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"Go Set a Mockingbird" – What Lee's Novels Teach Us About Race

Readers and scholars alike consider Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* to be one of the most quintessential works of American literature. It has long been hailed as a proponent of racial equality and of human empathy, characteristics that are particularly exemplified by the fictional Atticus. However, the supposedly anti-racist nature of the novel has been questioned by literary critics, especially in recent years. Some have looked at racism as it pertains to the characters within the novel. Atticus, who many consider a "champion against racism" (Macaluso 280), never explicitly challenges the racism in Maycomb. Even when defending Tom Robinson, a black man, Atticus's defense is weak, according to Best. She argues that Atticus intentionally sabotages Tom's case in order to uphold the Panopticon-like structure of Maycomb society (Best 546) – that is, to maintain the segregated factions of class, gender, and race "from which no one can escape, at least not without severe repercussions" (Best 541). The novel's young narrator, Scout, has even been placed under suspicion. Murray contends that despite her perceived innocence, Scout makes derogatory comments towards blacks without clear narrative context, as when she uses animalistic imagery to describe a black man, which casts her moral standing into doubt (79-80, 86).

Critics also point out that the symbol from which the novel derives its name, the mockingbird, is contentious. The mockingbird, meant to represent innocents who are persecuted – namely, Tom Robinson – is derogatory, according to both Saney and Murray. They assert that when it is used to symbolize African-Americans, the mockingbird is dehumanizing and portrays

blacks as weak, or helpless (Saney 102; Murray 87). Other critics have noted that the novel features white characters more prominently, making them the "hero[es]" of the story (Macaluso 280). This portrayal "marginalizes [the] black characters to validate and tell a story by, about, and for its white protagonists (and intended readers)" (Macaluso 280), which, in turn, undermines Black history by "reduc[ing Blacks] to…passive hapless victims" in their fight for racial equality (Saney 102).

While these perceived flaws inherently cast the racial message of *To Kill a Mockingbird* into doubt, criticism of the novel has only increased since the publication of *Go Set a Watchman*. In Lee's second novel, the perhaps ineffective, but ultimately laudable, Atticus of *Mockingbird* actively endorses segregation and discrimination against African-Americans through his "prominent place at the Citizen's Council Table" (Henninger 617). As shocking as this information is for the fictional Scout, now Jean-Louise, it has made readers similarly aghast (Henninger 598). In light of these recent literary developments, critics like Henninger have started to examine Lee's works in-tandem with one another. She claims that the "rage" Jean-Louise experiences due to the loss of "racial innocence," which occurs after Jean-Louise witnesses her father's overtly racist behavior, "offer[s] an important lens into the desires and the perceived needs of contemporary readers in both 1960 and 2015" (Henninger 600). Moreover, Henninger states that *Watchman* "confront[s] racial injustice…as a system of white power embodied in the self" (597), or that the novel exemplifies how racism exists within each person.

I agree with Henninger's view that *Mockingbird* and *Watchman* offer insight into modern society. However, instead of portraying the individualized nature of racism, I believe that Lee's works examine racism on a broader scale – as a collective, not an individual, issue. The revelations in *Watchman*, in dispelling prior notions about *Mockingbird* and proposing new ways

to “rea[d] against” it (Macaluso 285), offer insight on how we might “read against” our view of society in order to address racism in our world today. Although this epiphany occurs on an individual level in *Watchman*, Jean-Louise’s ideological development shows the extent that racism persists not only on a personal level, but a societal one; thus, it opens the door for discussion on the societal causes of racism, namely, language, racial stereotypes, and education.

Both novels contain vocabulary that “‘portrays all the stereotypical generalizations that demean [African-Americans] as a people” (Saney 100). In *Mockingbird*, this is most obviously evidenced by the dialogue of blatantly racist characters, like Mr. Ewell, who screams in court, “‘I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin' on my Mayella!’” (Lee, *Mockingbird*, 231). However, even the supposed hero Atticus uses phrases like: “‘nigger-lover is just one of those terms that don't mean anything—like snot-nose’” (Lee, *Mockingbird*, 144). Of his use of the “n-word,” Atticus explains that “‘[i]t's slipped into usage with some people like ourselves, when they want a common, ugly term to label somebody’” (Lee, *Mockingbird*, 144). Here, he touches on the idea that such “‘ignorant, trashy’” language (Lee, *Mockingbird*, 144) can be integrated into a person’s speech, whether or not one realizes it, simply by being exposed to that language by others. Regardless of Atticus’s intent in using these kinds of words – which here seems to not be as a means of discrimination – he perpetuates it, nonetheless, by continuing to use such terminology.

