

INTERPRETATION OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN HARPER LEE'S TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

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ABSTRACT

It is a widely accepted fact that literature reflects society. Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird is the reflection of 1930's America. Lee meticulously captures the issues, beliefs, prejudices of the Americans in this time period in the setting of a fictitious town, Maycomb, Alabama. Maycomb is a small town of close-knit families living for decades in that town. Though this is her first and the only novel (1920) till she would go on to publish Go Set a Watchman (2015) in 2015, Mockingbird received rave reviews and critical acclaim for her novel. Mockingbird received the Pulitzer Prize and went on to become a classic American novel which is prescribed in American Schools. The narrative is partly autobiographical as it is vaguely based on the incidents Lee witnessed in her hometown in 1936. The novel though deals with a very critical issue, racial prejudice, is simultaneously warm and educative of human values. The protagonist, Scout Finch, learns her lessons of compassion and courage at the hands of her father, Atticus Finch and their domestic help, Calpurnia.

The present paper deals with the portrayal of women in Mockingbird. Lee portrays her women as strong, assertive, ethical and nurturing. Simultaneously, we have certain social characters who are stereotypes and the accuser, Mayella of Tom Robinson, a negative character. It is interesting to note the strong roles, both positive and negative, the women characters play in this novel. The paper makes a note of the strikingly contrasting characteristics and attempts to study the autobiographical elements behind the portrayal of women characters in the Mockingbird.

KEYWORDS: Characters in Mockinbird; women characters in Mockingbird; Interpretation of characters in Mockingbird; and autobiographical elements in Mockingbird

INTRODUCTION

"To Kill a Mockingbird," the title of the novel written by Harper Lee, is a metaphor for actions that destroy innocence. Atticus Finch, Jem and Scout's father, tells his children that it is a sin to shoot a Mockingbird. Scout approaches her friendly neighbour, Miss Maudie who explains to her that "Mockingbirds never harm other living creatures" and they just "sing their hearts out" (Mockingbird, 76). Killing a Mockingbird is generally considered a sin as a Mockingbird does not harm but simply sings its heart out. The title could be an expression which voices the status of the Southern states. Practicing racial discrimination or harming innocent people is probably perceived as a sin by the author.

In the novel, Atticus tries his best to save Tom Robinson from the accusations of Mayella Ewell but fails. The jury convicts him despite significant evidence proving that he is not guilty and Tom is shot and killed when he tries to escape from the prison. Another innocent person who is persecuted is Boo Radley, Scout's neighbour. Scout and Jem start with making fun of Boo and finally realize that he is innocent at heart and friendly. At the end of the novel, Boo saves Scout and Jem from Bob Ewell, Mayella's father who tries to kill them as Atticus proved that he lied in the court. Thus, Scout and Jem learnt priceless lessons about life from their father, Atticus. Atticus defines courage as "when you're licked before you

begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what" (69). This may be understood as an explanation to Jem for his stand on the trial of Tom Robinson and extension of his help to Mrs. Dubose. Furthermore, a literary scholar, Tavernier-Courbin suggests that the title is symbolic of Lee mocking the prevailing systems of education, justice and society [2]. Lee takes sharp and subtle digs at the established conventions of society.

The three years' duration covered in the novel was ample enough to cover many burning issues of the 1930s in the Southern states of America. Simultaneously, she sketches the building of character in the protagonist, Scout Finch and her elder brother, Jem Finch. By the end of the novel, Scout learns life facts of great magnitude, humanity, humility, and dealing with hardships in life. Jem gains perception of people's intentions and their actions. The children adopt their father's practice of sympathy, consideration and comprehension and grow up to reveal that their encounters with hatred and intolerance do not diminish their faith in humanity.

It is remarkable to note that the town, Maycomb, also enacts a vital character in the novel. The town, Maycomb plays an important role as a character, by showering status on people with ancestry deep rooted in Maycomb.

In spite of its literary value, it is surprising that only few literary studies were based on Mockingbird. [2]. Don Noble, the editor of a book of essays on this novel provides some insight into this feature. He proposes that as the novel remains a best-seller to this day, readers probably assume that it does not necessitate literary analysis. As recently as 2006, British librarians pronounced that this novel is a must read by every person in their lifetime. [2]

The present paper attempts to study the autobiographical elements behind the portrayal of women characters and contrast the positive and negative characteristics of these women characters in the Mockingbird.

Mockingbird faced its share of criticism as well from many quarters. Though it was received well by white people, some African-Americans did mention problems with the text and the terminology used [5]. Also it was criticized that the black characters were not developed completely and in fact stereotypes of black characters were used. A well-known critic, Michael Lind expressed that the narrative presents stereotypical white trash and poor, helpless blacks. An author from Alabama, Mark Childress expressed that the novel helped the white Southerners comprehend the society they lived in. He pointed out that many Southerners were kind and compassionate people who were unaware of the havoc caused by the system they were practising and this novel in particular helped them realize the gravity of the situation [2].

