Atticus Finch and the Mad Dog: Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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One must think like a hero to behave like a merely decent human being.

—May Sarton

In the spring of 1960, in the midst of the major events of the civil rights movement, J. B. Lippincott and Company published Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A Pulitzer Prize winner which was made later into an Academy Award-winning film, the novel became and remains a bestseller. Yet, this novel which captured the imagination while it criticized the morality of American adults is classified as “young adult literature.” This classification has caused the work to be ignored by the critical community and has undercut the power of the image of the modern hero that it presents. The dominant voice of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not that of a child but that of a woman looking back at an event that tore at the fabric of childhood and of her community and that shaped her adulthood.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is about three years (approximately 1933-1936) in the childhood of Jean Louise Finch, better known as Scout, and the coming of age of Scout and her brother Jem in the household of their father, Atticus Finch. It is also about two seemingly unrelated things—the trial of a black man, Tom Robinson, for rape and the attempts of Jem, Scout and their friend Dill to make Boo Radley come out of his house. Boo, a man who, for his lifetime, is confined to his house, first, by his father and, later, by his uncle for committing a minor offense as a teenager, becomes a catalyst for the imagination and a symbol by which the children come to understand, in their particular ways, Tom Robinson’s trial. For Jem, the boy coming into manhood, the desire to see Boo is abandoned with Tom’s conviction, and Jem moves into the adult world. For Scout, however, who is a child of about
nine, Boo becomes the source of her imagination and the inspiration for her career as a writer. Thus, *To Kill a Mockingbird* shows the reader the importance of the imagination in the formation of the moral human being.

Yet, the children do not reach their understandings of Boo and Tom alone. The relationship of Boo Radley to Tom Robinson is mediated by Atticus Finch, the hero of the novel. Through the actions and thoughts of her father, Scout is able to make sense of Boo and Tom as she criticizes the morality of 1930s and 1960s America. Atticus’s moral structure gives form to the imagination that Scout’s meeting with Boo fires. Atticus is not the typical modern hero: he is neither angst-ridden nor decontextualized. He is a widower, a father, a lawyer and a neighbor—in short, an ordinary man living his life in a community. Yet, he stands as a supreme example of the moral life, and he communicates that morality to his children and, ultimately, to the community by his actions. Atticus’s ordinary heroism embodies three components: the call for critical reflection on the self, the rule of compassion, and the law that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird. This heroism is illustrated in three key scenes in which he confronts mad dogs.

The first of these scenes introduces the theme of the mad dog and its importance to the novel. Jem and Scout have been bemoaning the fact that their father is the most uninteresting man in town; “Our father,” Scout tells us, “didn’t do anything” (94). When he gives Jem and Scout air rifles for Christmas, he also refuses to teach them to shoot. This winter, however, is one of amazing portents, foreshadowing the trial of Tom Robinson and the emergence of Boo Radley: it snows for the first time in years; the Finchs’ neighbor, Miss Maudie’s house burns down; and a mad dog named Tim Johnson appears in February on the main street of Maycomb.

Heck Tate, the sheriff, refuses to shoot the mad dog himself. Much to the children’s amazement—they nearly fainted, Scout says—Tate turns the job over to Atticus.
In a fog, Jem and I watched our father take the gun and walk out into the middle of the street. He walked quickly, but I thought he moved like an underwater swimmer: time had slowed to a nauseating crawl.

Atticus pushed his glasses to his forehead; they slipped down, and he dropped them in the street. In the silence, I heard them crack. Atticus rubbed his eyes and chin; we saw him blink hard.

In front of the Radley gate, Tim Johnson had made up what was left of his mind. He had finally turned himself around, to pursue his original course up our street. He made two steps forward, then stopped and raised his head. We saw his body go rigid.

With movements so swift they seemed simultaneous, Atticus’ hand yanked a ball-tipped lever as he brought the gun to his shoulder.

The rifle cracked. Tim Johnson leaped, flopped over and crumpled on the sidewalk in a brown-and-white heap. He didn’t know what hit him.

What Tim Johnson sees when he raises his head is Atticus Finch. Atticus allows himself to be the target of an irrational force and to absorb its violence as he acts to protect innocent people. This stance, his putting himself between the innocent and danger, characterizes the man. And this action, which occurs two more times in the novel, thematically binds the rite-of-passage of Jem and Scout to the rape trial of Tom Robinson and to the emergence of Boo Radley.

