Spring 2016

From Scout to Jean Louise

John Sivils
Ouachita Baptist University

John Sivils

Professor Pittman

ENGL 3113

22 April 2016

From Scout to Jean Louise

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and its controversial sequel *Go Set a Watchman,* seem to revolve around similar events in the lives of the Finch family and the community of Maycomb. However, despite both being set in the same town and both being narrated by Jean Louise Finch, Lee uses different structures for the novels to serve different literary goals. Through *Mockingbird,* Lee uses Jem's coming of age to criticize the social and political climate of the 1950s, though she does so through the ostensible 1930s setting of the novel. Through *Watchman*, Lee uses Scout's coming of age explore to the timeless issue of how an individual is to relate to his or her world. *Go Set a Watchman* provides Scout's coming of age, and in doing so challenges the reader to accept living in the world that Lee presents in *Mockingbird.* In *Mockingbird,* Lee is saying, "This is the world we live in." In *Watchman*, Lee is saying, "This is how we might stand to live in it."

Readers widely consider *Mockingbird* a bildungsroman focusing on Scout. However, some think otherwise. In her essay "More Than One Way to (Mis)Read a Mockingbird," Jennifer Murray asks the question "is Scout, the remembered childhood self of the narrator, really the main character?" (80). Although Scout is the narrator, she is not the most dynamic, compelling, or spotlighted character of the novel. Most of the time, she's following Jem (or sometimes Dill). Although Atticus is crucial to the development of Tom Robinson's case, which becomes the central event of the novel, he remains a stagnant character. We can understand Lee's purpose in writing the novel when we consider Jem's role in the narrative.

One indicator that *Mockingbird* focuses more on Jem is the fact that Lee begins the story by focusing on Jem's broken arm. Scout tells us, "When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow," and goes on to talk about him for the entire first paragraph (Lee, *Mockingbird* 3). While this is a miniscule part of the novel, Lee begins with the narrative focus on Jem, rather than on Scout. Not only this, but Jem's insistence that the story actually began "the summer Dill came to us, when Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out" (Lee 3) causes Scout to begin the story of *Mockingbird* where she does. Jem has already heavily impacted the events of the narrative even in the first few paragraphs of the novel.

Lee begins Part Two of *Mockingbird* with another paragraph about Jem. She writes, "Jem was twelve. He was difficult to live with, inconsistent, moody. His appetite was appalling, and he told me so many times to stop pestering him I consulted Atticus; 'Reckon he's got a tapeworm?' Atticus said no, Jem was growing" (Lee 131).Lee's decision to choose this event as the starting point for the second part of the novel is remarkable for multiple reasons. First of all, it again puts the spotlight on Jem. Second, it focuses on Jem's growth as he enters adolescence. This important detail supports the idea that Scout is not the one growing the most in this book—she doesn't even understand Jem's maturation at this point. Rather, Lee gives Jem's growth the most attention.

Many critics point to *Mockingbird's* episodic structure as a remnant of Lee's initial attempt at publishing the tales of Maycomb as a collection of short stories. Murray believes it to be "the product of marketing pressures" in a literary community that favored novels over short-story collections (76), noting that "the chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* resonate more with a short story cycle's interconnectedness than the classical novel's linear coherence" (77). While

this is certainly very viable, I think that Lee intentionally maintained this structure so that she could have the freedom to jump around to different events that helped shape Jem's growth by revealing the aspects of his world. Even though certain scenes don't seem to advance the central plot—that is, Tom Robinson's case—they are vital in achieving the novel's purpose of commenting on 1950s American society through the coming-of-age of Jem.

One such scene that supports my claim is when the rabid dog Tim Johnson is roving the street by the Finch's home. The children watch as Atticus and Mr. Tate, the sheriff, confront the beast. Much to the children's astonishment, Atticus kills the dog with one rifle shot. Here, Jem learns that his father, whom he thought at the beginning of the chapter to be "feeble" and unadmirable (Lee 102), is not weak or incapable, but humble. Scout thinks that Atticus had never told them about being "the deadest shot in Maycomb county" (Lee 112) merely because "it just slipped his mind" (Lee 113), but Jem realizes that it's more complex than that, "something [Scout] wouldn't understand," (Lee 113) which causes him to exclaim proudly "Atticus is a gentleman, just like me!" (Lee 113).

Jem not only learns the importance of humility, but he also sees how a man must be able to face something frightening, such as a rabid dog, and make the hard decision to pull the trigger on an otherwise innocent animal. Similarly, Atticus would have to defend the innocent Tom Robinson from the rabid dog of Bob Ewell and the Maycomb jury, even though he loves the people of the community and refuses to treat them with hatred, despite their harshness toward him.

Another instance of Jem's maturation is when the Finch children find a runaway Dill hiding under their bed. Jem makes the mature decision to adhere to the law—in this case, the rules of parents—even when it may result unfavorably for his friend. Scout notes that in telling

Atticus about Dill, Jem had "[broken] the remaining code of [their] childhood" (Lee 159). Through this scene, and several others like it, we see Lee's focus on Jem's increasing understanding of the world. Jem's growth is put to the test at the climax of the novel as he watches the Robinson trial unfold from the balcony of the Maycomb court room.

