Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Although hitherto unacknowledged in critical studies, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* is primarily a story about perception, the ability to see clearly. The notion of visual perception is a prevailing metaphor established through abundant references to eyes, sight, and blindness. Sight or lack of sight and modes of visual perception are further illustrated with recurring images of light and darkness. Throughout the novel, various types of eye and light imagery form a structure that supports Emersonian transcendentalism. Degrees of seeing symbolize human perception or prophetic vision and reveal Emerson’s notion of a “transparent eyeball.” Moreover, descriptions of physical eyes and references to shades of light metaphorically denote philosophical and social concerns the novel expounds and suggest Emerson’s idea that we can truly see only with an unconquered eye.

Atticus wears glasses, cannot physically see well, yet he has insight and wisdom. In several significant scenes, Atticus performs specific gestures using his glasses. When Scout and Jem wonder why Atticus is older than their friends’ parents, Scout recalls, “Besides that, he wore glasses. He was nearly blind in his left eye, and said left eyes were the tribal curse of the Finches. Whenever he wanted to see something well, he turned his head and looked from his right eye” (98). Indeed, Atticus sees from the “right,” visually perceptive, unconquered eye. In this sense, while Atticus possesses insight from his “right” eye, Mayella’s right eye is both literally and figuratively bruised.

“*When You Finally See Them*” 237
When Atticus shoots Tim Johnson, the rabid dog, he raises “his glasses and Calpurnia murmured, ‘Sweet Jesus help him’” (104). Scout observes, “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” (104). Immediately after Atticus shoots the dog, he “stooped and picked up his glasses, ground the broken lenses to powder under his heel” (105). Scout recalls this incident twice, both times mentioning Atticus’s glasses. She remembers that when the mob approached Atticus at the jail, he had “calmly fold [ed] his newspaper and push[ed] back his hat” and relates that image to “Atticus standing in the middle of an empty waiting street, pushing up his glasses” (167), the act he performs just before his glasses fall off and he shoots the raging dog. At the end of the novel, Scout walks back from escorting Boo home and remembers a montage-like summary of the summer’s events, including her recollection of the time Atticus “walked into the street, dropped his glasses, and shot a dog” (294).

The repeated mention of Atticus’s glasses seems a minor detail when set against the significance of Atticus shooting the dog. However, references to glasses draw attention to Atticus’s poor visual sight, which because of its opposition draws attention to his acute moral perception. When one considers Atticus as acting under Emerson’s idea of truly seeing, attention to Atticus’s insight as opposed to his visual impairment becomes important. In fact, as Lee Brown so astutely points out, transparent eyes are physically blind. Brown convincingly argues that Emerson builds both on the traditional premise developed since Plato that the physical makeup of the eye impedes “clear transmission of the light of truth” and on the medieval tradition that asserts that “the pupils of the saints are made transparent and they can see the uncreated light directly and with a sight which reveals its essence” (127). Leonardo used optical laws to deduce “that completely transparent eyes must be blind to natural or created light (as opposed to supernatural or ‘uncreated’ light), for they lack a ‘thick opaque instrument’—the reti-
nal surface which lies behind the pupil of the eye. Hence, if angels are invisible to us, we are just as invisible to them” (127). Brown argues that “the Emersonian eyeball, like Leonardo’s angel, lacks the interior opacity requisite for vision” (128); he concludes, “By itself, the transparent eyeball is blind; in fact, it would be ‘void’ rather than transparent if it were not for the oversight of a higher eye which focuses on an object (or meaning) beyond it” (135). Atticus possesses just such a transparent eye—physically blind yet able to focus on meaning beyond literal sight.

Shooting the dog relates to the broader theme the novel expounds. Because he performs this heroic deed, Scout recognizes that Atticus is not merely an old man who does not achieve anything, and she looks forward to telling her friends that her father is “the deadest shot in Maycomb County” (107). She asks Miss Maudie why Atticus never uses his shooting skill, why he never hunts. Miss Maudie explains that Atticus is “civilized in his heart. Marksmanship’s a gift of God, a talent. . . . [H]e realized that God had given him an unfair advantage over most living things. I guess he decided he wouldn’t shoot till he had to, and he had to today” (107). While Atticus deems it morally necessary to shoot a dog that might hurt someone, he says “it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird” (98), the only act Atticus says is sinful. Although others judge that it is not immoral to shoot mockingbirds, Atticus is the self-reliant individual whose internal moral values are not contingent upon external social judgments.

