

# To kill a mockingbird

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Lee utilises various literary devices and methods to highlight serious issues and themes throughout the novel. Harper Lee uses her choice of the voice of the narrator primarily and most importantly to employ irony and satire throughout the novel as well as invoke pathos with her use of metaphors and euphemisms, a method referred to some as “tactile brilliance” (Ward 1960: 1). The novel teaches the reader valuable lessons about compassion towards humanity which makes it an essential read for all. The discussion that follows considers Lee’s use of literary devices to highlight the themes as well as the novel’s significance in the classroom today. “Lee combines the narrator’s voice of a child observing her surroundings with a grown woman’s reflecting on her childhood, using the ambiguity of this voice combined with the narrative techniques of flashback to play intricately with perspective” (Dunphy 2004: 640). This type of narration allows Lee to adopt an ironic tone by using elevated words to mean something more ironically ordinary, such as Scout’s portrayal of wearing a dress as being a “pink cotton penitentiary closing in on me” (Lee 1966: 135) to describe the pressures of being a lady, or describing Mr. Ewell as one who took “yearly lavations” (Lee 1966: 185), ironic to use such grand language on a man such as himself. Lee’s use of light-hearted irony provides relief for the reader as well as a balance “to the more serious themes of poverty, social injustice and racism” (Carney 2006: 8), for example, Lee’s description of the missionary ladies as being “bovine” (1966: 239) (like cows) during the missionary tea provides humour to the reader, however “underlying the humour there is severe implied criticism of these women’s so-called Christianity” (Viljoen & Horne 2008: 11). There are many children who do not have enough to eat in Maycomb and as Viljoen &

Horne points out these women are presumably aware of this yet their “missionary zeal takes the form of feasting together while talking about needy children in distant lands” (2008: 11). The humorous passage about women greedily eating and discussing the plight of the poor is juxtaposed with the more serious issue of racism. “Religious hypocrisy is attacked throughout the novel by means of satire” (Viljoen & Horne 2008: 10). Boo Radley, for example is imprisoned in his home by his deeply religious parents. They are described as being “foot-washers” by Miss Maudie (Lee 1966: 51) and people who “did not go to Church, Maycomb’s principal recreation, but worshipped at home” (Lee 1966: 15). The humour lies in referring to Church as being recreational however the serious issues of religious insincerity is addressed, by using the word “worship” with “bitter satire” since none of the connotations of the word worship can be applied to people who lock away their child for life (Viljoen & Horne 2008: 10). Harper Lee uses laughter to “expose the gangrene under the beautiful surface” (Tavernier-Courbin 2007: 33), especially the flaws in the Justice System and the miserable failure of Democracy. Despite Tom Robinson being given a trial it was by no means fair. He is unjustly accused and tried for a crime he did not commit because of his skin colour. There is no democracy for Tom, he “is crippled not just physically but by his dependence on the white people to save him from being wrongly prosecuted” (Seigel 1976: 133). This brings to light the theme that people are caused to suffer misery by other people. More serious metaphors are used to create fear, suspense, pathos, sadness and disgust. The slow motion shooting of the dog, Tim Johnson, is described as being underwater; “he walked quickly, but I thought he moved like an

underwater swimmer" (Lee 1966: 127). The imagery created by the metaphor described that "time had moved to a nauseating crawl" (www.teachersweb.com 2012: 27, 28), and watching the action was sickening. Lee's use of unusually short sentences at the beginning or end of a chapter brings our attention to them to create similar feelings in the reader, for example; "It was Jem's turn to cry" (Chapter 22 following the guilty verdict), evoking pathos. The more serious irony helps to reinforce the theme that people are not always what they appear and sometimes the reality is different to the surface appearance. Harper Lee chooses to write the novel in two parts. The opening chapters of the novel have ironic links with major events in the second part for example; Jem is made to empathise with Mrs Dubose at the end of Chapter 11 (the first part), a cathartic moment in his life. Scout mirrors this development at the end of the novel when she stands on the Radley porch and she is finally able to "walk in his shoes" (Carney 2006: 23, 4). This structure reinforces the theme of the gradual education of the heart and mind towards understanding and acceptance of the idea of the equal value of all human beings. We are able to see how both Jem and Scout mature and grow compassionately and towards a fuller humanity. Atticus, a very strong character in the novel fuels this growth within Jem and Scout. "The children internalise Atticus' admonition not to judge someone until they have walked around in that person's skin, gaining a greater understanding of peoples motives and behaviour" (Hovet and Grace-Anne 2001: 71). Atticus' values are instilled in his children by his actions, such as giving so much respect and regard to Calpurnia and respecting Mayella despite her involvement in the persecution of Tom Johnson, causing the reader to

