**Mockingbirds**

The title of the book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*, so mockingbirds must be important, right? But why? Let’s look at a few passages to try to figure out some answers to that question.

Mockingbirds first appear when Jem and Scout are learning how to use their shiny new air rifles. Atticus won’t teach them how to shoot, but he does give them one rule to follow.

*Atticus said to Jem one day, "I'd rather you shot at tin cans in the back yard, but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

That was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something, and I asked Miss Maudie about it.

"Your father's right," she said. "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." (10.7)*

So, mockingbirds are harmless, innocent creatures, and killing them is wrong, because they don’t hurt anyone. (The same could be said for cows, but hamburgers are so tasty, while mockingbirds presumably aren’t.) But is this lesson so important in itself that it’s worth putting it front and center on the cover of the book? There must be more going on here.

Mr. Underwood’s editorial after the death of Tom Robinson doesn’t mention mockingbirds by name, but it does have a similar message.

*Mr. Underwood didn't talk about miscarriages of justice, he was writing so children could understand. Mr. Underwood simply figured it was a sin to kill cripples, be they standing, sitting, or escaping. He likened Tom's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children, and Maycomb thought he was trying to write an editorial poetical enough to be reprinted in* The Montgomery Advertiser. *(25.27)*

Mr. Underwood may be trying to get through to even the stupidest residents of Maycomb, but his editorial also makes sure that every reader gets the connection: the mockingbird and Tom are in the same class of beings. But what’s the reason for bringing the bird and the man together? Mr. Underwood says it’s because of Tom’s disability, though it’s unclear why he thinks that makes a difference (perhaps it’s along the lines of "women and children first": those thought to be weak should receive special protection). Perhaps Tom’s innocence of the crime he’s accused of makes him similar to the mockingbird who does no harm to anyone. Or perhaps it’s the senselessness that’s really key: killing Tom brought about no good and prevented no evil, just like shooting a mockingbird.

The idea of killing a mockingbird turns up once more in the book, when Scout is telling Atticus she understands about not dragging Boo into court.

*Atticus looked like he needed cheering up. I ran to him and hugged him and kissed him with all my might. "Yes sir, I understand," I reassured him. "Mr. Tate was right."

Atticus disengaged himself and looked at me. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?" (30.66-68)*

Stories of poisoned pecans aside, all Boo does is watch the neighborhood, leave trinkets for Jem and Scout, and act to protect them when they’re attacked. Like killing a mockingbird, arresting Boo would serve no useful purpose, and harm someone who never meant anyone any harm. So over the course of the novel, killing mockingbirds is associated with the sinful, the pointless, and the cruel.

What’s the effect of using the mockingbird in this way? On the one hand, linking particular characters to mockingbirds reduces them to the level of animals; on the other, it says that even animals are worthy of sympathy and the respect of being left alone if they’re doing the same to you. By making killing mockingbirds a clear-cut case of wanton destruction, the book creates a rule for judging more complicated situations: bringing in the mockingbird is a prompt to take a step back from knee-jerk reactions (escaped convicts must be shot! murderers must be arrested!) and ask, what benefit is there? Why do this? What does it accomplish?

No mockingbirds were harmed in the making of this module.

**The Radley Place**

If Maycomb were Disneyland, the Radley Place would be the Haunted Mansion. And the Finch kids aren’t the only ones who avoid it like the plague.

*A Negro would not pass the Radley Place at night, he would cut across to the sidewalk opposite and whistle as he walked. The Maycomb school grounds adjoined the back of the Radley lot; from the Radley chickenyard tall pecan trees shook their fruit into the schoolyard, but the nuts lay untouched by the children: Radley pecans would kill you. A baseball hit into the Radley yard was a lost ball and no questions asked. (1.43)*

What makes the Radley Place so frightening? Part of it is, of course, its most famous occupant, Boo Radley.

*Inside the house lived a malevolent phantom. People said he existed, but Jem and I had never seen him. People said he went out at night when the moon was down, and peeped in windows. When people's azaleas froze in a cold snap, it was because he had breathed on them. Any stealthy small crimes committed in Maycomb were his work. (1.43)*

Boo becomes a figure of superstition, a convenient excuse for bad things happening. Perhaps the house takes on such an evil reputation because Boo is never seen; when the kids look for him, all they ever see is the outside of the house, which becomes almost a stand-in for Boo himself. And like Boo, the house is isolated from the community it sits in the middle of.