Tom is the symbolic mockingbird whose plight illustrates that racial injustice is the most apparent manifestation of moral corruption in Maycomb County; thus, the novel suggests that it is also a sin, spiritually wrong, to shoot Tom and to discriminate against people. When the prison guards shoot Tom, they shoot a mockingbird metaphorically. On the other hand, shooting the rabid dog signifies the antithesis of “senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children” (254). In contrast to the harmless mockingbirds, the dog “seemed dedicated to one course and motivated by an invisible force . . . his jaw opened and
shut; he was alist” (103). Atticus accepts responsibility for the fates of both the dog and Tom: he seeks to destroy the dog, who threatens society’s physical health, and to acquit Tom and expose and eliminate racism, a different type of social threat. In both cases, Atticus gets only one chance to abolish these threats. Tate tells Atticus that shooting the dog “is a one-shot job” (104), knowing the dog will attack the shooter if he misses. Likewise, Atticus tells Scout that “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” (84). Atticus successfully accomplishes his first “one-shot job” when he slays the physical threat; but when Tom is convicted, Atticus loses his one personal legal case. Atticus easily expels physical threats to Maycomb County, but eliminating philosophical social threats poses nearly impossible challenges.

When Dill runs away to the Finches’ house, Aunt Rachel forgives him and allows him to stay with Jem and Scout. Shortly after “Atticus pushed up his glasses and rubbed his face,” Scout says, “Dill and I decided to be civil to Jem” (152). Here, just as when Miss Maudie says that Atticus is “civilized,” the word “civil” is positioned against a reference to eyesight. Immediately after Atticus pushes up his glasses, he makes a connection between Dill’s crime and the crime Tom did not commit. He says, “From rape to riot to runaways” (152). Scout uses legal terms to describe Dill’s offense, as though Atticus were defending a client: “After many telephone calls, much pleading on behalf of the defendant, and a long forgiving letter from his mother, it was decided that Dill could stay” (155). Dill is excused for escaping his domestic prison; yet when Tom attempts to escape custody, he is brutally shot. Atticus says, “They fired a few shots in the air, then to kill.... Seventeen bullet holes in him. They didn’t have to shoot him that much” (248). While Dill is given mercy for an offense he indeed committed, the innocent Tom is shot cruelly, much more fiercely than the dangerous dog that Atticus shoots only once. The word “civil” has legal connotations, and the irony is that judicial laws do not reflect moral integrity. Atticus is “civilized” and Scout and Dill act “civilly” toward Jem,
forgiving him for telling Atticus that Dill has run to the Finches’ house. But the social system, represented as the Fifth Judicial Circuit Court, acts anything but civilly toward Tom. Judicial laws reflect rational thought, but Emerson suggests that clear vision depends not on rational thought but upon recognizing the world’s transparency, a cosmic phenomenon.

During the climactic courtroom scenes, Atticus first confirms that Bob Ewell is left-handed and that Tom’s left arm is mangled. After providing circumstantial evidence that Bob Ewell beat Mayella, “Atticus reached up and took off his glasses, turned his good right eye to the witness, and rained questions on her” (199). Atticus asks Mayella, “Why don’t you tell the truth, child, didn’t Bob Ewell beat you up?” (199). Immediately afterward, Atticus “sat down warily and polished his glasses with his handkerchief” (200). A plea for acknowledging truth is juxtaposed against a reference to Atticus’s eyesight. Unlike Atticus, Mayella may physically see clearly, as she does not wear glasses, yet she does not speak the truth.

Even though he interrogates her on the witness stand, Atticus obviously feels empathy for Mayella. When Mayella begins to cry hysterically and refuses further questioning from both defense and prosecution, Scout says that Atticus “hit her hard in a way that was not clear to me, but it gave him no pleasure to do so. He sat with his head down, and I never saw anybody glare at anyone with the hatred Mayella showed when she left the stand and walked by Atticus’s table” (200). Atticus, with his poor physical eyesight and strong sense of moral decency, does not glare at Mayella or cause her unnecessary humiliation. Atticus feels compassion for Mayella, yet she despises him, “glares” at him with strong physical eyesight that is unable philosophically to see clearly.

