

# Racism in to kill a mockingbird



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Since its publication in 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has become one of the most widely-read novels in all of twentieth century American literature, and a salient work of social realism. Despite this universal appeal, it is a novel grounded in a particular time and place. Although published in the 1960s at the height of the American civil rights movement, the novel is set in the 1930s. This may be read as a decision on the part of Lee, the author, to distance the novel from contemporary racial issues, or alternatively as a means of providing historical context for those issues and ongoing problems. The social milieu which emerges out of this context is one in which race and racism are central issues. However, the extent to which racism is integral to the novel's meaning and import is something which has been the subject of some debate in the critical literature. This essay will argue that racism is one of the lenses through which Lee explores some of the more central themes in her novel: namely, the idea of community, belonging and personal development. In particular, it will be argued, following Meyer (2010) that the idea of the 'Other' is central to the novel's characterisation, and that the process of 'Other-ing' is something which takes place both through racism and apart from it. The novel, narrated from the perspective of Scout, takes the

form of a *Bildungsroman* in which identity is negotiated by way of reference to the self and to communities. Race is one aspect of this process,

but other elements in the story, such as the character of Boo Radley, demonstrate the degree to which the novel is about other forms of social ‘Other-ing’

and personal identification.

Indeed, the issue of race is something which is not foregrounded until relatively far into the novel. The central narrative tension of the trial of Tom Robinson is something which emerges only after the initial narrative of the relationship between and games played by Scout, Jem and Dill, and their fascination with the Radley Place and the ambiguous character of Boo Radley. The device of the unreliable first-person child narrative is one which allows

Lee to explore the tension between nature and nurture, between that which is innate in human behaviour and that which is learned. One element of Scout’s

characterisation which enables her to have an impact on the lives of the adults around her is her naiveté. Her interaction with the mob that comes to lynch Tom Robinson before his trial is an example of how childlike behaviour can have a greater impact than the actions of adults in such contexts, as the

adult characters are shamed into discontinuing their violent behaviour when they are made to see it from the perspective of a child. The relationship between the social mores and codes surrounding race and the ideas and desires of the children in the novel is one of the central tensions in the novel, as

Scout (and vicariously the reader) examine the value systems of the community and interrogate them vis-a-vis her (and our) own. What emerges is an

increasing awareness of how her father's and later her own values do not coincide with those of the social groups and institutions of which she is a part.

This conflict between familial and social values is made explicit in an exchange between Scout and her father early on in the novel:

“ Do you defend niggers, Atticus?” I asked him that evening.

“ Of course I do. Don't say nigger, Scout. That's common.”

““ so what, everybody at school says.”

“ From now on it'll be everybody less one—”

“ Well if you don't want me to grow up talkin' that way, why do you send me to school?” (Lee, 1960: 77)

Atticus has an atypical understanding of the racist value of epithets which are considered standard usage by almost all the white characters in the novel.

Indeed, even characters such as Calpurnia adopt the racist language of the white characters. Moreover, Calpurnia demonstrates the degree to which racial

logic impinges on language by moderating her own according to the people she is with (Lee, 1960: 120). Interestingly, Atticus' critique of the racist

epithet 'nigger' is a class-related one: he describes such speech as 'common.' This suggests that Atticus associates racist language with a lack of education, and Scout is quick to identify the irony in her going to school only to learn ill-educated or common speech. The commonality of this sort of racist language is made clear when Scout notes that it's what everybody says at school. The association between institutions and racism is evident, and

this relates also to the idea of ostracism and 'Other-ing' of those who are excluded from such institutions. For a number of years after the time during which the novel is set, and until the successes of the civil rights movement, institutions in the American South such as universities and public transport were divided along race lines. It is therefore unsurprising that much of the mechanics of the racism depicted in the novel should operate along

institutional lines.

Heims (2009) has argued that the relationship between Scout's development and the 'Other' is at the centre of the novel, and that she negotiates a complex

process of self-discovery which at times in the novel involves casting the self as 'Other.' This is seen at various stages in the novel when Scout finds

herself identifying with those who, according to the values of the community, are considered inferior and different. Her identification with the victims of

racism and prejudice over the course of the novel demonstrates the apparent illogic of the behaviour. As Dare (2001) has argued, Scout's innocence is a

central element in the narrative, and serves to highlight the ways in which racism and class division operate in Maycomb. Wilson (2005) notes that Tom