Jem experience several other instances of emotional growth through the episodes leading up to the Robinson trial, but none shape him more than the result of the trial. Jem is hopeful throughout most of the trial, telling Reverend Sykes, who is seated nearby, "don't fret, we've won it" (Lee 218). It's "Jem's turn to cry" (Lee 242) when Judge Taylor announces the verdict and Robinson is convicted. After returning home, Jem asks Atticus, "How could they do it, how could they?" to which Atticus responds, "I don't know, but they did it. 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" (Lee 243).

Jem's growth is not yet complete at this point in the novel, causing him to weep as a child would. His reason for weeping, though, comes from an adult understanding of the trial. Atticus has taught him that all people, no matter their color, deserve the same treatment, and that Robinson was convicted only because of his race. Murray notes with apt analysis that "Jem is still just enough of a child to believe in justice, and just old enough to recognize a situation of true injustice" (Murray 82). Jem is in a transitioning state showing his slow maturity into manhood.

While we see many instances of Jem's growth throughout the story, Lee shows little growth in Scout. Many of the episodes, such as the mad dog episode, teach Jem a lesson, but Lee gives no evidence of any epiphany in Scout. Moreover, Scout still asserts while talking with Dill about how Tom is being treated during the trial that Robinson is "just a Negro" (Lee 226). Scout

also seems to evaluate Tom Robinson by focusing on his physical attributes, in a way that "smacks of animal imagery" (Murray 86). Scout notes that "Tom was a black-velvet Negro, not shiny, but soft black velvet. The whites of his eyes shone in his face, and when he spoke, we saw flashes of his teeth. If he had been whole, he would have been a fine specimen of a man" (Lee 192). Murray proposes that "the description focuses on difference in such a way that the physical is implicitly seen through the lens of evaluation of the workhorse, judging its worth through its skin and teeth" (Murray 86).

Even without this detail, we can still see that Lee focuses heavily on Jem's reaction to the verdict of the trial, while Scout remains mute for the entire chapter following the condemnation of Robinson. Clearly Jem's growth is much more important to this story. Scout seems to act more as an observer than as a dynamic character, which implicitly prevents her from being the central character of the novel.

Lee uses Jem's coming of age to slowly reveal the truth of 1950s American society to both Jem and the reader. When we read the verdict of Tom's trial, we are supposed to cry with Jem, asking, "How could they, how could they?" in echo. Lee's presentation of the social and racial dynamic of the 1950s in *Mockingbird*, as revealed through the eyes of Scout and as understood by the heart of Jem, is supposed to propel society farther away from the blatant injustice that transpired in the Maycomb court room. In a sense, the readers are coming of age alongside Jem, forced to face the reality that the world isn't fair, no matter how far we've progressed toward complete equality.

It seems odd to think that *Mockingbird* criticizes 1950s society when the book takes place in the 1930s; however, one must consider the historical context surrounding the novel's publication in 1960. Lee's historical inaccuracies in *Mockingbird* seem to discredit its apparent

setting in the Depression Era. For example, the formation of the WPA and Eleanor Roosevelt's sitting with black officials at Birmingham are mentioned in the novel, although the events didn't happen until years after they are described. In addition to this, the social issues that Lee focuses on in Mockingbird closely resemble the tension of the 1950s sparked by *Brown vs. the Board of Education* and the Emmett Till trial. Patrick Chura makes note of these historical fluctuations in his essay "Prolepsis and Anachronism: Emmett Till and the Historicity of *To Kill a Mockingbird*." He writes that "Because the text's 1930s history is superficial, the novel is best understood as an amalgam or cross-historical montage, its 'historical present' diluted by the influence of events and ideology concurrent with the period of its production" (Chura 1). For these reasons, I believe it is necessary to align the events of *Mockingbird* to the 1950s, rather than the Depression.

Not only is *Watchman* much more focused on Scout, but the issues Lee chooses to focus on are less about social injustice, as the issues in *Mockingbird* certainly were, and more about personal growth. The issues that Scout must come to terms with are the formation of personal convictions, the refusal to conform to mob thinking, accepting change, and choosing not to hate those whose way of life directly conflicts with her way of life. In his review of *Go Set a Watchman,* Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr. notes that "in *Watchman,* there are no children pondering different ways of doing things; youth only appear in flashbacks pondering personal rather than social issues, like what dress to wear to the dance" (Brinkmeyer 220). This contrasts heavily with Scout's realization in *Mockingbird* that Southern society's persecution of blacks mirrors the Nazi persecution of Jews. The central conflict of this story is not the way the world treats blacks—it is Scout coming to terms with Atticus's apparent change in character.