Mad dogs are easy; the courage to deal with a mad dog involves taking a concrete action: picking up a gun and shooting. Human beings are difficult; to respect their humanity, especially when they are wrong, makes concrete action difficult. In defending Tom Robinson, Atticus has to find a way both to respect the humanity of even his most belligerent opponents and to protect his innocent client. The alleged rape of Mayella Ewell presents the white citizens of Maycomb with something that “makes men lose their heads [so that] they couldn’t be fair if they tried” (223). Like the dog infected with rabies, the citizens of Maycomb are infected with Maycomb’s “usual disease,” racism, which
makes them just as irrational and just as dangerous as Tim Johnson. Atticus’s neighbors and friends, therefore, are those “mad dogs” that he must confront. In an attempt to confront their irrational fears and to educate them that “Maycomb had . . . nothing to fear but fear itself” (10), Atticus must find a different kind of courage than that of picking up a gun, the kind of courage that one has when “you know you are licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what” (116). This definition of courage provides the transition from facing the animal in the street to facing the citizens of Maycomb. Atticus, throughout the novel, then, repeats morally the stance that he takes physically in the city street.

That physical and moral stance embodies two philosophical components. The first is Atticus’s “dangerous question,” “Do you really think so?” and the second is Atticus’s admonition to Scout to stand in another person’s shoes before judging him or her. Fred Erisman, in “The Romantic Regionalism of Harper Lee,” calls Atticus Finch an Emersonian hero who is able to cast a skeptical eye on the conventional ideas of goodness, to supplant those virtues that have lost their value, and to preserve those that work (135). Edwin Bruell, playing on Atticus’s name, says Atticus is “no heroic type but [is like] any graceful, restrained, simple person like one from Attica” (660). Bruell sees Atticus as the Greek rational hero: “Know thyself. Nothing too much.” Both are correct, as far as they take their arguments. Both account for Atticus’s self-knowledge, but neither attempts to bind the “Know thyself” to Atticus’s equally powerful assertion that we must know others as well. How can these be reconciled?

To ask the question “Do you really think so?” asks us to begin to understand ourselves by articulating the meaning of the actions and thoughts that, often, are reflections of the unspoken values of our communities. Alasdair MacIntyre, in After Virtue, reminds us that we inherit such values along with our bonds of family, city, tribe and nation. These relationships “constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point” (220). The moral inheritance of the whites of Maycomb in-
cludes set ways in which to see those different from themselves, particularly blacks. Their assumptions about blacks are, as Atticus says in his closing argument "that all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, that all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women" (207). Atticus, through his defense of Tom Robinson and by his very presence, brings into question these assumptions, forcing those ideas to become conscious and, perhaps, to be articulated. His question invites expression but is also threatening because of its disorienting effect. "Do you really think so?" forces us to confront our deepest beliefs, dreams and fears.

James Baldwin gives us an example of this kind of confrontation in an essay on Martin Luther King, in which he recalled the silence that he encountered on an integrated bus not long after the Montgomery boycott was settled:

This silence made me think of nothing so much as the silence which follows a really serious lovers' quarrel: the whites, beneath their cold hostility, were mystified and deeply hurt. They had been betrayed by the Negroes, not merely because the Negroes had declined to remain in their "place," but because the Negroes had refused to be controlled by the town's image of them. And without this image, it seemed to me, the whites were abruptly and totally lost. The very foundations of their private and public worlds were being destroyed. (95)

This angry silence indicates that the white people resist and resent the change in the structure and story that has guided and undergirded their lives. Atticus's question potentially breaks through the kind of silence that Baldwin encountered on that Montgomery bus, forcing that silence to speak, perhaps creating a dialogue, between the self and the "other." Atticus, the man, becomes the catalyst for this dialogue in Maycomb.

Maycomb is, Scout tells us, "an old town . . . an old tired town" (9). It has been, as Erisman points out, "a part of southern Alabama from
the time of the first settlements, and isolated and largely untouched by
the Civil War, it was, like the South, turned inward upon itself by Re-
construction. Indeed its history parallels that of the South in so many
ways that it emerges as a microcosm of the South” (123). Maycomb
clings to its ideals, its traditions and its rigid caste system as ways of af-
firming its identity. People, especially blacks and poor whites, are, as
Baldwin noted, expected to remain in their “places.” The alleged rape
of Mayella Ewell violates this order and throws the town and the indi-
viduals involved into confrontation with their community identity.