Robinson's guilty verdict is demonstrative of a wider lack of social justice for black men, but it is the developing moral framework of the first-person

narrative – that of a white girl – which throws light on this failure

(Shackelford, 1997). Scout's judgement anticipates the developing moral

framework in which the case for civil rights was being articulated at the time of the novel's publication, but the social context in which the novel was

written was one in which justice was still more difficult to come by, at least in some parts of the United States such as the South, for black people than

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for white people. Jackson (2003: 277) has identified how the novel 'skilfully uses the device of seeing events through the eyes of children,' and racism in particular is an ideology which is presented as something that Scout eventually comes to reject. Much of this understanding of the nature and practice of

racism comes through Scout's learning about the meaning of certain derogatory terms which are addressed to her and her father in the light of his defending

Robinson. Atticus describes the term 'nigger-lover' to her as something that's 'hard to explain' and that 'ignorant, trashy people use it when they think

somebody's favoring Negroes over and above themselves' and that it is used when those people 'want a common, ugly term to label somebody' (Lee, 1960:

112). Atticus has understood the degree to which such racist terms are employed by people who see their personal interests as being under threat.

It

becomes apparent as the novel progresses that racism among the white characters is above all a product of fear and concern for their own interests.

Racism

becomes a means by which black people can be oppressed through language and discrimination. The violent reaction against Atticus, therefore, can be

understood as coming from the fear among the white community that someone of their number, an educated man and a lawyer, might be acting in a way which

favours other people's interests.

However, there is a paradox inherent in the idea that the novel presents the maturation of the children and their increasing sympathy for the Other as they

mature, whilst the white adults of the novel are highly prejudiced and largely unsympathetic to the 'Other.' This paradox centres on the figure of Atticus

Finch, who carries a great deal of moral weight in the novel as one of the few white males in the text who oppose the racist logic of the novel's social

milieu. Atticus's decision to defend Tom Robinson is one which immediately alienates him and his family from the community. Much has been made in the

literature of the role of Atticus Finch, and the status of the character as an American hero: 'the story of the Robinson case, the anecdotes and the

impressions help to explain how Atticus Finch is a hero, and how lawyers become heroes in America' (Shaffer, 1981: 181). The closing speech that Atticus

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delivers before the jury is a central set-piece in the novel and in its treatment of racism. The speech is notable for its focus on the moral codes of the

society which have been broken, and the relationship between these codes and the idea of criminality. Atticus notes that Mayella used the rape accusation

to invent criminality when all there had been was a flouting of conventions: 'She was white, and she tempted a Negro. She did something that in our society

is unspeakable: she kissed a black man. Not an old Uncle, but a strong young Negro man' (Lee, 1960: 207). Although not a crime in itself, this behaviour would lead to such social ostracism and outcasting in the society in which the novel is set that Mayella accuses Tom of rape as a means of assuaging her

guilt (Halpern, 2008). Again, the treatment of racism here is closely associated with a wider examination of social codes and behaviours. The sexual

association between a white woman and a black man is particularly taboo, and here race impinges on other kinds of relations to create a complex situation in the public eye, although Atticus argues that the case is as simple as 'black and white' (Lee, 1960: 207).

In the case of Mayella, the issue of social ostracism and the idea of ‘ Other-ing’ recur as key elements. Mayella’s relations with Tom would lead to her being made a social outcast, being excluded and exiled in the manner of Boo Radley, albeit for very different reasons. These different narratives of real or potential ‘ Other-ing’ contribute to the sense in the novel of a clearly defined social code of conduct, the contravention of which leads to one being outcast from the group. Race is one of the key nexuses through which this strong tribalism is explored, but it is also something which is more widely treated in the novel in the context of property and ownership. The defence of one’s property is a recurring theme, as in the case of Mr Radley and his firing after intruders. Here, notably, the action is emphasised as being indiscriminate and not racially motivated *per se* ; Radley is willing to use force to defend himself and his property from whoever it may be:

“ Shot in the air. Scared him pale, though. Says if anybody sees a white nigger around, that’s the one. Says he’s got the other barrel

waitin’ for the next sound he hears in that patch, an’ next time he won’t aim high, be it dog, nigger, or – Jem Finch!” (Lee,

1960: 55)

This description of Mr Radley’s indiscriminate defence of his property is indicative of the way in which other social concerns – money, ownership and

so on – intertwine with racism but are not necessarily synonymous with it. It can be noted that racism during the period had a number of economic associations, and racism can be linked to the practice of slavery in the previous century (Wilson, 2005). However, the ability of white people to discriminate against other white people in the novel, and the degree to which self-interest motivates much of this discrimination, demonstrates how racism

is but one aspect in the novel's mapping of social behaviours and actions.

