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## The Trial Episode of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*: A Textual Analysis

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**Abstract:** In this paper I attempt to look at the famous trial episode of *To Kill a Mocking Bird* from different perspectives. My main intention here is to bring out the significance the novel owes to this episode. Furthermore it is such an episode of which any definite interpretation of meaning is not possible. Our comprehension of the episode is further problematized by the narrative strategy adopted by the novelist where we get to know of various events only through the filtered memory of a girl called Scout. Openness to varied interpretation makes the trial scene all the more engrossing to the readers. My endeavour here is to place this scene within the varied criticisms for a better understanding as well as to open up another thread of interpretation to this.

**Key terms:** Freud, Psychoanalysis, White-Black, Left-Right.

*To Kill a Mocking Bird* is one of the best loved stories of Harper Lee. Chicago Tribune hailed it as “---A novel of strong contemporary significance”. However it is needless to say that the novel owes much to its famous trial scene for such significance. Even then, Edgar Schuster is reluctant to consider the trial scene to be the most important theme of the novel. He argues that this scene occupies only fifteen percent of the whole novel and our pre-occupation with the trial scene may render our perception of the novel meagre (506). None the less I hold that the contrary is true; that if we consider several incidents of this novel as petals and the novel a flower, the trial scene is undoubtedly the stock that standing in the middle of the structure beautifully holds it.

The novel opens with a reference to Jem's badly broken arm, which we will learn later to be the outcome of the trial scene. Scout, in a flash back recounts the endeavours of three children to make Radley out of the house and leads us consequently for the trial. A lawyer, Atticus Finch who



happens to be the father of Scout and Jem defends Tom Robinson, a black man charged with the rape of a white girl. Interestingly Robinson was found guilty and shot dead. After his death he has been likened to a mocking bird and this metaphor of the mocking bird links two innocent victims, namely Boo Radley of the first part and Jem of the second part of the novel with Tom Robinson.

The trial of a black man stirred the dull county of Maycomb. Both whites and blacks gathered at the court yard enthusiastically. This portion of the novel presents the racial prejudice more tellingly than elsewhere. The whites enjoyed the front seats, while the balcony was reserved for the blacks. Jem, Scout and Dill, in spite of being white sat amongst the blacks and thus defied one of the codified unwritten laws. Atticus Finch was revealed at his best during this session. He was the defense lawyer and he executed his job excellently; Atticus also brought to the fore the unacknowledged darkness of our psyche which does not dare to recognize equality. However, Mr. Heck Tate was first called to testify and the connotation of “right and left” started gaining a crucial role. Laurie Champion argues that right in the novel suggests virtue, while left suggests inequality (234). Constantly the “right” and “left” kept on contrasting. Building evidence against Bob Ewell, Atticus asks Tate which one of Mayella’s eyes was bruised and he replies, “Her left”. Atticus then asks “Was it her left facing you or her left looking the same way you were?” Tate answers, “Oh yes, ---It was his right eye, Mr. Finch” (Lee, 185).

Again, Mayella’s black right eye contrasts sharply with Tom’s left arm which “hung dead at his side” implying his innocence against Mayella’s inability to see things correctly (Champion, 236). Right connotating morality and left a flaw again gets an upper hand when Atticus proves that Bob Ewell is left handed and the bruises on Mayella’s face was the sole creation of Ewell’s left hand (Champion, 236).

*To Kill a Mocking Bird* portrays how the actions of individuals are determined by racial considerations. There always persists a sense of hesitation and distrust among them for the other community. So, when Atticus was appointed to defend a black man the white community of Maycomb started to show their contempt. While Atticus and his children have been despised for



being a 'nigger-lover' by the whites, the blacks likes Lulla would not allow Finch children to enter into the church. Mr. Dolphus Raymond, a white by birth, mingles with the blacks and therefore becomes an evil man in common conviction. However during the trial scene when Scout had a brief conversation with him, she found him not so evil, the rumours had made of him. Mr. Dolphus's children are called 'mixed children'. Jem recognized their pitiful state of not being able to be a part of either community which can be identified with the post-colonial experience of rootlessness and fluid or divided identity.

As we know, the colonial discourse often presented the natives or the colonized people as uncivilized anonymous masses, lacking in morals. Here the Blacks are going through the same experience of being colonised. Blacks being amorous in nature and endowed with lust is one of the commonly accepted notions of the Whites. Tom Robinson's charge of raping a girl only strengthens their beliefs. Never the less, therefore Tom had but a very little hope of surviving the trial. Though Atticus defends Tom well and proves his innocence, he cannot efface the deep rooted conviction which the colonial education has so dearly planted. So, the result was inevitable and verdict pre-planned; Tom Robinson was found guilty by the court, and was sent to prison.

Mayella Ewell was a lonely lady. Atticus proved that she had no friends and being the eldest of Bob Ewells children, Mayella had to work hard to manage the household. Tom Robinson had sympathy for her and tried to help her in whatever means possible. So, why did Mayella accuse Tom of rape who happens to be the only beneficent friend of her? The probable answer is her father pressurized her to do so. But psycho-analytical criticism has a different interpretation to provide.

According to Freud when some fear, wish, memory or act do not conform the consented society, we try to cope with it by repressing it that is, eliminating it from the conscious mind. But it does not make it go away; it remains alive in the unconscious and seeks a way back to the conscious mind constantly. This is exactly the case with Mayella. She had committed a crime of tempting a Negro, broke "a rigid and time honoured" code of society. But now she wants to do away with her crime. And the best way to do this, is by eliminating Tom Robinson forever. Tom



Robinson was her daily reminder of what she did. Tom would not let her eliminate the incident from her conscious mind and even if she manages somehow to do so, his presence would instigate a “return to the repressed” from her unconscious. Tom, now must cease to be to make Mayella free of her psychological turmoil.

This was only one side of the tale; there might be a reverse version of it. Actually, as it is a memory tale told by Scout; whatever we perceive, it is only through the mirror of her experience. At first, Scout recounts her own account of how the events were taking place. But as soon as the trial had started, she first of all described the physical appearance of the person to testify and then recorded the words of every individual objectively. Scout also gave her own comments and comprehension thereafter. But surprisingly she violates the norm with Bob Ewell. When Mr. Ewell was called to the witness box, she gave somewhat lengthy description of their filthy ways of living at their habitat. May be it was a strategy of the novelist to acquaint us with the behavior of such folks as Ewells. But this argument would not hold much water, for Scout had already spoken of the manners of different communities, including the Ewells in details at the first half of the novel. So, why did she think of reminding the readers of Ewells’ mannerism again at this point?

To this question, I think it would not be wrong to assume that she did it desperately to taint our judgment of the Ewells. The incorporation of a lengthy description of Ewells’ habit definitely hinders the rational thinking of the readers. Again, this assumption gained further ground when Scout omitted the cross examination section of Tom Robinson. She had to go outside with Dill, so she missed the session and could not record it. We get a hint of Robinson, getting cornered by Mr. Gilmer during this cross examination session. But then we are intentionally kept in void. Why did she do it? Was it simply a strategy to constitute our judgments in Tom’s favour? Or does she actually want us to take a bias opinion of the whole procedure? It would not be wrong either if we go still further or ask whether Tom Robinson really raped Mayella since the court found him guilty and Judge Taylor was known to be a good Judge so far.



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