Atticus, in the second mad dog incident, confronts two very differ-
ent sets of Maycomb’s white citizenry, both with the same assump-
tions. The first group is “good” citizens—“merchants, in-town farm-
ers” (148), even the town doctor—who come to warn Atticus that Tom
Robinson is in danger. They ultimately confront Atticus about his de-
fending a black man who has been accused of raping a white woman
and tell Atticus that he has everything to lose. Atticus asks, “Do you re-
ally think so?” The men, angered, advance on Atticus: “There was a
murmur among the group of men, made more ominous when Atticus
moved back to the bottom front step and the men drew nearer to him”
(148). The tension is broken when Jem, afraid for his father, yells to
Atticus that the phone is ringing.

Not long after, Scout disperses the second group of Maycomb’s citi-
zens—this time, poor white citizens who smell of stale whiskey and
the pigpen (154)—who come to the jail to lynch Tom Robinson. Scout
watches her father push back his hat, fold his newspaper and confront
the angry men. The men assume that Atticus is powerless because they
have called away the sheriff, but Atticus’s response is “Do you really
think so?” Scout, hearing the question for the second time that evening,
thinks this is “too good to miss” (154) and runs to see what is going to
happen. Scout’s presence and her personalization of the mob, her sin-
gling out Mr. Cunningham, the father of one of her school friends, dis-
rupts the mob psychology, ending the danger. Only later does Scout re-
alize the implications of what she has witnessed:
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 awful events hit me and I began crying. (158)

Atticus’s question penetrates to the heart of the images and ideas that sustain the citizens of Maycomb as surely as the bullet penetrates the body of the mad dog. Faced with a challenge to their identity, both groups of men react; they lose their reason and become like a mad dog, attacking the man who calls their truth into question.

Why do the children have to save Atticus? Herein lies another dimension of the problem and potential danger of Atticus’s question. Atticus’s Apollonian virtues are based on the assumption that he is dealing with rational and reflective people. Scout indicates that when Atticus asks the question of her and Jem, he follows the question with a lesson or proof that forces the two of them to prove the validity of their ideas:

“Do you really think so?”

This was Atticus’s dangerous question. “Do you really think you want to move there, Scout?” Bam, bam, bam, and the checkerboard was swept clean of my men. “Do you really think that, son? Then read this.” Jem would struggle the rest of an evening through the speeches of Henry W. Grady. (148)

What reforming action can Atticus offer to these angry and emotional men confronted with a black man whom they think has gotten “above his place”? None. Tom Robinson is not part of their community in any vital and human way. They do not see Tom Robinson. He is not one of them; he exists either outside of the community or on its periphery. He is not their neighbor, either in the literal or in the religious sense. Atticus forces the men, if they cannot see Tom Robinson, to see Atticus
Finch. Their anger, however, nearly makes them forget that they do consider Atticus their neighbor. Only the intervention of the children restores their reason. Reflection, however, can take the men only as far as the experience of Atticus Finch; to see Tom Robinson, another kind of action is demanded. The first half of Atticus’s ethic, the demand for reflection, therefore, is useless without the second half, the standing in another’s shoes, the demand for compassion.

Civilization can be seen as “the agreement, slowly arrived at, to let the abyss alone,” as Allen Tate says in *The Fathers* (185-86). Then, the Tom Robinsons of the world are defined as the abyss around which we create impenetrable boundaries. Or civilization can be a structure based on compassion—on the fact that, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said in *Strength to Love*, the “other” “is a part of me and I am a part of him. His agony diminishes me, and his salvation enlarges me” (35). Compassion has limits: it contains the realization that I can never know your experience as you experience it, but that I can, because of our “human fellow feeling” (11-12), as Joseph Conrad termed it, make an attempt to know what you feel and, thereby, bring you into the narrative of my experience. Hermeneutics creates the neighbor.

Atticus explains this to Scout as walking in another person’s shoes:

> “First of all,” he said, “if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.” (34)

Atticus asks Scout to “see with” others, to be compassionate. But compassion must be bound to the critical question “Do you really think so?” in order to respect the humanity of the neighbor. Critique without compassion threatens to become force; compassion without critique may dissolve into sentimentalism or emotionalism. Either stance alone turns the “I” into an “It,” either an object to be controlled or a creature to be stereotyped or pitied. Both are required in order to see clearly, and
though they may not lead to truth, they often lead, as Atticus tells Scout, to compromise (36). Reflection gives us humility, forces us to confront our own frailties and limitations; and compassion helps us love, lets us make, as Iris Murdoch says, "the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique" (209). Scout will exercise this ethic in the most essential way at the end of the novel.