Though it takes place twenty years later, much of the dialogue in *Watchman* is the same as in *Mockingbird*. Terms like “Negro boy” or “Negroes” (Lee, *Watchman*, 27, 74), as well as the extremely derogatory “n-word” continue to be used in everyday conversation. Again, this derogatory language is not merely used by blatant racists, but by everyone. For example, Jean-Louise’s Aunt Alexandra says, “Keeping a nigger happy these days is like catering to a king…” (Lee, *Watchman*, 166). The casual nature with which this language is used, and the frequency

with which it is used, illustrate just how much racism is ingrained in the dialect of Maycomb. Moreover, the lack of progressive language and, in its stead, the shocking amount of outdated terminology, illustrates the staying power of language over time and its resistance to change.

Even Jean-Louise uses this derogatory language, both as a child and as an adult. The young Scout says: "after all he's just a Negro" (Lee, *Mockingbird*, 266); later, the grown Jean-Louise recites the lyrics of a song containing racial slurs: "*Eeny, meeny, miny, moe. Catch a nigger by his toe…*" (Lee, *Watchman*, 162). Despite their obviously negative connotations, Jean-Louise is rarely conscious of the offensive nature of her words. This proves the lasting effect that the vernacular of those around her, especially adults like Atticus and Aunt Alexandra, have had on Jean-Louise. She is not aware of her inherently racist language, but instead, she continues to incorporate it into her own speech without a second thought.

In addition to racist language, there are distinct racial stereotypes maintained in Lee's works. In *Mockingbird*, this is primarily exemplified by Calpurnia's behavior. There is a marked contrast between how Calpurnia acts within the Finches' home and when she is among the African-American community. Calpurnia acknowledges the presence of stereotypes and intentionally shifts her behavior and mannerisms to accommodate them, explaining to Scout: "'Now what if I talked white-folks' talk at church, and with my neighbors? They'd think I was puttin' on airs to beat Moses'" (Lee, *Mockingbird*, 167). Later, in *Watchman*, Jean-Louise recounts the reverse situation – that "with [white] company came Calpurnia's company manners" (Lee, *Watchman*, 70). In both cases, Calpurnia "puts on airs," to use her words, whether it be to fulfill the expectations of the black community or the white one.

The idea of stereotypes relates, in a sense, to the idea of the "Other" that critic Best explores in relation to *Mockingbird*. Best claims Jem and Scout forge their identities "through an

understanding of that which they are not, the ways in which they and their family are different," especially compared to those of another race (543). While, arguably, the idea of the "Other" helps the children develop a stronger sense-of-self, it simultaneously introduces them to stereotypes by drawing attention to what differentiates whites from blacks. Under this view, the concept of the "Other" teaches Jem and Scout that people of different races are, in fact, different beings, allowing less opportunity to focus on their similarities and furthering the distance between races, instead of bringing them closer together.

Racial stereotypes continue to exist in *Watchman*. This is glaringly evident in the pamphlet entitled "*The Black Plague*" (Lee, *Watchman*, 101) that Jean-Louie finds, in addition to the comments she overhears in the Citizens' Council meeting; these phrases include "kinky wooly heads" and "mouths like Number 2 cans" (Lee, *Watchman*, 108), descriptions that are incredibly offensive and caricature-like. Even outside of the meeting, which has an audience specifically comprised of white supremacists, similar comments are made. Jean-Louise's beau, Henry, nonchalantly comments, "'That's the way they [African-Americans] assert themselves these days…They're a public menace'" (Lee, *Watchman*, 80). This short statement contains multiple offenses – Henry's demeaning, condescending use of the pronoun "they," as well as his prejudiced generalization. While Jean-Louise may instinctively disagree with such racial profiling, numerous other members of Maycomb maintain such a view of African-Americans, making it clear that stereotypes remain prevalent within the community.

Despite her best efforts to reject Maycomb's ideology, Jean-Louise is still affected by those around her. Throughout *Mockingbird*, the beliefs of the adult characters significantly impact the views of the children, particularly Scout. While this occurs in indirect ways, such as the daily language and stereotypes mentioned above, it is also perpetuated by Scout's education.

