—The implications of racism are probably the most pronounced theme in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In the novel, Lee repeatedly questions the attitude that whites are superior to African-Americans. For example, while visiting Calpurnia's church, Scout realizes that the physical structure is quite different, but the messages are the same. Dill cannot understand why a wealthy white man like Mr. Raymond would choose to marry an African-American woman. No one questions the references to Tom Robinson as a "nigger" or a "boy," and he is convicted based solely on his race. Because Atticus defends Tom, his children suffer tremendously, both from the reality of the trial and Bob Ewell's subsequent attempts to kill them.

The implications of prejudice, however, extend beyond the trial of Tom Robinson. The class structure that Lee presents indicates the prejudice that people have for others of their same race, such as Aunt Alexandra's refusal to allow Walter Cunningham to visit Scout and the neighbors' stories about the evil Boo Radley. Although the fight for women's equality was not an issue at the time this book was set and was just beginning when it was published, many critics use *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an example of prejudice against women. For example, Atticus jokes about having women on the jury, and the judge considers clearing all women from the courtroom so they do not have to hear the references to rape and violence. Scout also fights the confines of the accepted role of a Southern young lady; she hates to wear dresses, and the biggest insult she receives is to be told she's acting like a girl.

*Courage and Bravery*—Through Atticus' character, Lee introduces the definition of true bravery as the willingness to stand up against all odds to do what one believes is right. Atticus is a consistent example of courage. He believes that bravery has nothing to do with using a gun when he describes Mrs. Dubose as the bravest person he knows. The only way his children know he is an excellent marksman is by watching him kill the mad dog. However, it is Atticus' willingness to fight for Tom Robinson's freedom during and after the trial is his most significant testimony to his definition of bravery. Lee also shows the development of this concept in other characters, such as Heck Tate, when he stands up to Atticus to protect Arthur Radley from the agony of a needless trial.