In the third of the mad dog scenes, the trial of Tom Robinson becomes a symbol for the attempt to stand in another's shoes and see an event from that person's perspective while maintaining a critical capacity. Atticus says that serving on a jury "forces a man to make up his mind and declare himself about something. Men don't like to do that" (225). This case not only questions the jury, but it questions Atticus himself. When Scout learns that Atticus was appointed to the Robinson case, she asks why he cannot refuse it. He replies,

For a number of reasons. The main one is, if I didn't I couldn't hold up my head in this town. I couldn't represent this county in the legislature. I couldn't even tell you and Jem not to do something again . . . Scout, simply by the nature of the work, every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. This one's mine, I guess. (80)

He later tells his brother Jack, within Scout's hearing,

"You know, I'd hoped to get through life without a case of this kind, but John Taylor pointed at me, and said, 'You're it.'"

"Let this cup pass from you, eh?"

"Right. But do you think I could face my children otherwise?" (93)

Atticus realizes that he is defeated before he begins but that he must begin if he is to uphold his values. The legal system offers at least a chance of success. In contrast to the lynch mob in the dark, the court represents the light of reason. Scout and Jem, in their innocence, believe that the
court is the structure in which Atticus can defeat the mad dog of irrationality and racism. Scout thinks, "With [Atticus’s] infinite capacity for calming turbulent seas, he could make a rape case as dry as a sermon. . . . Our nightmare had gone with daylight, everything would come out all right" (171-72).

In the trial, Atticus attempts to make the jury and the town see the incident from the perspectives of both Mayella Ewell and of Tom Robinson and, thus, to understand that Mayella’s accusation is a lie born from fear, emotional need, ignorance and poverty. From Mayella Atticus elicits the story of a lonely young woman imprisoned in poverty by her father’s alcoholism (185). The Ewells, “white trash,” are as alienated from Maycomb as Tom Robinson. Yet in the squalor of Ewell life, there is one disjunctive sight: Mayella’s geraniums, as carefully tended as those of Miss Maudie Atkinson. These represent Mayella’s desire to escape the life she lives, but that escape is denied her both by her own nature and by the rigid caste system of Maycomb. Scout compares her to the half-black and half-white children of Dolphus Raymond:

She was as sad, I thought, as what Jem called a mixed child: white people wouldn’t have anything to do with her because she lived among pigs; Negroes wouldn’t have anything to do with her because she was white. . . . Tom Robinson was probably the only person who was ever decent to her. (194)

This decency is Tom Robinson’s undoing. He is a black man who finds himself in the most dangerous of circumstances. He is accosted by a white woman, and whether he struggles with her or runs, he is guilty. What emerges before the astonished eyes of the court is that Tom Robinson could not have raped Mayella Ewell. The evidence, that she was beaten by someone left-handed, becomes moot when Tom Robinson faces the court and all see that “[h]is left arm was fully twelve inches shorter than his right and hung dead at his side. It ended
in a small shriveled hand, and from as far away as the balcony I could see that it was no use to him” (188).

Mayella, when confronted with her obvious lie, falls back on her whiteness as her defense. Her father Bob had disrupted the court earlier when he testified that, through the window, “I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin’ on my Mayella!” (175). His language illustrates the assumption that blacks are uncontrollable animals—mad dogs who must be exterminated. Mayella falls back on the same argument. The caste system of Maycomb names, categorizes and limits her, just as it names, categorizes and limits Tom Robinson. The boundary between them is an absolutely rigid one. Maycomb defines Tom Robinson as nonhuman; thus, Mayella only has to appeal to her whiteness—that which makes her “one of us”—to be right:

Suddenly Mayella became articulate. “I got somethin’ to say . . . an’ then I ain’t gonna say no more. That nigger yonder took advantage of me an’ if you fine fancy gentlemen don’t wanna do nothin’ about it then you’re all yellow stinkin’ cowards, stinkin’ cowards, the lot of you.” (190)

Scout says that “Atticus had hit her hard in a way that was not clear to me” (191). His questions are the “Do you really think so?” They force her to face the truth of her self, but faced with that truth, she, angrily and stubbornly, falls back within the safety of the community ethos, leaving critique and compassion behind.

