

Irreality in to kill a mockingbird: an overview of scholarly perspectives

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Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is commonly understood to be a coming of age story that deal with the theme of racial discrimination in the American South during the Great Depression. Close inspection of the novel reveals many ambiguities that contradict this broad reading of the text. In fact, the novel is constructed on contradictory terms from the ground up, with many stereotypes and prejudicial depictions of scenes and characters working in opposition to the traditional reading of the novel. The contradictory ideas in the novel are based in a sense of irreality that hangs over the novel's setting, plot, and dialogue. This irreality is best understood as a kind of willful naiveté that imposes a child's view of events on the action and draws a similarly childlike picture of moral and societal realities.

Jennifer Murray examines the ambiguous foundations of the novel in her article "More Than One Way to (Mis)Read a *Mockingbird*" (2010). In the article, Murray rejects many of the traditional critical readings of the novel as being based in a superficial grasp of the text. In order to explicate the thematic contradictions in the novel, Murray explores the evolution of the novel from its earliest incarnation as series of disconnected short-stories. One of the first traditional ideas that Murray rejects is the idea of the novel being in any way Scout's coming of age story. Murray notes that Scout, unlike Jem, never makes the transition from childhood to adolescence in the novel. It is only through the flashback framing of the story that Scout's maturity is conveyed. In the action of the story itself, Scout remains rooted in childhood.

As Murray notes, “” Scout, moving from six to nine years of age, does not undergo radical transformation, does not move from childhood to adolescence, does not, in fact, ‘come of age’” (Murray), therefore the novel is not actually her coming of age story. Instead, Scout is a narrative device through which the various short-stories are integrated in the novel. This technique results in much of the consequent contradictions in theme. The contradictory visions that are contained in Scout’s narrative are the result of a fantasy-experience of the world. The fact that Scout never properly “comes of age” in the novel is an indication that her child’s vision remains intact in shaping her narrative. Scout is therefore an unreliable narrator who presents an unreal vision of her experiences and memories.

Murray’s analysis of the contradictions in the novel is largely based on the premise that Lee’s narrative technique was expedient rather than elegant. She notes that: “The text embodies contradictory impulses in the thematic fields of race, gender, patriarchy, class, and narrative structure; these contradictions, which belong to history, mark the text as surely as the repressed produces symptoms” (Murray). Murray’s estimation of the novel is that expresses the limitations of Lee as a novelist to think outside of cultural and racial stereotypes. However, what is a more likely and more critically supportable is the idea that the contradictions in the novel represent Scout’s limitations as an unreliable narrator and that the unreal and childlike elements of the narrative are a deliberate choice made by Lee in order to underscore her theme of lost innocence and racial discrimination.

Again, it is worth remembering that traditional interpretations of the novel are usually straightforward and are likely to pass over the important ambiguities that reveal the deeper subtext of the story. For example, Dean Shackelford points out in "The Female Voice in 'To Kill a Mockingbird': Narrative Strategies in Film and Novel" (1996) that the film version diverges from the predominantly female point of view that is intrinsic to the novel. Shackelford's interpretation of the novel is that it "portrays a young girl's love for her father and brother and the experience of childhood during the Great Depression in a racist, segregated society which uses superficial and materialistic values to judge outsiders, including the powerful character Boo Radley." (Shackelford). Close inspection of each of the assertions reveals that most, if not all of Shackelford's assumptions are unsupportable.

Even such rudimentary themes as femininity or racial equality are subject to ambiguity when the text is closely inspected. For example, the character of Calpurnia is commonly regarded as a representation of racial integration. She is looked at as a member of the Finch family and appears to be presented as such in the novel. However, as Murray points out, Calpurnia's actual status is that of an overworked servant. Murray writes "Calpurnia is the housekeeper, cook, and babysitter, but there are no clear indications of when her work day begins or ends or how much she is paid for her services" (Murray). Because she is both female and African American, Calpurnia's depiction in the novel unfortunately forwards prejudicial stereotypes against minorities on both racial and gender grounds.