Atticus presents his rhetorically superb closing argument, explaining that the prosecuting argument rests on the faulty assumption that blacks are more immoral than whites, then “he took off his glasses and wiped them…” (217). Atticus proves his argument, and the jury surely
understands Atticus’s speech on an intellectual level; but in Emersonian terms, the jury convicts Tom because of their inability to see truly—this ability to judge is not mental but visual. They use thought processes when they make their decision, but as Emerson observes, “Sturdy and defying though he look, [every man] has a helm which he obeys, which is, the idea after which all his facts are classified. He can only be reformed by showing him a new idea which commands his own” (“Circles” 180). Acquitting a black person does not fit into the jury’s preestablished mental constructs. To assume that Tom is telling the truth and that a white girl is lying is a verdict that will not fit their belief system; therefore, they decide Tom raped Mayella because that scenario fits their preconceptions that whites are superior to blacks.

Fred Erisman suggests that when in Atticus’s speech to the jury he states that people of all races perform immoral acts, he, “like the Puritans . . . assumes the flawed nature of man, but, like Emerson, he looks to the higher laws—those of the court and of the nation—that enable man to transcend his base diversity and give him the only form of equality possible in a diverse society” (132). Although Atticus appeals to the higher laws, he admits to Jem that he is “no idealist to believe firmly in the integrity of our courts and the jury system. A court is only as sound as its jury, and a jury is only as sound as the men who make it up” (218). Atticus says that he is “confident” the jury will “restore this defendant to his family”; yet he pleads, “In the name of God, do your duty” (218). Jem repeats, “In the name of God, believe him” (218). Obviously, Atticus does not depend on the higher man-made courts, for he pleads with the jury “in the name of God,” a phrase that echoes the Emersonian plea for humanity to harmonize with God. Atticus teaches his children, the symbolic future generation, to be nondiscriminatory, to observe events from an innocent eye that does not seek to categorize people hierarchically. Atticus presents to the jury rational, logical arguments, but his defense fails. Even if Atticus has a glimmer of hope that he may acquit Tom through rhetoric and, therefore, begin to obliterate racism, Lee’s message suggests the contrary.
Because of the sexual nature of the crime, Reverend Sykes asks Scout, Jem, and Dill if Atticus knows they are watching the trial. While "Reverend Sykes's black eyes were anxious" for Jem to answer him, Jem says that Atticus "can't see us this far away" (184). Denying Sykes's request to ask all children and women to leave the courtroom, Judge Taylor says, "People generally see what they look for..." (185). Reverend Sykes searches the courtroom for drama that is unsuitable for children. His concerns reflect racist attitudes, suggesting that the children should not hear about a black man raping a white woman. Contrary to Reverend Sykes, Atticus cannot see his children, and according to Judge Taylor's dictum, he cannot see his children because his transparent eye does not perceive whether or not children and women watch the trial. Atticus, however, sees truth, and that is what he attempts to prove.

Atticus asks Calpurnia to accompany him to inform Helen that Tom has been shot, and he raises "up his glasses" (249). Atticus says he told Tom he might win a court appeal, explaining that he "couldn't in truth say that we had more than a good chance. I guess Tom was tired of white men's chances and preferred to take his own" (249). Here, Atticus raises his glasses immediately prior to speaking the truth. In the courtroom scene, he pushes up his glasses after expounding truth. In both instances, allusions to Atticus's glasses, his poor physical sight, are juxtaposed against his ability to speak the truth.

References to Atticus's glasses also come when he makes minor judgments. For example, when Atticus takes Aunt Alexandra's advice and attempts to tell the children to remember their "gentle breeding" and act like wellborn citizens, Scout begins to cry. Comforting Scout, Atticus tells her to forget everything he and Aunt Alexandra have said about what it means to be a Finch. As Atticus walks toward the door Scout notices that his "eyebrows were raised, his glasses had slipped" (144-45). He recognizes that Aunt Alexandra is wrong and that he is giving his children bad advice. His glasses slip, and he loses physical sight, but he reverts to his own child-rearing methods. Throughout the
novel, Atticus performs his parental role according to Emerson’s dictum: “To the well-born child, all virtues are natural, and not painfully acquired. Speak to his heart, and the man becomes suddenly virtuous” (“Over-Soul” 163-64).

