

## In Defense of To Kill a Mockingbird

Critic: Jill May

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Criticism about: (Nelle) Harper Lee (1926-), also known as: Nell Harper Lee, Harper Lee, Nelle Harper Lee, Harper Nell Lee

Nationality: American

[In the following excerpt, May looks at the history of censorship attempts on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which came in two onslaughts—the first from conservatives, the second from liberals.]

The critical career of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a late-twentieth-century case study of censorship. When Harper Lee's novel about a small southern town and its prejudices was published in 1960, the book received favorable reviews in professional journals and the popular press. Typical of that opinion, *Booklist's* reviewer called the book melodramatic and noted traces of sermonizing, but the book was recommended for library purchase, commending its rare blend of wit and compassion. Reviewers did not suggest that the book was young adult literature, or that it belonged in adolescent collections; perhaps that is why no one mentioned the book's language or violence. In any event, reviewers seemed inclined to agree that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a worthwhile interpretation of the South's existing social structures during the 1930s. In 1961 the book won the Pulitzer Prize Award, the Alabama Library Association Book Award, and the Brotherhood Award of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. It seemed that Harper Lee's blend of family history, local custom, and restrained sermonizing was important reading, and with a young girl between the ages of six and nine as the main character, *To Kill a Mockingbird* moved rapidly into junior and senior high school libraries and curriculum. The book was not destined to be studied by college students. Southern literature's critics rarely mentioned it; few university professors found it noteworthy enough to teach as an exemplary southern novel.

By the mid-sixties *To Kill a Mockingbird* had a solid place in junior and senior high American literature studies. Once discovered by southern parents, the book's solid place became shaky indeed. Sporadic lawsuits arose. In most cases the complaint against the book was by conservatives who disliked the portrayal of whites. Typically, the Hanover County School Board in Virginia first ruled the book immoral, then withdrew their criticism and declared that the ruckus was all a mistake (*Newsletter [on Intellectual Freedom]* 1966). By 1968 the National Education Association listed the book among those which drew the most criticism from private groups. Ironically it was rated directly behind *Little Black Sambo* (*Newsletter* 1968). And then the seventies arrived.

Things had changed in the South during the sixties. Two national leaders who had supported integration and had espoused the ideals of racial equality were assassinated in southern regions. When John F. Kennedy was killed in Texas on November 22, 1963, many southerners were shocked. Populist

attitudes of racism were declining, and in the aftermath of the tragedy southern politics began to change. Lyndon Johnson gained the presidency; blacks began to seek and win political offices. Black leader Martin Luther King had stressed the importance of racial equality, always using Mahatma Gandhi's strategy of nonviolent action and civil disobedience. A brilliant orator, King grew up in the South; the leader of the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], he lived in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1968, while working on a garbage strike in Memphis, King was killed. The death of this 1965 Nobel Peace Prize winner was further embarrassment for white southerners. Whites began to look at public values anew, and gradually southern blacks found experiences in the South more tolerable. In 1971 one Atlanta businessman observed [in *Ebony*, The liberation thinking is here. Blacks are more together. With the doors opening wider, this area is the mecca.... Southern arguments against *To Kill a Mockingbird* subsided. The Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom contained no record of southern court cases during the seventies or eighties. The book had sustained itself during the first period of sharp criticism; it had survived regional protests from the area it depicted.

The second onslaught of attack came from new groups of censors, and it came during the late seventies and early eighties. Private sectors in the Midwest and suburban East began to demand the book's removal from school libraries. Groups, such as the Eden Valley School Committee in Minnesota, claimed that the book was too laden with profanity (Newsletter 1978). In Vernon, New York, Reverend Carl Hadley threatened to establish a private Christian school because public school libraries contained such filthy, trashy sex novels as *A Separate Peace* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Newsletter 1980). And finally, blacks began to censor the book. In Warren, Indiana, three black parents resigned from the township Human Relations Advisory Council when the Warren County school administration refused to remove the book from Warren junior high school classes. They contended that the book does psychological damage to the positive integration process and represents institutionalized racism (Newsletter 1982). Thus, censorship of *To Kill a Mockingbird* swung from the conservative right to the liberal left. Factions representing racists, religious sects, concerned parents, and minority groups vocally demanded the book's removal from public schools. With this kind of offense, what makes *To Kill a Mockingbird* worth defending and keeping?