As an adult, Jean-Louise makes the insightful comment that racism "begins at home" (Lee, *Watchman*, 248). Albeit less formal than a school setting, the impact of parental "education" is undeniable; indeed, the environment in which children are raised has a large impact on their ideology. Atticus often urges Scout to "consider things from [others'] point of view" (Lee, *Mockingbird*, 39), and Scout herself says, "Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them" (Lee, *Mockingbird*, 374), proving that she has internalized her father's philosophy.

This philosophy may be, in part, what contributes to Jean-Louise's traces of racism later in life. Although, historically, this famous adage has been seen as empathetic, it may actually excuse racism, according to Macaluso. He argues that by instructing Scout to find the "basic humanity" in everyone, Atticus attributes racism to individual error, rather than a larger societal issue (Macaluso 285), thus, instilling misconceptions about racism in Scout from an early age. This may contribute to Jean-Louise's lack of awareness of the racism in her community, in her father, and in herself throughout *Go Set a Watchman*; the belief that racism exists person-to-person – in blatantly racist people, at that – may prime Jean-Louise to ignore or to simply be unaware of the other ways that racism presents itself.

On that note, the extent of Jean-Louise's ignorance regarding societal racism warrants debate. It is often ambiguous whether she knows it exists and pretends that it does not, or if she is truly in the dark. However, due to Jean-Louise's own admission that she is "complacent in her snug world" (Lee, *Watchman*, 118) and resistant to change in general – she "never learn[s] to ride a bicycle" and frequently acts like "a damn child," according to Atticus (Lee, *Watchman*, 11, 14) – it is more likely that she is in denial. Although she may have previously witnessed the warning signs of racism in the people and institutions around her, Jean-Louise does not confront

them until she is directly faced with the racist words and actions of her loved ones, particularly Atticus.

Jean-Louise's complacent attitude towards racism is, arguably, like that of our society today. Moreover, the components of the fictional Maycomb that perpetuate racism also exist in the real world. Despite modern attempts to remain politically correct in every situation, offensive language, particularly revolving around race, remains in use. In fact, the "correct" terms for identifying race are elusive, leaving many struggling to find the right word – is it "Indian," or "Native American?" "Black," or "African-American?" This raises the question of how aptly we can address racism in our society if we do not even have the words with which to discuss it.

Even when race is discussed, it is often still influenced by stereotypes. While these stereotypes may have changed since the eras of *Mockingbird* and *Watchman*, they similarly generalize and marginalize race. Take, for example, the images invoked by the words "inner city" and "suburban" – the first would be assumed to be a person of color, while the latter would be assumed to be white. While these labels are not necessarily seen as derogatory, they illustrate just how closely race and language are linked, even in subtle ways.

Finally, education remains a primary factor in how we frame race. Macaluso's essay "Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird Today*: Coming to Terms With Race, Racism, and America's Novel" perfectly captures this. Macaluso argues that teachers must address the numerous ways that racism can be present, whether it be blatant actions or aspects of daily life (285). Similarly, Jay states that "[i]nstitutionalized, legalized, and culturally reinforced ideologies of discrimination belong to a different category than personal prejudice or bigotry" (497). To distinguish between the two, Macaluso uses the terms "old racism" and "new racism," (282-283).

He claims, pulling from his own experience as a teacher, that if only the explicitly racist words and actions in the novel are what are used to define racism, students will gain a limited definition of the term (Macaluso 283). This may lead young people to miss other examples of racism – such as the ones discussed above – both in literature and around them.

It is troubling for readers, including myself, who have held *Mockingbird* in such high esteem to acknowledge its failings and to see it a more negative light. However, if readers have missed or ignored the possibility of underlying racism in literature, it is worth considering how that might play into their interpretations of the real world. Like Jean-Louise, we have maintained a "racial innocence" (Henninger 608), and, like Jean-Louise, we do not want to relinquish it. Yet it is time that we, as a society, acknowledge the remaining prevalence of racism. Towards the end of *Watchman*, Jean-Louise reflects on the prejudice of those around her, asking: "Had it percolated gradually through the years until now? Had it always been under her nose to see if she had only looked?" (Lee, *Watchman*, 150). We must ask ourselves these same questions in order to address the underlying issues with our education, speech, and stereotypes, as well as to investigate other societal causes of racism, so that our misconceptions about race no longer pass on to future generations.

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