Allusions to eyes and sight in Tate’s testimony symbolize truth in ways similar to those to Atticus’s sight. As Scout first observes the trial, she notices Tate “touching his glasses during his testimony” (177). When Atticus asks Tate which one of Mayella’s eyes was black on the day she was assaulted, Tate “blinded and ran his hands through his hair” (179). Realizing Mayella’s right eye was black, “Mr. Tate blinked again, as if something had suddenly been made plain to him” (179). Atticus’s argument rests on the certainty that Mayella’s right eye, instead of her left, was black. Therefore, Tate builds Atticus’s case by exposing evidence that Atticus uses to demonstrate Tom’s innocence.

Eye imagery in reference to other minor characters suggests that they possess only superficial vision, lack moral perception and Emersonian clear vision. Scout observes that Mr. Gilmer, the prosecuting attorney, has “a slight cast in one of his eyes which he used to his advantage: he seemed to be looking at a person when he was actually doing nothing of the kind, thus he was hell on juries and witnesses. The jury, thinking themselves under close scrutiny, paid attention; so did the witnesses, thinking likewise” (177). Whereas Atticus uses clear vision during the trial, Mr. Gilmer relies on a gaze, a peculiar look that manipulates juries and witnesses. The jury and witnesses pay attention not because they are interested in the facts of Mayella’s assault but because they fear Mr. Gilmer. They appear to listen to testimonies, but they neither hear nor see evidence that suggests Tom’s innocence. Just as Mr. Gilmer only appears to see a person, the jury only appears to consider a verdict in Tom’s case.

Subtle references to Aunt Alexandra’s sight and overt references to Walter Cunningham’s blindness suggest they also possess only superficial vision. Atticus says that Cunningham almost acquitted Tom, and Scout says that she wants to befriend Walter. Aunt Alexandra looks at
Scout “over her sewing glasses” and tells her that she should not befriend the Cunninghams because they are from a lower social class than the Finches (236). While Aunt Alexandra explains that Scout cannot befriend Walter because the Cunninghams are “trash,” she “took off her glasses and stared at [Scout]” (237). Scout ponders Aunt Alexandra’s habit of placing people in hierarchical social classes, recalling that Aunt Alexandra also does not want her to visit Calpurnia. With her glasses Aunt Alexandra has physical sight, but with or without her glasses she lacks Emersonian clear vision. When Scout asks Atticus why Mr. Cunningham, one of the men she had recognized amongst those who attempted to lynch Tom, would participate in a confrontation against Atticus, he replies, “Mr. Cunningham’s basically a good man . . . he just has his blind spots along with the rest of us” (168). Atticus admits he also has blind spots, indicative of a person willing to acknowledge his own flaws, a sign of honor. Atticus sees in spite of self-proclaimed blind spots and physically impaired eyes that require glasses, but Aunt Alexandra and Cunningham, representative of most of the community’s members, remain unable to recognize their blind spots, much less see beyond their narrow-minded views.

The theme of clear visual perception integrates with images of light and darkness to suggest that insight comes from an innocent perspective, the unconquered eye. Images of light are used to describe the children and Atticus while Atticus is standing guard over Tom to protect him from any lynching attempt. By contrast, images of darkness describe the men who intimidate Atticus. The children sneak out of the house to look for Atticus, and approaching the town square, they observe light beaming from outside the jail: “[W]e saw a solitary light burning”; “[I]n the light from its bare bulb, Atticus was sitting propped against the front door” of the jail (161). The children witness the townsmen threaten Atticus, and Scout notices a “flash of plain fear was going out of his eyes, but returned when Dill and Jem wriggled into the light” (162-63). Atticus leaves the light on while he talks to Mr. Underwood, who he discovers has witnessed the scene from his office win-
dow. Immediately before Atticus and the children leave the square, Atticus turns “off the light above the jail door” (166). The threat is gone—there is no need for literal or spiritual light. Walking home, Scout assumes Atticus scolds Jem for disobeying him, but as “they passed under a streetlight, Atticus reached out and massaged Jem’s hair, his one gesture of affection” (166). Atticus and Jem stand in both literal and spiritual light when Atticus applies situational ethics to conclude Jem acted wisely when he refused to obey him.