When Harper Lee first introduces Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, she is almost six years old. By the end of the book Scout is in the third grade. Throughout the book events are described by the adult Scout who looks back upon life in the constricted society of a small southern town. Since it is the grown-up Scout's story, the young Scout Finch becomes a memory more than a reality. The book is not a vivid recollection of youth gone by so much as a recounting of days gone by. Yet, Scout Finch's presence as the events' main observer establishes two codes of honor, that of the child and of the adult. The code of adult behavior shows the frailty of adult sympathy for humanity and emphasizes its subsequent effect upon overt societal attitudes. Throughout the book Scout sees adults accepting society's rules rather than confronting them. When Scout finds school troublesome, Atticus tells Scout that they will continue reading together at night, then adds, you'd better not say anything at school about our agreement. He explains away the Maycomb Ku Klux Klan, saying, it was a political organization more than anything. Besides, they couldn't find anybody to scare. And when he discusses the case of a black man's word against a white man's with his brother, Atticus says, The jury couldn't possibly be expected to take

Tom Robinson's word against the Ewells' ... Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don't pretend to understand. The author tells us that Atticus knew Scout was listening in on this conversation and purposely explained that he had been court appointed, adding, I'd hoped to get through life without a case of this kind.... And when the jury does see fit to try and condemn Tom Robinson, Scout's older brother Jem and good friend Dill see the white southern world for what it is: a world of hypocrisy, a world burdened with old racist attitudes which have nothing to do with humanity. Jem says, I always thought Maycomb folks were the best folks in the world, least that's what they seemed like. Dill decides he will be a new kind of clown. I'm gonna stand in the middle of the ring and laugh at the folks.... Every one of `em oughta be ridin' broomsticks.

The majority of white adults in Maycomb are content to keep blacks, women and children in their place. Atticus's only sister comes to live with the family and constantly tells Scout she must learn how to act, that she has a place in society: womanhood with its stifling position of prim behavior and wagging tongues is the essence of southern decorum. Even Atticus, the liberal minded hero, says that perhaps it's best to keep women off the juries of Alabama because, I doubt if we'd ever get a complete case tried the ladies'd be interrupting to ask questions. By the end of the book Scout has accepted the rules of southern society. The once hated aunt who insisted upon Scout's transformation into a proper young lady becomes an idol for her ability to maintain proper deportment during a crisis. Scout follows suit, reasoning if Auntie could be a lady at a time like this, so could I.

The courtroom trial is a real example of Southern justice and Southern local color storytelling. Merrill Skaggs has analyzed the local color folklore of southern trials in his book *The Folk of Southern Fiction*. Skaggs comments that there is a formula for court hearings, and he suggests that local color stories show that justice in the courtroom is, in fact, less fair than justice in the streets. He discusses justice in terms of the black defendant, saying, Implicit in these stories ... is an admission that Negroes are not usually granted equal treatment before the law, that a Negro is acquitted only when he has a white champion. During the trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird* Tom Robinson says he ran because he feared southern justice. He ran, he says, because he was scared I'd hafta face up to what I didn't do. Dill is one of Lee's young protagonists. He is angered by the southern court system. The neglected son of an itinerant mother, Dill is a stereotype of southern misfits. Lee doesn't concentrate upon Dill's background; she concentrates upon his humanity. The courtroom scene is more than local humor to him. It is appalling. When he flees the trial, Scout follows. She cannot understand why Dill is upset, but the notorious rich drunk with mixed children can. He sees Dill and says, it just makes you sick, doesn't it? No one, save Jem and his youthful converts, expects Atticus to win. The black minister who has befriended the children warns, I ain't ever seen any jury decide in favor of a colored man over a white man. In the end Atticus says, They've done it before and they did it tonight and they'll do it again and when they do it seems that only children weep. And Miss Maudie tells the children, as I waited I thought, Atticus Finch won't win, he can't win, but he's the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that. Then she adds, we're making a step it's just a baby-step, but it's a step.

In his book, Skaggs points out that obtaining justice through the law

is not as important as the courtroom play in southern trials and that because the courtroom drama seldom brings real justice, people condone violence within the community. Atticus realizes that justice is often resolved outside of the court, and so he is not surprised when the sheriff and the town leaders arrive at his house one night. The men warn Atticus that something might happen to Tom Robinson if he is left in the local jail; the sheriff suggests that he can't be responsible for any violence which might occur. One of the men says, don't see why you touched it [the case] in the first place.... You've got everything to lose from this, Atticus. I mean everything. Because Atticus wants courtroom justice to resolve this conflict, he tries to protect his client. On the night before the trial Atticus moves to the front of the jail, armed only with his newspaper. While there, the local lynching society arrives, ready to take justice into its own hands. Scout, Jem, and Dill have been watching in their own dark corner, but the crowd bothers Scout and so she bursts from her hiding spot. As she runs by, Scout smells stale whiskey and pigpen, and she realizes that these are not the same men who came to the house earlier. It is Scout's innocence, her misinterpretation of the seriousness of the scene, her ability to recognize one of the farmers and to talk with guileless ease to that man about his own son which saves Tom Robinson from being lynched. The next morning Jem suggests that the men would have killed Atticus if Scout hadn't come along. Atticus who is more familiar with adult southern violence, says might have hurt me a little, but son, you'll understand folks a little better when you're older. A mob's always made up of people, no matter what.... Every little mob in every little southern town is always made up of people you know doesn't say much for them does it? Lynching is a part of regional lore in the South. In his study of discrimination, Wallace Mendelson pointed out that the frequency of lynchings as settlement for black/white problems is less potent than the terrorizing aspect of hearing about them. In this case, the terrorizing aspect of mob rule had been viewed by the children. Its impact would remain.