Tom Robinson’s real crime is not the rape: it is that he shows himself to be more than the definition that Maycomb has created for him. Scout says that Tom is, in his way, as much a gentleman as her father (197). Indeed, Tom is convicted because he acts out Atticus’s maxim and stands in another’s shoes. When asked why he helped Mayella,

Tom Robinson hesitated, searching for an answer.

“Looked like she didn’t have nobody to help her, like I says . . . I felt right sorry for her, she seemed to try more’n the rest of ‘em—”

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"You felt sorry for her, you felt sorry for her?" Mr. Gilmer seemed ready to rise to the ceiling.

The witness realized his mistake and shifted uncomfortably in the chair. But the damage was done. (199-200)

This is Tom Robinson’s crime.

The real mad dog in Maycomb is the racism that denies the humanity of Tom Robinson. Atticus takes on that mad dog. When Atticus makes his summation to the jury, he literally bares himself to the jury’s and the town’s anger: he “unbuttoned his vest, unbuttoned his collar, loosened his tie, and took off his coat. He never loosened a scrap of his clothing until he undressed at bedtime, and to Jem and me, this was the equivalent of him standing before us stark naked” (205). Atticus tells the jury that what has happened between Mayella Ewell and Tom Robinson is a crime because it violates the rigid code and social structure of Maycomb. Mayella, willfully breaking this code by kissing a black man, now has to put the evidence of her crime out of her sight, for truly to see Tom Robinson is to have to confront and to redefine herself: “of necessity she must put him away from her—he must be removed from her presence, from this world. She must destroy the evidence of her offense” (206).

Atticus also appeals to the jury in the terms of his ethic. Arguing that the legal system is the place where community codes and caste systems must be left behind, he asks the jury to think rationally and critically, to ask themselves “Do you really think so?"

A court is only as sound as its jury, and a jury is only as sound as the men who make it up. I am confident that you gentlemen will review without passion the evidence you have heard. . . . In the name of God, do your duty. (208, emphasis added)

He also asks them to acknowledge Tom Robinson’s humanity, to have for Tom the compassion that Tom had for Mayella Ewell. Atticus fin-
ishes his argument with a prayer: "In the name of God, believe him" (208).

This is not to be. As the town waits for the verdict, a sleepy Scout watches her father in the hot courtroom, and, in her thoughts, she binds the mad dog theme to Tom Robinson:

But I must have been reasonably awake or I would not have received the impression that was creeping into me. It was not unlike one I had last winter, and I shivered, though the night was hot. 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. Mr. Heck Tate, who had entered the courtroom and was talking to Atticus might have been wearing his high boots and lumber jacket. Atticus had stopped his tranquil journey and had put his foot onto the bottom rung of a chair; as he listened to what Mr. Tate was saying, he ran his hand slowly up and down his thigh. I expected Mr. Tate to say any minute, "Take him, Mr. Finch..." (213)

She continues, finding in the courtroom the images of Atticus's facing Tim Johnson, the mad dog, in the street:

What happened after that had a dreamlike quality: in a dream I saw the jury return, moving like underwater swimmers, and Judge Taylor's voice came from far away and was tiny. 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. (213)

Though Tom Robinson is convicted, Atticus wins a small victory; the jury's deliberation lasts well into the night. Miss Maudie Atkinson

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confirms that Atticus's role is to face the mad dogs. He makes Maycomb question itself in a way no one else could, even though they, like Mayella, cannot bind love to power and act in creative justice.

“We’re the safest folks in the world,” said Miss Maudie. “We’re so rarely called on to be Christians, but when we are, we’ve got men like Atticus to go for us. . . . [As] I waited, I thought, Atticus Finch won’t win, he can’t win, but he’s the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that. And I thought to myself, well, we’re making a step—it’s just a baby step, but it’s a step.” (218-19)

This baby step is not enough for Tom Robinson. He cannot trust that he can have justice, so he attempts to escape from prison and is shot dead in the attempt. This man who performed a loving act is treated like a rabid mad dog. The prison is a metaphor for Tom’s position in the Maycomb of the 1930s. What is a baby step for the town is merely continuing oppression for Tom, the innocent man. Charles H. Long points out that, potentially, “passive power is still power. It is the power to be, to understand, to know even in the worst of historical circumstances, and it may often reveal a more clear insight into significant meaning of the human venture than the power possessed by the oppressor” (195). This Tom Robinson cannot believe, so he cannot wait. His is the silence of the oppressed person who has reached despair.