Contrarily, Atticus’s adversaries stand in the dark with only superficial vision. Scout observes “dusty cars” approaching the town square, and she describes the men who get out of the cars as “shadows, sullen-looking, sleepy-eyed” (162, 164). When the children first approach the town square and notice the light shining from outside the door, Jem says, “That’s funny . . . jail doesn’t have an outside light” (161). The jail has no outside light except for the light Atticus brings with him. As demonstrated in Tom’s conviction, the jail also lacks spiritual light. Atticus, who brings the spiritual light with him, tries to establish Tom’s innocence as he struggles against firmly fixed racism.

Near the end of the novel, images of light and references to eyes and sight signify important moral decisions. Boo carries Jem, walks under a “street light,” and hands him to Atticus, while “[l]ight from our front door framed Atticus . . .” (277). The crowd moves to the front porch because the “livingroom lights were awfully strong.” Scout leads Boo to the corner of the porch, “in deep shadow. Boo would feel more comfortable in the dark.” Atticus sits in the swing and Tate stands beside him, “light from the livingroom windows” shining on them. Tate tries to persuade Atticus to pretend Bob Ewell fell on his own knife, stabbed himself in a drunken stupor. Atticus says, “I guess the thing to do—good Lord, I’m losing my memory. . . . Atticus pushed up his glasses” (286). Literally, Boo stands in the dark; metaphorically, he stands in the dark because he does not know what Tate and Atticus are discussing. Atticus thinks Jem stabbed Bob Ewell, “got hold of Ewell’s knife somehow in the dark” (287). Atticus stands in the dark symbolically
because he believes Jem stabbed Bob Ewell; Bob Ewell is described as literally standing in the dark. During this discussion, Tate asks, “Got a flashlight?” and Dr. Reynolds says, “I can ease around and turn my car lights on” (288).

Atticus argues that his children know the truth and that if he lies to protect Jem, he “couldn’t meet his eye” (288). Tate counters that Scout and Jem do not know who killed Bob Ewell because it “was mighty dark out there, black as ink. It’d take somebody mighty used to the dark to make a competent witness…” (289). Someone accustomed to darkness literally could see Boo kill Bob Ewell; symbolically, only someone who is “in the dark” would not understand that Boo stabbed Bob Ewell to protect Jem and Scout. When Tate explains that Boo, not Jem, stabbed Bob Ewell, Atticus agrees that Tate should lie, pretend Bob Ewell stabbed himself. While Tate tells Atticus that Jem did not kill Bob Ewell, “Mr. Tate’s boot hit the floorboards so hard the lights in Miss Maudie’s bedroom went on. Miss Stephanie Crawford’s lights went on” (289). Atticus now stands in the light both literally and symbolically and sees from a new perspective. Emerson suggests that a new perspective is essential for clear sight: “The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. . . . Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon, and under every deep a lower deep opens” (“Circles” 179). Atticus’s eye has been cleansed and space has allowed a new opening for the horizon of the eye; he has achieved a new level of Emersonian transcendence.

Scout also experiences this type of Emersonian transcendence. When Atticus assures Scout that Tate is right, that Bob Ewell killed himself, she understands fully the morality at work. To prosecute Boo would “be sort of like shootin’ a mockingbird, wouldn’t it?” (291), she asks. Atticus walks to the darkened corner where Boo sits, thanks him for saving his children, and Boo stands up, “light from the livingroom windows glisten[ing] on his forehead” (291). After escorting Boo
home, Scout “turned to go home. Street lights winked down the street all the way to town. I had never seen our neighborhood from this angle” (293). Indeed, she sees from a new perspective, understands that Boo is not a “malevolent phantom” as described by local rumor, and infers that telling the complete truth is not always morally correct (15). Scout asks Atticus to read from The Gray Ghost when she gets home. She summarizes for Atticus the plot that involves children who falsely accuse a boy of breaking into a clubhouse: “An’ they chased him ‘n’ never could catch him ‘cause they didn’t know what he looked like, an’ Atticus, when they finally saw him, why he hadn’t done any of those things ... Atticus, he was real nice ...” (295). Atticus answers, “Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them” (296).

Amidst images of light and darkness, Scout and Atticus use descriptions of physical sight—“see,” “saw,” and “look”—symbolic of the ability to see from a fresh perspective. In this case, to understand people and recognize their character strengths in spite of local rumor that implies contrary reputations. Scout recognizes that Boo is the community’s “gray ghost,” a description that echoes Atticus’s comment to Jem that although Mr. Radley does not chain Boo to a bed literally, there are “other ways of making people into ghosts” (18).

