

Racism in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Abstract

Racism and prejudice in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* exemplifies the different ways in which white and black people were treated in 1930s Alabama. Lee addresses these issues specifically to Tom Robinson's court case, where he was wrongly accused of raping Mayella Ewell. Using Wayne Flynt's online Encyclopaedia of Alabama, and Austin Sarat's and Martha Umphrey's 'Temporal Horizons' essay, I argue how the topic of race creates a peripheral voice in Maycomb's society. I closely analyse Tom Robinson's testimony, the children's reaction to the court case, and the differing opinions on racism as expressed by Atticus Finch and Bob Ewell.

Harper Lee based her novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, on two court cases that took place in 1930s Alabama. The Scottsboro Trials concerned nine black youths who were tried for allegedly raping two white women; and a white woman alleged that a black ex-convict sexually assaulted her.¹ Cases such as these were common in 1930s Alabama, the period in which Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set. Within this period, white and black people shared a common poverty during the Great Depression.² Tom Robinson represents the peripheral voice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as he is dominated by white supremacist Ewells in his court case. This is shown in his testimony and the reaction that is provoked by the courtroom:

'You're a mighty good fellow, it seems – did all this for not one penny?

'Yes suh. I felt sorry for her, she seemed to try more'n the rest of 'em-'

'You felt sorry for her, you felt sorry for her?' Mr Gilmer seemed ready to rise to the ceiling.

The witness realising his mistake and shifted uncomfortably in the chair. But the damage was done. Below us, nobody liked Tom Robinson's answer.³

The courtroom sees Tom's sympathy towards Mayella as him suggesting his status is above hers. In the town of Maycomb, white people are legally considered superior to black people. Due to his race, and despite the evidence, Tom is found guilty of a crime he did not commit, by an all-white, all-male jury. This highlights Tom's peripheral voice in society, as a comment of sympathy from a white male to white

¹ Wayne, Flynt, Encyclopaedia of Alabama [online], '*To Kill A Mockingbird*', updated November 4, 2016, [accessed 24 November 2018], Available from <<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1140>>

² Flynt, Encyclopaedia of Alabama, *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

³ Harper, Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, (London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1960), p. 203.

female would be completely rational, yet he is judged for this comment because of the colour of his skin. Moreover, this idea is reinforced by the difference in which Mr Gilmer refers to Tom as 'boy', whereas Atticus addresses Mayella as 'Miss.' Referring to Tom as 'boy' puts him in a lower ranking social position in comparison to Mayella, and this belittles him in front of the jury. Dill recognises Tom's peripheral voice in society and becomes distraught about how Tom is treated in the courtroom: 'That old Mr Gilmer doin' him thataway, talking so hateful to him... the way that man called him "boy" all the time and sneered at him. "Well, Dill, after all he's just a Negro."⁴ This gives two perspectives on how the children view the treatment of blacks and whites. Dill sympathises with Tom and knows that he should be treated equally to Mayella. In comparison to Scout's response, who recognises it is usual for a black man to be spoken down to as 'he's just a Negro.' This implies that she accepts the social conditioning of her time that allows black people to be treated unequally to white people.

Furthermore, Lee infers that the children in the novel want to improve the inequality between the black and white people. The concept is reinforced through the divide in the courtroom; white people sit on the first level whilst black people sit on the balcony overlooking the court, with Scout, Jem and Dill joining the black spectators. The children recognise the respect that the black people have for them as Scout notes 'Four Negroes rose and gave us their front-row seats.'⁵ They begin to sympathise with the black people they are surrounded by: 'Behind us, there was an angry muffled groan from the coloured people.'⁶ Lee foreshadows values of the New South which were emerging at the time she wrote the novel in the 1960s, one where white and black people have more equal legal rights.

Sarat and Umphrey suggest that 'in cultural terms, Ewell represents the Old South – honour, violence, racism – and Atticus the emerging order of the New South of respect, restraint and racial equality.'⁷ This is shown when Bob Ewell spits at Atticus: 'Atticus didn't bat an eye, just took out his handkerchief and wiped his face and stood there and let Mr Ewell call him names wild horses could not bring her to repeat.'⁸ Ewell's confrontational behaviour shows that he feels his honour has been insulted, since Atticus chose to represent the factual truth of Tom Robinson's account over expressing racial loyalty between two white men. Sarat and Umphrey support this by suggesting 'Ewell's menacing but flaccid and cowardly display of violence is a metaphor for the structure of violence and underpinning the era's white supremacist values.'⁹ Atticus shows that he is aware of Tom's peripheral voice in society and wants this to be heard, when he explains: 'You never really understand a person

⁴ Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p. 205.

⁵ Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p. 170.

⁶ Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p. 179.

⁷ Austin, Sarat, Martha Umphrey, 'Temporal Horizons', in *Reimagining To Kill a Mockingbird: Family, Community and the possibility of equal justice under Law*, (United States of America: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013), p. 20.

⁸ Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p. 223.

⁹ Sarat, Umphrey, 'Temporal Horizons', p. 21.

until you consider things from his point of view – until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.’¹⁰ Despite constantly being referred to as a ‘nigger-lover’ and going against the dominant racist view in the county, Atticus does everything to prove Tom Robinson’s innocence.

Harper Lee conveys the issues surrounding racism and prejudice towards black people in 1930s Alabama. This is highlighted by Tom Robinson’s peripheral voice: a black man wrongly accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a white woman. The differences between white and black people are shown both through character development and dialogue. This is represented when Tom is referred to as ‘boy’ and Mayella as ‘Miss’, when the judge humiliates Tom in front of the jury to belittle him. Also, the judgement of the trial is biased, as their conclusion comes from an all-white, all-male jury, who are racist and prejudiced.

Bibliography

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¹⁰ Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p. 35.