Jem, moving into adulthood, also feels Tom’s despair. Tom Robinson’s conviction and his death mark Jem’s fall from innocence; as he tells Miss Maudie, his life until now has been “like bein’ a caterpillar in a cocoon. . . . Like somethin’ asleep wrapped up in a warm place” (218). Now, he must come to terms with what he has witnessed. Atticus tells Scout, who does not understand Jem’s despair, that “Jem was trying hard to forget something, but what he was really doing was storing it away for a while. . . . When he was able to think about it, Jem would be himself again” (250). Yet Jem is marked forever by the experience. Scout begins the novel by describing Jem’s arm:
When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed, and Jem’s fears of never being able to play football were assuaged, he was seldom self-conscious about his injury. His left arm was somewhat shorter than his right; when he stood or walked, the back of his hand was at right angles to his body, his thumb parallel to his thigh. (7)

Jem’s arm, broken in his and Scout’s “longest journey together” (256), the night they survive Bob Ewell’s vengeful attack, parallels Tom Robinson’s withered arm, lost in a piece of machinery. Tom’s lost arm and hand are ultimately crippling; they symbolize his inability to climb out of the prison of racism, his being crushed in its machinery. As Tom tries to escape, he is hindered by his loss: “They said if he’d had two good arms he’d have made it” (238). Jem is crippled and lives; but, the injury is the sign of the experience’s “leaving its mark” on Jem’s body and on his soul.

Similarly, Boo Radley makes his mark on Scout. To Kill a Mockingbird is divided into two parts: the first is the children’s attempt to make Boo Radley come out of his house, and the second is the trial of Tom Robinson. At first, the two seem unrelated; however, one soon realizes that Boo Radley is a hermeneutical device for the children’s coming to understand the adult world represented by the rape trial. Like Tom Robinson, Boo Radley, who commits a childhood offense and is imprisoned by his family as punishment, is one of the least powerful members of Maycomb society. Parallel to Tom’s trial, from which the truth about the community’s racism emerges, is the children’s attempt to see Boo Radley and to make him emerge from hiding.

Tom Robinson’s trial and death make Jem realize that the very limited kind of communication that Boo has with him and Scout—for example, his leaving them gum and soap dolls in the knothole of a tree—is the only connection with the outside world that Boo can claim. Jem decides that, in a world in which a Tom Robinson is falsely accused and convicted and, finally, dies, Boo Radley does not want to come out
(230). In Maycomb, there is no vital role for either Boo Radley or for Tom Robinson except as phantom and monster. For the disillusioned Jem, there is no longer a place for the childhood wonder that Boo represents. But in that mysterious role of ghost and phantom, Boo makes one powerful act as he emerges to save the children from Bob Ewell’s attack.

Scout, too young to understand exactly what Tom Robinson’s death means, does not lose her capacity for wonder. She sees Boo, and their meeting is Scout’s rite of passage in the novel. Boo is the catalyst for the wonder that is the beginning of understanding. Scout and Jem’s friend Dill sets in motion the children’s investigation of the mystery of Boo Radley: “[H]e would wonder. ‘Wonder what [Boo] does in there. . . . Wonder what he looks like’” (17). Scout, true to her name, enters this uncharted territory. She is willing to risk the exploration of the unknown, and her discovery is a profound one.

This risk almost causes her death. Bob Ewell, seeking revenge, attacks Jem and Scout as they walk home from a school play. Jem and Scout are saved by their mysterious phantom, Boo Radley, and Scout gets to see the man who has been the object of the children’s speculations:

His lips parted in a timid smile, and our neighbor’s image blurred with my sudden tears.

“Hey, Boo,” I said.

“Mr. Arthur, honey,” said Atticus gently correcting me. (273)

This “gray ghost” that Scout desires to see appears and is given a name, and he gives Scout a gift beyond measure. As Scout walks Boo Radley home, she realizes that he, this “malevolent phantom” (13), is her neighbor:

Neighbors bring food with death and flowers with sickness and little things in between. Boo was our neighbor. He gave us two soap dolls, a bro-
ken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives. But neigh-
bors give in return. We never put back into the tree what we took out of it: we had given him nothing, and it made me sad. (281)

What follows is both another gift from Boo and a gift to Boo; it is a gift that she will share with her wounded, sad brother and with us, the readers. Scout stands in Boo's shoes and sees the world and the turbulent events of this time from his front porch:

I had never seen the neighborhood from this angle.