*The shutters and doors of the Radley house were closed on Sundays, another thing alien to Maycomb's ways: closed doors meant illness and cold weather only. Of all days Sunday was the day for formal afternoon visiting: ladies wore corsets, men wore coats, children wore shoes. But to climb the Radley front steps and call, "He-y," of a Sunday afternoon was something their neighbors never did. The Radley house had no screen doors. I once asked Atticus if it ever had any; Atticus said yes, but before I was born. (1.45)*

The reclusiveness of all the residents of the Radley House, not just Boo, means that it’s a kind of black hole in the neighborhood, a house of mystery in the midst of the familiar. Perhaps the Finch kids and Dill spend so much time trying to make sense of the Radley Place, and the Radleys, because they don’t understand why anyone would voluntarily isolate themselves. If Maycomb is such a great place to live, why do the Radleys purposely keep themselves out of it? Is there something wrong with the Radleys, or something wrong with the community that they can’t or won’t be a part of? Why do they act so differently from everyone else?

When Scout finally gets to the threshold of the Radley Place after Boo rescues her and her brother from Ewell, she does an odd thing. Instead of peering through the window to try to see inside the house that’s intrigued the kids for so long, she turns around and looks outward.

*In daylight, I thought, you could see to the postoffice corner.

Daylight... in my mind, the night faded.[…] It was summertime, and two children scampered down the sidewalk toward a man approaching in the distance. The man waved, and the children raced each other to him.

It was still summertime, and the children came closer. A boy trudged down the sidewalk dragging a fishingpole behind him. A man stood waiting with his hands on his hips. Summertime, and his children played in the front yard with their friend, enacting a strange little drama of their own invention.

It was fall, and his children fought on the sidewalk in front of Mrs. Dubose's. The boy helped his sister to her feet, and they made their way home. Fall, and his children trotted to and fro around the corner, the day's woes and triumphs on their faces. They stopped at an oak tree, delighted, puzzled, apprehensive.

Winter, and his children shivered at the front gate, silhouetted against a blazing house. Winter, and a man walked into the street, dropped his glasses, and shot a dog.

Summer, and he watched his children's heart break. Autumn again, and Boo's children needed him.

Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough. (31.25-31)*

Scout realizes the Radley Place is like one-way glass: even though the kids couldn’t see in, Boo could see out, and perhaps was just as interested in them as they were in him. Does this make Boo a part of the community after all? On the one hand, he watched what everyone else was doing like a spectator at a play. On the other, he was able to break the fourth wall and step in when he was needed. At the end of the novel, Boo disappears once more into the Radley Place, and Scout says that they never saw him again. But perhaps with her knowledge of what the world looks like from inside it, Scout will now see the Radley Place as a living house instead of a dead one.

**The Mad Dog**

Meet Tim Johnson. He was just snuffling along, investigating interesting smells, burying bones only to dig them up again, and looking out for lady dogs, when – bam – the symbolic structure of the book picks him up and decrees he has to die. Why? What did poor Tim the Dog ever do to get infected with rabies and be gunned down like, well, a dog?

For starters, there’s his name. It may seem odd to give an animal the last name of the family it belongs to, but it’s apparently common practice in Maycomb – Judge Taylor’s pooch gets the same treatment. But more interestingly, it allows the dog’s name to sound suspiciously like that of another character. Tim Johnson…Tom Robinson? Coincidence? Perhaps. But Scout’s memory of her father shooting the dog does pop up more than once in situations involving Tom, and doesn’t get mentioned otherwise.

For example, after Scout turns away the lynch mob, her memory of Atticus in front of the jail merges with her memory of him shooting the dog.

*I was very tired, and was drifting into sleep when the memory of Atticus calmly folding his newspaper and pushing back his hat became Atticus standing in the middle of an empty waiting street, pushing up his glasses. The full meaning of the night's events hit me and I began crying. (16.3)*

But why does Scout associate the two images? Perhaps they’re both examples of Atticus doing tough things he doesn’t want to do. Or of Atticus facing off with a mindless threat. (He does later refer to the men in the lynch mob as "animals" [16.22]).

Scout returns to this memory again when she’s dozing off, waiting for the jury to announce its verdict in Tom’s case.

*The feeling grew until the atmosphere in the courtroom was exactly the same as a cold February morning, when the mockingbirds were still, and the carpenters had stopped hammering on Miss Maudie's new house, and every wood door in the neighborhood was shut as tight as the doors of the Radley Place. A deserted, waiting, empty street, and the courtroom was packed with people. A steaming summer night was no different from a winter morning. […]. I expected Mr. Tate to say any minute, "Take him, Mr. Finch...." (21.46)*

Why does Scout have this feeling? In both past and present, she’s waiting for something to happen; both times, she has no power over the outcome. In the previous instance, Atticus’s skill with a gun was able to save the neighborhood from the mad dog; will he be able to do the same this time? The same image recurs once more as the jury delivers their verdict.