Autobiographical Elements

Though Harper Lee refused to accept that the novel has autobiographical elements, there are many facts that suggest otherwise. Lee's father, Amasa Coleman Lee was an attorney like Atticus Finch [2]. Lee's mother was chronically ill and her influence on Lee was negligible as her presence was absent in Lee's life. In the novel, Scout's mother dies in Scout's childhood. Scout does not even remember her. Lee and her elder brother Edwin were separated by four years like Scout and Jem. The household was looked after by a black housekeeper. Dill, Scout's friend is modelled on her close friend Truman Capote, who grows up to become a renowned writer [2]. The character of Dill who has high imagination and who is a great storyteller is based on Capote. Similar to Dill, Capote lived with his aunts next door to Scout's. In the same street lived a family who kept their son locked for getting into legal trouble. This family was the basis for the Radley's family. Also Lee's mother's maiden name is Finch. Naming the protagonist as Finch is an evidence of the love and veneration Lee had for her mother.

The case of Tom Robinson has many sources as the South was riddled with numerous cases like this. In 1936, a black man, Walter Lett was accused of raping a white woman and sentenced to death. However, his death sentence was changed to life imprisonment based on a series of letters claiming his innocence. Another important case at that time was that of the Scottsboro boys, where nine black men were accused of molesting two white women on negligible evidence. Also the 1955 case of the murder of the black teenager, Emmett Till for flirting with a white woman, could be a basis for Tom Robinson's incident [2].

Critics have acclaimed Lee's narrative style as she had to possess, the mind of a six-year-old child and an intellectual, adult mind to comprehend the racial injustice, the system of justice and the society at the same time. *Time* noticed and mentioned her "tactile brilliance" in one of its first book reviews. However, there were literary critics and novelists who expressed their scepticism regarding Jem and Scout's comprehension of social reality based on the fact that they were sheltered and protected by their family. Critics have classified this novel as both Southern Gothic and Bildungsroman as the narrative contains the characteristics of both genres. However, some critics point out that the novel cannot be termed as Southern Gothic as Boo Radley was in fact a loving personality who cared for Scout and Jem. Lee dexterously presents universal issues in the society as the mundane problems of individual characters [2].

Scout stands out as a powerful individual throughout the narrative. Scout's aunt, Alexandra; their domestic help, Calpurnia; and neighbours, Miss Maudie and Mrs. Dubose act as important influences who shape the character of Scout and Jem. Mayella Ewell and Bob Ewell's accusations of molestation by Tom Robinson make Scout and Jem understand the implications of racial injustice. Scout's primary female influences are Calpurnia, a black woman and her neighbour, Miss Maudie. Both Calpurnia and Miss Maudie are decisive, impartial and caring. They loved Scout and protected her at all times yet they chastised her without any prejudice when she was wrong. Alexandra is a strict Southern lady who dislikes her nieces' tomfoolery and her unlady-like dressing sense. She tries her best to mould Scout into a perfect Southern lady but fails. Also the absent mothers of Scout, Boo Radley, Dill and Mayella Ewell make their absence felt throughout the narrative as the readers wonder how the mothers' influence would impact the narrative if they were present.

When Atticus decides to defend Tom Robinson, the town goes against him. Some White men in the town decide to lynch Tom Robinson on the night before trial. Scout and Jem sense a danger and follow their father, who stands guard at the local prison. When things become tense, Scout steps forward and addresses a friend of her father who is the leader of the crowd. Her innocent questions make him comprehend the gravity and implications of his misguidance and he withdraws. This is a major event in the life of Scout as it moulds her character. Aged six, she might not understand the magnitude of the event or how she saved the lives of Atticus and Tom Robinson, nevertheless, the memory of the event will help her cross hatred and prejudice in her later life. Her faith in humanity will remain unshaken forever.

Mockingbird was prescribed as a text book in many schools and helped in moulding the students into good citizens. The many incidents which Scout and Jem encounter in life act as lessons which instil moral values and ethical values in children [2]. Atticus and Scout remain as the most endearing personalities in English literature.

Some of the credit in shaping the narrative should go to the editor of the novel, Therese von Hohoff Torrey. Tay Hohoff, as she is known, was raised in a Quaker home and attended Quaker school. Her progressive upbringing and schooling helped her appreciate Lee's ideas and her first rough draft. Tay Hohoff encouraged her and motivated Lee till she got the finished product which she could see in the lines of the rough draft. Lee took three years to work on her manuscript before publishing it in 1960. Lee based many of her characters on her neighbours in Monroeville, Alabama,

where she was born and grew up [2].

Atticus believes that one should remain faithful to one's conscience at all times. He is not only etched in the memory of readers but also imprinted in the minds of many lawyers who look up to him as a role model of integrity. Scout respects and admires Atticus and treats his ideas as the ultimate judgement. She tries to stay true to her conscience and ends up ruffling many feathers in Maycomb.

It can be rightly said that the characterization in the novel is devoid of discrimination. Lee portrays a weak and powerless Mayella Ewell along with a compelling and endearing Scout. Scout's tomboyish behaviour is admonished by her Aunt Alexandra, Calpurnia and Mrs. Dubose, the three formidable women in Scout's life.

Most often, literature reflects reality and life reflects literature. This narrative is a mirror of the society and also helped in moulding the characters of adolescents. The novel narrates the changes that were happening around in the society and promotes equality regardless of race, class and gender.

REFERENCES

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