... 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 ... (281)

Scout learns Atticus's ethic completely. Looking at her life from Boo's perspective, she is able to see herself and her experiences in a new way. This is the imaginative "Do you really think so?" and is the birth of Scout the writer and is the education of Scout the moral agent. She also makes an act of compassion—and this is her gift, as the neighbor, to Boo: she sees the world from his point of view and gains an understanding of him that no one else in Maycomb has ever had and, since he enters his house never to emerge again, ever will have. Scout looks into the face of the phantom and into Arthur Radley's human heart and realizes that her life and Boo's have been and are interrelated: that she is Boo's child (282) as well as Atticus's, nurtured and protected by both to this moment. Maycomb had been told recently that "there was nothing to fear except fear itself" (10), and Scout realizes the truth of this. She tells Atticus that "nothin's real scary except in books" (283) and that Boo was "real nice" (284). Atticus replies, "Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them" (284).

Atticus, then, casts his ethic in visual terms, and in the metaphor of vision, the function and the content of the novel merge. In the preface to "The Nigger of the 'Narcissus,'" Joseph Conrad links compassion
with vision and imagination with morality and makes clarity of vision the task of the artist. The artist, he says, creates community by appealing to the "human fellow feeling" that links us with all humankind:

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word . . . to make you see. . . . If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm . . . and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask. . . . And when it is accomplished—behold!—all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile—and the return to eternal rest. (13-14)

The adult Scout telling us her story is the artist who grounds this call for vision in a character: her father. She, in insisting with her father that seeing is a hermeneutical act, gives us true a meeting with the "other" and brings us, perhaps, to a moment of insight into our own lives, our own assumptions and our own frailties. The work of art becomes, potentially, a moral and ethical reference point, a pair of shoes in which we can stand.

The deepest symbol in the novel is Atticus Finch himself. Atticus, when he gives the children their air rifles, states the moral lesson of the novel. He tells them that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird; that is, it is wrong to do harm to something or to someone who only tries to help us or to give us pleasure. That rule, combined with critical reflection on the self and with compassion for others, keeps us from becoming mad dogs, from destroying each other and, finally, ourselves. Scout understands this lesson as she, along with Sheriff Heck Tate and her father, agree that Boo should not be charged for Bob Ewell's murder. When Atticus asks Scout if she understands this adult decision, she responds: "Well, it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?" (279).

Atticus stands at the novel's heart and as its moral and ethical center: a man who knows himself and who, therefore, can love others. Scout presents her father to us as a gift and a guide. She shows us a man who gives up himself as he forces us to see and, thus, to know others by see-
ing through him, yet he is far from being a “gray ghost.” Atticus emerges clearly, as a particular, ethical human being—as May Sarton’s heroic, decent man—but also as an enduring symbol of the good. Toni Morrison calls such “timeless, benevolent, instructive, and protective” people “ancestors” because they so perfectly represent humanity that their wisdom transcends their physical being (343). For Scout, the child as well as the artist, and for us, because of her art, Atticus is ancestor, eternally present as comforter and critic, as structure and source:

He turned out the light and went into Jem’s room. He would be there all night, and he would be there when Jem waked up in the morning. (284)

Notes

1. The black community recognizes this as well. Scout and Jem have sat, throughout the trial, in the balcony with the black spectators. As Atticus leaves the courtroom, a sleepy Scout tells us:

   Someone was punching me, but I was reluctant to take my eyes from the people below us, and from the image of Atticus’s lonely walk down the aisle.
   “Miss Jean Louise?”
   I looked around. They were standing. All around us and in the balcony on the opposite wall, the Negroes were getting to their feet. Reverend Sykes’s voice was as distant as Judge Taylor’s.
   “Miss Jean Louise, stand up. Your father’s passin’.” (214)

   The black community acknowledges that Atticus has made this attempt. They cannot acknowledge the judge or the justice that was meted out, but they honor the just man.

2. For a very interesting article about ethics, narrative, and character, see Christina Hoff Sommers, “Teaching the Virtues,” Public Interest (Spring 1992) 3-13. Professor Hoff Sommers argues that teaching “situation ethics” or specialized ethics, as we have in the academy for some time, only leads to an ethical relativity among our students. She calls for grounding ethics in story and in character, in showing the importance of the virtue through exemplary characters.
Works Cited