Calpurnia's status as a servant corresponds to other stereotypes that are embedded into the basic foundation of the novel. The central character of Atticus Finch, for example, is an embodiment of idealized patriarchal power. Throughout the novel he is depicted as the quintessential father who prioritizes compassion and wisdom above violence and power. This conception of Atticus is almost necessary in order for the novel's plot to succeed. However, Atticus's true nature is much less tolerant and practical than it may appear at first glance. Murray asserts that Atticus is, in fact, a strangely ineffectual character whose narrow-minded commitment to unspecified moral principles leaves him unable to act with any relevance or force. Murray notes that "Atticus, in his strict moral principles, is also plagued by an inability to evaluate danger. His leitmotif is 'it's not time to worry yet'... a way of reassuring his children that things will always turn out all right, but of course they don't." (Murray). Again, as with the character of Calpurnia, Atticus's basis in stereotype is obvious, but his relation to the deeper thematic contradictions in the novel is only evident on a close reading.

A similar dynamic is present in regard to the novel's generally assumed status as Scout's coming of age story. As previously mentioned, very little in the novel suggests Scout's development into young adulthood. Instead, it is Jem who undergoes the transformation from childhood to adolescence. According to Murray, it is Jem's growth, rather than Scout's that must be considered the focal point of the novel's coming of age theme. Murray notes that "To conclude the question of To Kill a Mockingbird as Bildungsroman,

suffice it to say that examples focusing on the emotional growth of Jem could be multiplied." Murray offers a further conclusion that Jem's coming of age story effectively gives the novel multiple protagonists. If the novel has more than one protagonist, the question arises as to which of the two protagonists is central. Murray observes that "To Kill a Mockingbird is a novel without a clear protagonist, making do with a double-perspective first-person narrator instead," (Murray). However, there is a very clear distinction between the two protagonists: Jem is the only one of the two whose transition from child to adolescent is shown to the reader. The fact of Scout's development into puberty and beyond into maturity is implied but it is never dramatized. This means that Scout's character is effectively left in a state of perpetual innocence while Jem is clearly shown being initiated into the cynical reality of young adulthood.

Jem's painful loss of innocence is presented in dramatic fashion after he experiences the verdict at Tom Robinson's trial. Lee writes: "'It was Jem's turn to cry'" and as Jem walks away from the courthouse he verbally expresses his disillusionment: "It ain't right," he muttered" (Lee 215). The guilty verdict is synonymous with Jem leaving behind the comfortable innocence of his childhood illusions. Scout's innocence is not shown as being shattered during this scene. The fact that Jem is the vehicle for the novel's coming of age theme means that Scout's contrasting innocence is brought to the forefront of the story due to the fact that the narrative is told exclusively in her voice.

Shackelford points out that Scout's status as the sole narrator of the novel ensures that "that the reader is seeing all the events through a female child's eyes" (Shackelford). This statement is of tremendous significance because it is connected to the previously explored ambiguities and thematic contradictions. Scout is the primary protagonist of the story and its sole narrator. As such everything in the novel must be regarded as being seen through Scout's perspective. Scout's perpetual naivete is indicated by the fact that her coming of age is left un-revealed to the reader. Therefore the ambiguities and contradictions that impact the novel's themes are the result of a childlike simplification of reality. This is the reason, for example, that Calpurnia's status as a slave is buried in the text beneath a veneer of familial inclusion. Such a veneer reflects Scout's perpetual innocence.

The naivete that colors Scout's perspective is clear from the previously discussed ambiguities. However, there is another, perhaps even more fundamental, structural detail that shows how this perpetual innocence feeds a sense of irreality into the novel. Chura's essay in *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historic Documents* (1994) presents the case that the novel conflates two periods of American history. Although the ostensible setting of the novel is during the Great Depression, Chura argues that many of the details of the fictionalized trial of Tom Robinson are drawn from the real-life trial of Emmet Till that took place in 1955. Chura states that "A fundamental a presence in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the structural and ideological detail of the Emmett Till trial of 1955... The mid 1950s/early civil rights era is therefore the context from

which the novel is best understood" (Chura). This strange mixing of era is part of the way in which Lee's narrative strategy presents a story steeped in irreality and fantasy.

Cura goes further in the analysis of the novel's historical backdrop.

According to Chura, "Lee's 1930s historical background, though developed in some detail, should not be allowed to obscure the real conditions which governed the text's production in the years from roughly 1955 to 1959" (Chura). In other words, Scout's recollection of events within the context of the narrative itself is an act of bending history by placing the social themes and ideas of the mid 1950's into a fictional setting based on the 1930's. If the historical inaccuracies and thematic ambiguities of *To Kill a Mockingbird* are simply regarded as weaknesses in Lee's technique or in her thinking, an important aspect of the novel, perhaps the most important aspect is likely to be missed. This is the fact that the intended effect of these seeming "mistakes" is to show the entire narrative through a child's eyes.