After the trial Bob Ewell is subjected to a new kind of Southern justice, a polite justice. Atticus explains, He thought he'd be a hero, but all he got for his pain was ... was, okay, we'll convict this Negro but get back to your dump. Ewell spits on Atticus, cuts a hole in the judge's screen, and harasses Tom's wife. Atticus ignores his insults and figures, He'll settle down when the weather changes. Scout and Jem never doubt that Ewell is serious, and they are afraid. Their early childhood experiences with the violence and hypocrisy in southern white society have taught them not to trust Atticus's reasoning but they resolve to hide their fear from the adults around them. When Ewell does strike for revenge, he strikes at children. The sheriff understands this kind of violence. It is similar to lynching violence. It strikes at a minority who cannot strike back, and it creates a terror in law-abiding citizens more potent than courtroom justice. It shows that southern honor has been consistently dealt with outside of the courtroom.

Harper Lee's book concerns the behavior of Southerners in their claim for honor, and Boo Radley's presence in the story reinforces that claim. When Boo was young and got into trouble, his father claimed the right to protect his family name. He took his son home and kept him at the house. When Boo attacked him, Mr. Radley again asked for family privilege; Boo was returned to his home, this time never to surface on the porch or in the yard during the daylight hours. The children are fascinated with the Boo Radley legend. They act it out, and they work hard to make Boo come out. And always, they wonder what keeps him inside. After the trial however,

Jem says, 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 ... it's because he wants to stay inside.

Throughout the book Boo is talked about and wondered over, but he does not appear in Scout's existence until the end when he is needed by the children. When no one is near to protect them from death, Boo comes out of hiding. In an act of violence he kills Bob Ewell, and with that act he becomes a part of southern honor. He might have been a hero. Had a jury heard the case, his trial would have entertained the entire region. The community was unsettled from the rape trial, and this avenged death in the name of southern justice would have set well in Maycomb, Alabama. Boo Radley has been outside of southern honor, however, and he is a shy man. Lee has the sheriff explain the pitfalls of southern justice when he says, Know what'd happen then? All the ladies in Maycomb includin' my wife'd be knocking on his door bringing angel food cakes. To my way of thinkin' ... that's a sin.... If it was any other man it'd be different. The reader discovers that southern justice through the courts is not a blessing. It is a carnival.

When Harper Lee was five years old the Scottsboro trial began. In one of the most celebrated southern trials, nine blacks were accused of raping two white girls. The first trial took place in Jackson County, Alabama. All nine were convicted. Monroeville, Lee's hometown, knew about the case. Retrials continued for six years, and with each new trial it became more obvious that southern justice for blacks was different from southern justice for whites. Harper Lee's father was a lawyer during that time. Her mother's maiden name was Finch. Harper Lee attended law school, a career possibility suggested to Scout by well-meaning adults in the novel. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in 1935, midpoint for the Scottsboro case.

Scout Finch faces the realities of southern society within the same age span that Harper Lee faced Scottsboro. The timeline is also the same. Although Lee's father was not the Scottsboro lawyer who handled that trial, he was a southern man of honor related to the famous gentleman soldier, Robert E. Lee. It is likely that Harper Lee's father was the author's model for Atticus Finch and that the things Atticus told Scout were the kinds of things Ama Lee told his daughter. The attitudes depicted are ones Harper Lee grew up with, both in terms of family pride and small town prejudices.

The censors' reactions to *To Kill a Mockingbird* were reactions to issues of race and justice. Their moves to ban the book derive from their own perspectives of the book's theme. Their reader's response criticism, usually based on one reading of the book, was personal and political. They needed to ban the book because it told them something about American society that they did not want to hear. That is precisely the problem facing any author of realistic fiction. Once the story becomes real, it can become grim. An author will use first-person flashback in story in order to let the reader live in another time, another place. Usually the storyteller is returning for a second view of the scene. The teller has experienced the events before and the story is being retold because the scene has left the storyteller uneasy. As the storyteller recalls the past both the listener and the teller see events in a new light. Both are working through troubled times in search of meaning. In the case of *To Kill a Mockingbird* the first-person retelling is not pleasant, but the underlying significance is with the narrative. The youthful personalities who are recalled are hopeful. Scout

tells us of a time past when white people would lynch or convict a man because of the color of his skin. She also shows us three children who refuse to believe that the system is right, and she leaves us with the thought that most people will be nice if seen for what they are: humans with frailties. When discussing literary criticism, Theo D'Haen suggested [in *Text to Reader*] that the good literary work should have a life within the world and be part of the ongoing activities of that world. *To Kill a Mockingbird* continues to have life within the world; its ongoing activities in the realm of censorship show that it is a book which deals with regional moralism. The children in the story seem very human; they worry about their own identification, they defy parental rules, and they cry over injustices. They mature in Harper Lee's novel, and they lose their innocence. So does the reader. If the readers are young, they may believe Scout when she says, nothin's real scary except in books. If the readers are older they will have learned that life is as scary, and they will be prepared to meet some of its realities.

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