*I saw something only a lawyer's child could be expected to see, could be expected to watch for, and it was like watching Atticus walk into the street, raise a rifle to his shoulder and pull the trigger, but watching all the time knowing that the gun was empty. A jury never looks at a defendant it has convicted, and when this jury came in, not one of them looked at Tom Robinson. (21.48)*

Even Atticus’s talent for sharp-shooting can’t do anything if the gun isn’t loaded. It’s tempting to try to map out the symbolism here – is the gun the legal process? are the bullets the jury? is Tim Johnson racism? – but that might be an oversimplification. Perhaps it’s just the feeling Scout has that’s the link between the two situations – the sick horror at what’s happening, but knowing that it can’t be any other way.

##### Gothic Details

The forces of good and evil in *To Kill a Mockingbird* seem larger than the small Southern town in which the story takes place. Lee adds drama and atmosphere to her story by including a number of Gothic details in the setting and the plot. In literature, the term Gothic refers to a style of fiction first popularized in eighteenth-century England, featuring supernatural occurrences, gloomy and haunted settings, full moons, and so on. Among the Gothic elements in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are the unnatural snowfall, the fire that destroys Miss Maudie’s house, the children’s superstitions about Boo Radley, the mad dog that Atticus shoots, and the ominous night of the Halloween party on which Bob Ewell attacks the children. These elements, out of place in the normally quiet, predictable Maycomb, create tension in the novel and serve to foreshadow the troublesome events of the trial and its aftermath.

* The Radley House, which represents evil to the children, and the tales of Boo being kept in the basement are Gothic elements. So is the scene where Scout is attacked after the school play---all darkness and scary sounds that turn out to be real.
* In town, when they're going to the courthouse, I believe. Lee (through Scout) notes all the gothic details.

Critic Claudia Durst Johnson has argued that To Kill a Mockingbird contains many Gothic elements, from the legends and secrets surrounding Boo Radley to Dill’s imaginative stories and the children’s superstitions. The unseasonable snow and the fire at Miss Maudie’s, as well as the later appearance of a mad dog, can be seen as contributing to a sense of supernatural foreboding leading up to the injustice that pervades Tom Robinson’s trial. This interpretation, however, is balanced by the fact that both the snow and the fire bring out the best in people—school is canceled, Scout and Jem build a fine snowman, the neighbors help save Miss Maudie’s belongings, and Miss Maudie perseveres after her house is destroyed. Even when she sees her prize flowers ruined, the brave old woman does not despair; instead, she offers a cheerful comment about wanting a smaller house and a larger garden. This interweaving of dramatic, Gothic atmospherics and good-hearted small-town values epitomizes To Kill a Mockingbird and mirrors the novel’s main theme. In a world in which innocence is threatened by injustice, cruelty, prejudice, and hatred, goodness can prevail in the form of sympathy, understanding, and common sense, as evidenced by how the townspeople’s affectionate willingness to help one another enables them to overcome the intrusion of these Gothic elements into their simple small-town lives

Mockingbird, mad dog, camellias, gun, Boo’s tree, the trial

The most notable of them is the presence of a mysterious recluse, Boo Radley, living in a foreboding house:

The house . . . was once white with a deep front porch and green shutters, but had along ago darkened to the color of the slate-gray yard around it. Rain-rotted shingles drooped over the eaves of the veranda; oak trees kept the sun away. The remains of a picket drunkenly guarded the front yard. . . . Inside the house lived a malevolent phantom. People said he existed, but Jem and I had never seen him. People said he went out at night when the moon was down, and peeped in windows. When people's azaleas froze in a cold snap, it was because he had breathed on them. Any stealthy small crimes committed in Maycomb were his work."