This narrative strategy actually results in the novel showing a unified theme despite its apparent ambiguities and inconsistencies. The unification is in the implied loss of innocence that Scout is shown to have experienced by way of her voice in the novel but that is never directly shown to the reader. The perpetual sense of fantasy and irreality is meant to express the collective social denial of the reality of racism and its crimes. It is through our own loss of innocence that each of us, as readers, feels the tragic consequence of Tom Robinson's conviction and murder. We are left to shatter the fantasy world that is built out of Scout's childlike vision. Jem's painful initiation into

adulthood is meant to encourage a tragic and even bitter reading of the events of Tom Robinson's trial. By contrast, the absence of Scout's "on-screen" transition into maturity allows each reader to experience this loss of innocence subjectively.

This is a complicated narrative approach but it is supported through a close reading of the text. For example, in Chapter 25 Scout is astonished by Jem's unwillingness to let her squash a bug. Jem, having been initiated into a world of experience, is unable to kill, while Scout by contrast remains in a state of childish naiveté where killing a "roly-poly" is of little moral consequence. Scout reveals that she is conscious both of Jem's transition into young adulthood and her own uninitiated state. She thinks to herself that "" It was probably part of the stage he was going through, and I wished he would hurry up and get through it" (Lee 242). In Scout's mind, all that is necessary is that Jem ' get through" whatever has disturbed their otherwise undisturbed sense of innocence and safety.

Previously, the fabricated danger of Boo Radley was the only perceived threat to their sense of safety. After Tom Robinson's conviction Jem no longer believes in the safe world. His rejection of it is based in anger and in sadness. By contrast Scout is only beginning to suspect that something is wrong and she experiences this threat primarily through Jem's changes in personality. Annie Kasper in the article " General Semantics in to Kill a Mockingbird" (2006) refers to the concept of "infinity values." This concept "states that all things can have values in a wide variety of gradations" and that furthermore "limitations of the human language often prevent us from

making these distinctions” (Kasper). While Jem’s loss of innocence allows him to begin viewing a world based on infinity values, Scout remains rooted in a naive perspective that fosters stereotypes and dramatic distinctions.

Kasper relates the concept of infinity values directly to the way in which Boo Radley is revealed to the reader. Kasper writes “Boo Radley is labeled as creepy and strange because he never ventures from his house. The townspeople associate this strangeness with evil and foster a prejudice against Boo” (Kasper). The same kind of prejudice is, obviously, directed against Tom Robinson on the basis of race. As Jem and Scout come to understand Boo Radley on a more personal level, their fear dissipates. This plot arc is frequently cited as evidence for the novel’s anti-discriminatory theme. Such an assertion is valid, but a close reading of the text reveals that Radley’s character is never fully released from its initial status as “other.” Despite the fact that Radley saves the children and murders Bob Ewell, his status remains largely unchanged.

Murray notes that the common association between Bradley and the mockingbird in the novel’s title remains a passive association: “the plight of Arthur Radley is not much improved by the compassionate but ineffective symbolic attribution of mockingbird status. Is no better life imaginable for him than to return to his gothic shadows?” (Murray). Seen in this light, Boo Radley, like Calpurnia, remains oddly impersonal and servile. There is no effort to humanize either of the characters through a realistic examination of their real-world challenges and needs. Instead, both Calpurnia and Radley

enter and exit the narrative at useful points remaining largely one dimensional and idealized.

As with the other aspects of fantasy and irreality that have been examined, the portrayal of Radley is based on simplification. The tendency to reduce and simplify the world into obvious divisions and compartments is a symptom of immaturity. Scout's prolonged state of innocence is symbolic of the cultural blindness that can be shown to be historically attached to America's racist traditions. One very important thing to remember in connection with the simplification of world-view that comes out of Scout's narrative is that it is meant to be an obvious contrast to the grim events that are depicted in the novel. Therefore Scout's casual desire to kill a "roly-poly" is a chilling irony given that Tom Robinson is destined to be squashed in a similar fashion.

The reader is meant to feel that Scout's innocence and simplified world-view is an unenviable state. It is better to be wounded, like Jem, but awake to the reality of infinity values. The original description of Boo that appears in Chapter One represents the tragic outcome of retaining the child's view of the world. Radley is described by Jem as a giant who "dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that's why his hands were bloodstained" (Lee 13). His appearance is associated with bloodshed and murder. In addition to providing a subtle foreshadowing to the novel's climax, this description shows with clarity the devastating impact of discrimination and ignorance.

Works Cited

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