Race is undoubtedly one of the elements which distinguishes characters in the novel, and one of the social elements through which the residents of Maycomb

identify themselves and others. The white community of the town is undoubtedly racist, and Atticus's decision to defend Robinson is one which leads to a

process of 'Other-ing' by association, in which not only Atticus but also Scout and Jem are alienated and ostracised from the community by virtue of Atticus's decision. The residents racialise what is in fact a crime of a sexual nature by foregrounding the fact that the accused is a black man and the victim is a white woman. Race enters into the debate surrounding the incident and condemns Robinson to be judged guilty independently of the evidence

against him. The binary terms which define racism as an ideology impinge on social relations between the Finch family and the rest of the community, with the residents identifying them with the 'black side' and therefore with that which is inferior or enemy. This 'Other-ing' of the Finch children and their identification with the black community is made explicit by Lee in the depiction of Calpurnia, and the fact that she takes the children to the local black

church where they are met with a positive and welcoming reception. The topographical division of the community into black and white groups is made explicit

during the trial, when the Finch children sit in the 'coloured balcony' (Lee, 1960: 166). The nature of pre-civil rights America was one in which communities were divided not just in ideological but in literal terms, between white and black institutions and spaces. The tension in the novel between local and foreign, known and unknown, safe and dangerous is one which is explored in racial terms. It is also, however, something which defines the opposition between the understood and the 'Other,' and is seen in the mysterious and unexplored nature of the Radley Place as much as it is in the idea of racial division.

Boo Radley serves as an effective corollary to the character of Tom Robinson by demonstrating that ostracism and the process of Other-ing can take place in

the absence of racism. At the beginning of the novel, he represents the personification of the unknown, a local ' Boogeyman' and object of fear for the

three children. The revelation that he might be more benevolent than this first impression, which manifests itself through anonymous gifts and gestures, is

one which at first puzzles Jem and Scout. The children's emotional and intellectual development in the novel equips them with the understanding necessary

to humanise Boo and turn him from this ' Other' figure into someone they can understand and sympathise with. The plight of Tom Robinson, and the children's

increasing awareness of how he has been mistreated and misrepresented by the town's adults, educates Jem and Scout in the ways in which adults prejudice

themselves against and behave discriminatingly towards those they perceive as ' Other.' Their increased understanding of Tom results in increased

understanding of Boo, and enables them to see racism as one of many processes by which hate and prejudice can manifest themselves in communities. During

the trial, Jem comes to understand that Boo's reclusiveness is not a sad exile but a conscious decision to distance himself from these processes and

judgements:

Scout, I think I'm beginning to understand something. I think I'm beginning to understand why Boo Radley's stayed shut up in the house all this time...

it's

because he *wants* to stay inside (Lee, 1960: 231).

The narrative development of the novel is therefore one of a progression from ignorance to understanding, from fear to tolerance and acceptance.

This is

the central moral drive in both the Boo Radley and the Tom Robinson elements of the story. Racism is one form of prejudice through which

ignorance and a

lack of understanding manifests itself. It is also the means through which characters distinguish themselves from the perceived threat of the 'Other':

by

judging and condemning it. The trial therefore functions synecdochally as a component of this overall schema in which characters judge others who are

different from them. The development of the relationship between the children and characters like Boo Radley and Calpurnia is one in which initial difference is overcome and what was originally perceived as a threat or a conflicting relationship is revealed to be one of common humanity.

To conclude, it is evident that race and racism are central concerns in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and the status of the novel as a seminal work of

realist fiction in American social history is a justified one. Its genesis at the time of the civil rights movement, and Lee's decision to set the novel at a time when this movement was in its comparatively fledgling stages, all point to this association. However, despite the centrality of the issue of racism,

and its treatment through the character of Atticus Finch and his defence of Tom Robinson, it is one theme among many in the novel which address what this

essay has argued is the integral motif: namely, the process of 'Other-ing' which is perceived as alien and different, and the narrative trend for these initial 'Others' to be reconciled and understood as the novel progresses. In particular, it has been argued that the character of Boo Radley, a white man who undergoes a similar, though considerably less extreme, process of ostracisation and 'Other-ing' in both the eyes of Scout and those of the community,

demonstrates the degree to which this process extends beyond race. The treatment of racism is therefore highly subtle and important *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but it is also part of a wider exploration of the mores and behaviours of individuals and communities in a particular time and a particular place.

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