Boo is portrayed as unsophisticated and innocent, yet he is treated unjustly for a petty childhood prank committed years earlier. Because Mr. Radley keeps “Boo out of sight” (18), he remains a “phantom,” ostracized by the community. Boo does not speak until the end of the novel, when he says to Scout, “Will you take me home?” Scout says, “He almost whispered it, in the voice of a child afraid of the dark” (292). According to Emerson, “We owe many valuable observations to people who are not very acute or profound, and who say nothing without effort, which we want and have long been hunting in vain. The action of the soul is oftener in that which is felt and left unsaid, than in that which is said in any conversation” (“Over-Soul” 165). While Jem lies sick in bed, Boo lightly touches his hair (the same gesture Atticus uses when he realizes Jem was correct for refusing to leave the scene of
the attempted lynching) and tightens his grip on Scout’s hand. His gentle gestures move Scout immensely. She recalls, “Boo was our neighbor. He gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives” (293).

It is important to remember that the novel is told from the adult Scout’s point of view, as she recalls incidents that occurred during one summer of her childhood. It is, finally, this point of view, that of a child, from which the truth is seen. Erisman refers to what he perceives as Emersonian innocent vision in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: “Atticus’s individualism is emphasized... through his awareness of the clarity of the childhood vision (suggesting Emerson’s remark that ‘the sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he... who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood [Nature 9]’)” (131). He notes that Emerson’s remark is illustrative both of the mob when it leaves the scene of Tom’s jail cell and of Atticus’s statement, “So it took an eight-year-old child to bring ‘em to their senses, didn’t it?,” as well as with Dolphus Raymond’s recognizing the children’s instinctual reaction to Tom’s trial (168).

After Tom is convicted, Atticus tells Jem: “If you had been on that jury, son, and eleven other boys like you, Tom would be a free man.... So far nothing in your life has interfered with your reasoning process” (233). Erisman concludes, “The point could not be more obvious; in the unsophisticated vision of the child is a perception of truth that most older, tradition-bound people have lost. Atticus, like Emerson’s lover of nature, has retained it...” (131). Jem questions Atticus, “How could they do it, how could they?” (225). Atticus answers, “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” (225). In addition to possessing “unsophisticated vision,” Jem is “looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift summary way of boys. ... He gives an independent genuine verdict. ... Who can thus avoid all pledges, and having observed, observe again from the same unaffected,
unbiased, unbribable, unaffrighted innocence...” (“Self-Reliance” 29). Jem is unbiased, or “color blind.” Scout and Jem dress to visit Calpurnia’s church, and Calpurnia tells him that he can’t wear a green tie with a blue suit. Scout laughs and says, “Jem’s color blind” (128), a reference to physical sight. Jem is also metaphorically color blind, for he visits Calpurnia’s church without hesitation. Lula, however, tells Calpurnia that white children should attend their own church—a discriminatory attitude juxtaposed against Jem’s which enhances the viewpoints of both. By comparison, Jem’s attitude is the more noble of the two. Whereas Scout jokes that Jem is color blind, Lula, who desires separate churches for whites and blacks, is certainly not.

In terms of Emersonian transcendentalism, it may at first seem plausible that like Atticus, Boo, and the children, the jury also sees clearly. Throughout his writings, Emerson privileges the unsophisticated and those who retreat to nature. Jem asks Atticus “Why don’t people like us and Miss Maudie ever sit on juries? You never see anybody from Maycomb on a jury—they all come from out in the woods” (234). Emerson advocates that entering the woods helps one (re)gain childlike innocence and clear vision: “In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. . . . In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair” (Nature 10). 4 Atticus’s answer to Jem’s question, however, suggests that the jury lacks clear vision and is anything but self-reliant. Because it took the jury a few hours rather than a shorter time to convict Tom, Atticus feels that he has made at least a step towards eliminating racism from Maycomb County. He says that Walter Cunningham may have considered Tom’s innocence: “If we’d had two of that crowd, we’d’ve had a hung jury. . . . There’s a fair difference between a man who’s going to convict and a man who’s a little disturbed in his mind, isn’t there? He was the only uncertainty on the whole list” (235-36). The “little disturbance” in Cunningham’s mind is prompted,

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of course, because he would rather agree with the other members of the jury than speak from his personal moral convictions. As Emerson says, “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude (“Self-Reliance” 31). Unlike Atticus, who for the sake of impartial justice places his children and himself in jeopardy, Cunningham is not willing to suffer the consequences of publicly acknowledging Tom’s innocence. While both apparently understand that “for nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure” (“Self-Reliance” 32), only Atticus is willing to defend his convictions.