As I noted previously, much of Scout's activity in *Mockingbird* centers around Jem, Dill, or Atticus. She's often not engaging in affairs of her own interest—rather, she is tagging along with someone else. Scout does not seem to find any problem with this until after she sees Atticus at the Maycomb Citizens' Council meeting. Heartbroken and betrayed, she realizes that "the most potent moral force in her life was the love of her father" (Lee, *Watchman* 117). She was so attached to her father that she "never realized that before she made any decision of importance the reflex, 'What would Atticus do?' passed through her unconscious" (Lee 117). In short, "she worshiped him" (Lee 118) and relied on him—or the idol of him that she had created—to guide her thinking.

This kind of blind, thoughtless following is exactly what caused otherwise good men, such as Mr. Cunningham, to show up at the Maycomb county jail with the intention of hurting Robinson—and Atticus, if he got in their way. The Maycomb of *Mockingbird* was full of followers such as this who had no reason to hate blacks other than because the world told them to. Scout has committed a similar sin by simply following what she thought another would do, rather than thinking for herself. This is one of the first steps in relating to an unjust world. Scout is forced through the death of her idolized Atticus to take ownership of her own ideals. She can no longer simply do as Atticus or Jem tells her. As Dr. Finch tells Scout, "[she] had to kill [herself], or [Atticus] had to kill [her] to get [her] functioning as a separate entity" (Lee 265).

The most painful part of the realization of Atticus's true character in *Watchman* is not the fact that racism exists in the world, or the fact that Maycomb is firmly resisting the tides of the Civil Rights movement, but that Atticus is involved in the anti-integration force of Maycomb. The strong moral code that Scout had attributed to Atticus was disintegrating now that she saw him as a racist. Scout, and the readers, must answer a hard question: "How can I be fair to the

people I love, when they are unfair to others?" Lee forces us to reconcile love—in Scout's case, familial love—with one's personal conviction. When the two conflict, what are we to do?

When faced with this situation, Scout attempts to run away as a remedy. She "doesn't give" and "stays rigid" (Lee 265). In essence, she decides that "[she doesn't] like the way these people live, so [she has] no time for them" (Lee 265). But Dr. Finch warns her that she must not react this way, or else she will "be the same at sixty as [she is] now" (Lee 265). This kind of bigotry is just as pernicious as the racist bigotry that the people of Maycomb adhere to. Lee uses this conversation between Scout and Dr. Finch to warn the reader that running away and refusing to listen, as Scout attempted to do, will only cause more separation in the world, which is counterproductive to Scout's desire for unity and equality.

As I explained previously, Scout uses very physical and animalistic imagery to describe Tom Robinson in *Mockingbird*, which suggests that she not only notices differences, but unconsciously dehumanizes blacks. This, along with her assertion to Dill that Robinson is "just a Negro" show that young Scout Finch is not a consistent character, as she compares Southern racial violence to Hitler's campaign against the Jews. In one case, she is criticizing her society; in another, she is behaving just like the other whites in Maycomb.

In *Watchman*, the inconsistencies continue. In her argument against Atticus about the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown vs the Board of Education*, Scout tells her father that, "When it came we didn't give an inch, we just ran instead. When we should have tried to help 'em live with the decision, it was like Bonaparte's retreat we ran so fast" (Lee 245). It was this same kind of running out of fear of a different way of life that Scout was doing when she ran away from Maycomb to New York. She hasn't realized it yet, but she sometimes dons the same behaviors that she condemns.

Scout has more growing to do to become a consistent character, but the events of *Watchman* do much more to help her come of age than anything that happened in *Mockingbird.* Lee uses both of these books in tandem to convey a rich criticism against the flaws of a society that chooses to "proclaim freedom and democracy while practicing segregation" and "proclaim equal rights for all while keeping those rights from black people" (Brinkmeyer 221). Scout has recognized the inconsistency of the world—specifically Southern society—but she has not yet recognized the inconsistences in herself. She would silence the Klan and anyone else who opposes her way of thinking, yet at the same time espouse her mantra: "Equal rights for all; special privileges for none" (Lee 242). In practice, she is being just as closeminded as the people of Maycomb.

The traditional interpretation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as Scout's coming of age doesn't hold up to critical reading. Rather, if we read it as a social commentary on the society that Jem is coming of age in, we can enrich our understanding of the personal revelations that Scout experiences in *Go Set a Watchman.* Jem's struggle to understand that the world is unjust becomes all of ours as we read *Mockingbird*, and Scout's struggle to form her own identity and accept the unjust world she lives in also becomes ours as we read *Mockingbird.* The full breadth of Lee's message cannot be understood without reading both of her novels.

Works Cited

Brinkmeyer Jr., Robert H. "Scout Comes Home Again." *Virginia Quarterly Review* 91.4 (2015): 217-221. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 21 Apr. 2016.

Chura, Patrick. "Prolepsis and Anachronism: Emmet Till and the Historicity of *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *The Southern Literary Journal* 32.2 (2000): 1-26. Web.

Lee, Harper. *Go Set a Watchman*. New York, NY: Harper, an Imprint of HarperCollins, 2015. Print.

---. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006. Print.