.......Another characteristic is the suggestion that supernatural powers are at work. For example, when Jem mentions the term *Hot Steam* and Dill asks him to define it, Scout reports Jem's answer as follows:

"Haven't you ever walked along a lonesome road at night and passed by a hot place?" Jem asked Dill. "A Hot Steam's somebody who can't get to heaven, just wallows around on lonesome roads an' if you walk through him, when you die you'll be one too, an' you'll go around at night suckin' people's breath-- . . . If you hafta go through one you say, 'Angel-bright, life-in-death; get off the road, don't suck my breath.' That keeps 'em from wrapping around you—"

.......Other Gothic characteristics include a grotesque presence, such as the mad dog; a seemingly unnatural occurrence, such as the snowstorm; ventures into the unknown, such as the children's invasion of the Radley property on a dark night; and a frightening encounter, such as the one the children experience with Bob Ewell on Halloween night

**Atticus**: As his name suggests, he represents reason, restraint, tolerance, and democratic ideals. Attica was a region of ancient Greece in which Athens was the principal city. Since ancient times, Attica and Athens have always been associated with the qualities Atticus exhibits.
**Boo**: As his name suggests, Boo Radley represents the presence of an otherworldly creature in a town of ordinary folk. In fact, Boo *is* otherworldly in the sense that he is a good person who withdraws from the defective world around him.
**Camellia**: The camellia Mrs. Dubose bequeaths to Jem represents an effort by a cantankerous, disease-ridden old woman to make peace with the boy while pointing out that life in Alabama can be as beautiful as the camellia, Alabama's state flower. The fact that the camellia is in the evergreen family may suggest that she wishes Jem's memory of her better side will last throughout his life.
**Courthouse Pillars**: The pillars of the Maycomb courthouse represent the traditions, mores, and attitudes of the Old South, including racial prejudice and segregation. The term *Old South* generally refers to the South before the Civil War. Here is the passage identifying the pillars as symbols of the pre-Civil War South: "The concrete pillars supporting its [the courthouse's] south roof were too heavy for their light burden. The pillars were all that remained standing when the original courthouse burned in 1856. Another courthouse was built around them."
**Fire**: The fire that burns Maudie Atkinson's house symbolizes the racism that has inflamed Maycomb. Like the disease afflicting the mad dog, the fire threatens to spread.
**Injury to Tom Robinson's Arm**: This appears to symbolize the racism that handicaps him as a black and puts him at a disadvantage at his trial.
**Knothole**: The knothole in the oak tree on the Radley property appears to symbolize Boo Radley's good heart, inasmuch as he places gifts in it for the children. It may also suggest his desire to communicate and connect with the world.
**Mockingbird**:The mockingbird symbolizes innocent characters perceived as enemies of society or as easy prey for villainy. The most obvious "mockingbirds" are Boo Radley, wrongfully regarded as a monster, and Tom Robinson, wrongfully convicted of rape. A mockingbird, of course, is a mimic, capable of imitating the songs of other birds and even certain nonhuman sounds. Boo Radley and Tom Robinson do not mimic the actions of other human beings, but many residents of Maycomb perceive them as if they did. To them, Boo executes the actions of a fiend; Robinson, the actions of a rapist. Because Boo is shy and reclusive, he does not defend himself against the false stories about him; because Robinson is black, he cannot convince prejudiced townspeople of his innocence. In other words, they are easy prey. Others who may be viewed as mockingbirds are Scout and Jem because, as children of Atticus, they are perceived as sharing his blame for defending a black and because they are easy prey for Bob Ewell. In addition, blacks in general are depicted as mockingbirds.
**Morphine**: This powerful painkiller, taken by terminally ill Mrs. Dubose, may represent the Old South traditions and racism to which many Maycomb residents have become "addicted." The fact that she breaks her morphine addiction in the last month or so of her life, despite the severe pain her illness causes, suggests that it is never too late to reform one's ways and redeem oneself.
**Paper Bag**: Everyone assumes that Dolphus Raymond drinks whiskey from the bottle he carries around in a paper bag. But the bottle contains Coca-Cola, not whiskey. The paper bag thus symbolizes the danger and wrongfulness of judging a person on appearances, without sufficient knowledge of what is behind the appearances. In a way, the paper bag is like the skin color of a Negro.
**Rabid Dog (Tim Johnson)**: The mad dog called Tim Johnson represents the delirium and rage that grip Maycomb after Mayella Ewell, a white woman, accuses Tom Robinson, a black man, of raping her. Atticus kills the dog. He also attempts to kill the vicious racism that sickens the town.
**Scout**: As her name suggests, she apparently represents exploration. She learns by reading voraciously, asking many questions, and eagerly participating in activities that may satisfy her curiosity.
**Snowman**: The snowman Scout and Jem build with a mixture of dirt and snow symbolizes the mixture of good and bad in human beings. Atticus expresses this idea when speaking of Mr. Cunningham: "[He's] basically a good man, he just has his blind spots along with the rest of us."
**Treehouse**: Jem's treehouse may symbolize that Jem shares with Boo Radley a desire to escape from the world.