Although the Ewells and those chosen for juries in Maycomb County are unsophisticated, some might even be considered “brutes,” they fail to meet Emerson’s requirement for people who see with an unconquered eye: “What pretty oracles nature yields us on this text in the face and behavior of children, babes and even brutes. That divided and rebel mind, that distrust of a sentiment because our arithmetic has computed the strength and means opposed to our purpose, these have not. Their mind being whole, their ego is as yet unconquered, and when we look in their faces we are disconcerted. Infancy conforms to nobody...” (“Self-Reliance” 28). Unequivocally, Atticus, Boo, and the self-reliant children possess the unconquered eye—instead of allowing only selective knowledge to enter their perceptions, their sight remains true and unimpaired.

The central theme of To Kill a Mockingbird involves Maycomb County’s inability to recognize Tom as a victim of racial bias or to “see” justice. Maycomb County residents are not metaphorically color blind, for they condemn a man because he is black. Tom’s jurors understand who assaulted Mayella, but to acquit Tom they must convict Bob Ewell. Because of the racially biased justice system, the guilty Bob Ewell is spared simply because he is white. Discrimination, therefore, operates both to condemn the innocent and to acquit the guilty, and justice is served in neither case. Ultimately, Tom’s conviction is due to the
judgment of those who cannot understand, that “[e]very particular in nature, a leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time, is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world” (Nature 27). Emerson advocates the eye that refuses to discriminate and categorize, one that does not attempt to specify priorities. Harper Lee and Emerson championed the egalitarian eye that both leads to and derives from innocent observation, that becomes cyclical as the eye rises repeatedly to form new horizons: “The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end” (“Circles” 180); “So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes. It shall answer the endless inquiry of the intellect,—What is truth? And of the affections,—What is good?” (Nature 44).

In To Kill a Mockingbird ethnicity becomes the ultimate issue that involves the light/dark and sighted/blind dichotomies. Both Tom and Bob Ewell are finally (mis)judged according to shades of light or dark, namely the color of their skin. Because they are not color blind, Maycomb County residents recognize that Tom is black and Bob Ewell is white, yet they cannot see nor understand racist social misconceptions. The more sonorous point is, in fact, that they employ only a superficial vision that sees and distinguishes color and arrives at conclusions by valuing ethnicity hierarchically. Lee does more than provide a story about the evils of racism. Through references to sight/blindness and light/darkness, she suggests that predisposed discrimination prevents clear perception and manifests itself as racial injustice. Racism cannot be eliminated by man-made laws nor intellect, she submits, but only by seeing clearly from a fresh perspective, one that cyclically leads to a cleansed eye, that again and again remains unconquered.

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Notes

1. Surprisingly enough, despite its literary and commercial successes, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has received little scholarly attention. It was not until 1994 that Claudia Durst Johnson produced the first two full-length studies of the novel. Much of the criticism, Johnson notes, has been written by practicing lawyers and professors of law who are concerned with the legal ramifications of segregation or Atticus’s professional ethics. The most recent criticism written from a primarily legal perspective is collected in *Symposium: To Kill a Mockingbird*, a 1994 special issue of *Alabama Law Review*.

2. Fred Erisman discusses *To Kill a Mockingbird* in terms of “an Emersonian view of Southern romanticism, suggesting that the South can move from the archaic, imported romanticism of its past toward the more reasonable, pragmatic, and native romanticism of a Ralph Waldo Emerson” (123). He concludes that the “New South,” like Emerson, “spurns the past, looking instead to the reality of the present. With him, it places principled action above self-interest, willingly accepting the difficult consequences of a right decision” (128).

3. In addition to references to Boo as having clear vision, possessing a “transparent eyeball,” descriptions of him as a ghost or phantom suggest that he is a transparent being, one who represents Leonardo’s angels discussed earlier.

4. Significantly, this passage immediately precedes the well-known transparent eyeball passage that serves as the epigraph of this essay.

Works Cited


“When You Finally See Them” 253