empathise with her. Jem's desire to protect the vulnerable and be a gentleman just like his father can be seen as he matures and protects the roly poly bug from Scouts hand. The final words in Chapter 31 emphasises Atticus' strong role as a parent and illustrates his wise outlook by enforcing the theme that if one lives with sympathy and understanding, then it is possible to return faith to humanity despite its capacity of evil. The sick dog, Tim Johnson, reveals Atticus' talent for shooting but also significantly, Atticus kills the dog to be humane. Both his children realise that he has humility. The incident is also a prelude to Tom Robinson's fate, who is also shot when trying to escape for a crime he did not commit and a pending execution, effectively putting him out of his misery. According to Carney the shooting of the dog mirrors the judgment at the courthouse. " When Tim the dog is shot ' the mockingbirds were silent' and when Tom's life is effectively ended by the court, Harper Lee repeats details from the killing of the dog including ' when the mockingbirds were still'" (2006: 25). The symbol of the mockingbird is evoked at the beginning and end of the novel and is " returned to when Lee is trying to make a moral point" (Dave 1974: 319). The mockingbird is a motif for innocence that runs throughout the novel. Miss Maudie tells Scout that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird. The primary characteristic of the Mockingbird is that it does no harm, as Miss Maudie describes it, " mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy [...] they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. " (Lee 1966: 96). Viljoen & Horne likens the wide range of the Mockingbirds song as being " a contrast with the narrow range of human prejudices that bind most of the people in the novel" (2008: 7). Three characters are symbolised by the

mockingbird. The first and most obvious character is Boo Radley. Scout plainly states at the end of the novel that to hand Boo over to the law would be “ like shootin’ a mockingbird” (Lee 1966: 282). Over the course of the novel Scout realises that Boo isn’t the crazy, depraved individual he was made out to be when Miss Maudie reveals his fathers extreme religious beliefs to her, then with the gifts he leaves for her and Jem, mending Jem’s pants, protecting her from the cold and finally saving her life. She is able to walk in his shoes at the end of the novel and see that he was just an innocent person who gave her nothing but love and who was just a victim of gossip and an overbearing family. The second character symbolised by the mockingbird is Atticus Finch who is described as having “ a song of compassion which moves all with ears and heart to hear it” (Viljoen & Horne 2008: 8). The third character is Tom Johnson who, like the mockingbird “ does no harm, yet is found guilty and is hounded to his death” (Viljoen & Horne 2008: 8). Lee uses satire to convey her feelings about the education system of the day. She thinks the education system is stifling, restrictive and assumes that old fashioned methods are wrong as Scout is reprimanded for being able to read and write. The suggestion that Scout has learned to read and write incorrectly as well as using the word “ crime” to describe Scouts ability to read and write conveys her ironic tone. Instead of awarding Scouts advanced skills she is scolded. It is the duty of the teacher to encourage their learners to excel rather than condemn them for it. The novel serves as a warning to teachers in this regard and also in the following comment in which Scout describes her feelings towards the education system: ...as I inched sluggishly along the treadmill of the Maycomb County school system,

I could not help receiving the impression that I was cheated being out of something. Out of exactly 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 (Lee 1966: 38). As a prospective teacher this statement warns me to prepare lessons which are engaging as well as relevant to all pupils from all walks of life as well as to consider the level of understanding and literacy that all my students are capable of. Viljoen & Horne suggests that the passage about Miss Caroline's attempts to read a story to the children about talking animals serves as an additional warning to "take great care to offer our learners material to which they can relate meaningfully" (2008: 9). As well as providing a great insight into the care that teachers should take when constructing lesson plans the novel offers material which provides precious lessons to learners. Corruption and innocence is a valuable theme in this book especially when teaching more vulnerable and impressionable students. So many students succumb to peer-pressure resulting in poor choices. Lee addresses the surface level of mob mentality in the novel which is particularly applicable to high school students as it can take the form of bullying, teasing and in extreme cases gang participation (Miller 2012). "Despite the enormous popularity of To Kill a Mockingbird and the Pulitzer Prize it won in 1961, the novel gave rise to controversies around the United States"(Toet 2011: 21). Words used in the novel such as "whore lady and "damn" seemed unfit for a younger audience and the novel was said to contain racist elements. The book may seem demoralizing to certain race groups especially with the constant use of racial slurs. It is the teacher's duty to teach the book responsibly, highlighting the themes and lessons so as to

not cause offence or to be interpreted in a way which is not desired. The novel reveals a young girl's love for her father and brother and the experience of childhood during the Great depression in a racist and segregated society which uses superficial standards to judge outsiders. Lee uses the social castes of the time as well as other literary devices to incite compassion and understanding within the reader towards humanity. It is a novel that is still relevant today especially in the classroom as it teaches vulnerable and impressionable students the value of compassion, understanding and the consequence of judging outsiders. Her strong characters like Atticus Finch and Boo Radley Teach us these lessons in the most powerful way. References: 1. Carney, S. 2006. Bird Notes.

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