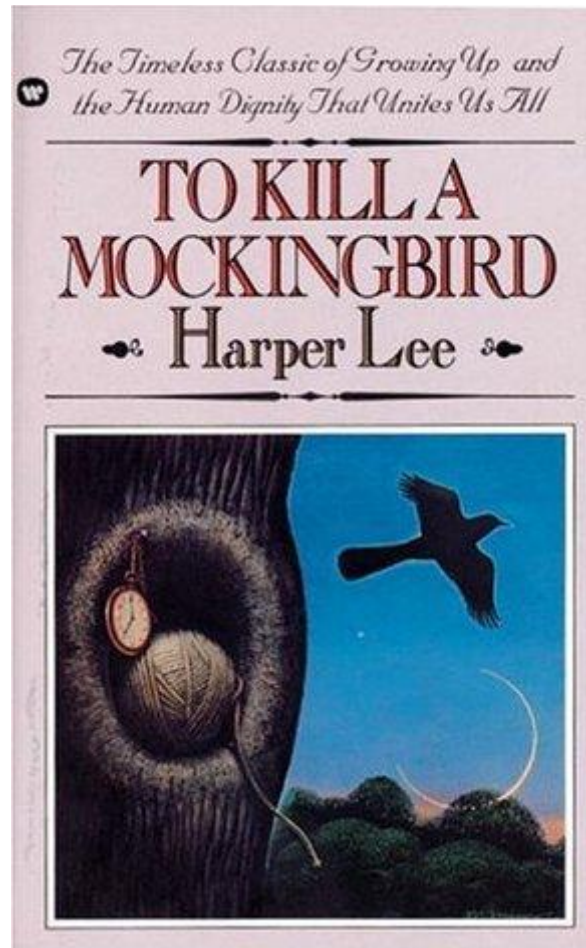


New Historicism Applied to *To Kill A Mockingbird*

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Abstract

New Historicism is a literary theory based on the view that literature should be studied, designed and understood within the discourse of both the chronicle of the author and the history of the critic. Based on the study of literary criticism of Stephen Greenblatt and proposed by the philosophy of Michel Foucault, New Historicism declares not only that a work of literature is influenced by its author's period of time and circumstances, but that the critic's reaction to that piece of work is also influenced by his environment, notion, and preconception. A New Historicist perception of literature in a wider historical context

analyses both how the writer's times stricken the work and how the work reverberates the writer's times, in turn acknowledge that contemporary cultural contexts color that critic's reason out. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a novel of historical fiction written by an American writer Harper Lee, a story in which the scene plays a important part in the issue and is anywhere from 25 years in the past to prehistoric times. The story of the novel portrays life in a particular time, period or centering on a particular event in history. The significant to impressive historical fiction is the quality of the author's references to existent events and the authentic portrayal of characters in the time period. Characters framed in historical fiction may either be fanciful or portrayals of actual historical figures. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in the 1930s in a small Alabama town. The year is significant because it is in the midst of the Great Depression. When analysing literature, I could use this theory in the present article as a way to better understand the various approaches one may view a piece of literature as a result of their personal biases, as well as encouraging research into a particular subject.

Keywords: History, Background, Racism, Slavery, Rights, Practice, Segregation

New Historicism

Greenblatt is a leading figure in the critical movement known as the new historicism. Begun in America in the early 1980's, this school of thought is in great measure a reaction against the tendency in much modern criticism, starting with the New Critics and extending through deconstruction, to concentrate on the language of isolated texts and ignore the worldly circumstances- the societies and times- that produced them. The new historicism returns literary works to history and culture. This return, it is important to note, does not repeat the historicism of earlier generations, which saw literature as reflecting, in mirror like fashion, a unified spirit of the age. Instead, it combines the urge to reconnect texts to their real-world referents and sources with the lessons of contemporary language-centered theories, which in various ways stress the power of words to make rather than merely mimic reality, in order to create a new and reinvigorated notion of literature as a historically and culturally grounded form of expression. "The idea of a uniform and harmonious culture, "Selden writes, "is a myth imposed on history and propagated by ruling classes in their own interests." (Understanding contemporary American literary theory, Pg-67)

A common disposition in the study of literature written set in a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the cultures as presented in the text and as it really was. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is not possible for two basic reasons. First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as constituted and constant. To say, any discernment of the “truth” is a subject of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most conspicuously apparent in the fact that the “losers” of history barely ever get heard.

The culture that is submissive by another culture is often mislaid to history because it is the powerful that have the reference to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who knows the whole story of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unexplored histories are just as evidential as the histories of the predominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often disagree “traditional” history, there is no mode to truly know the implicit truth. Second, while the text under discussion does indeed reverbrate the culture in which it was written, it also takes part in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very cosmos changes the culture it “reflects.”

To Kill a Mockingbird

To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. Though Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and modify certain elements of that culture. In the novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee touched on topics that revolved around the perspective historicism. *To Kill a Mockingbird* covered topics like racism, slavery and alcoholism all in a historicism perspective. An example in his novel is, when Atticus tells Scout:

As you grow older, you’ll see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don’t you forget it-whenver a white man does that to a black man, no matter who he is, how rich he is, or how fine a family he comes from, that white man is trash.(Lee, 23.40).

Although these topics could be seen in a modernism perspective, there are older people’s points of view on the trial. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was first published in 1960, by an

American author Harper Lee who uses historicism as a tool in his novel while talking about racism and slavery.

One of the aims of the new historicists is to place the literary text in the larger context of the cultural text, to cease to see the literary text as “a sacred, self-enclosed, and self-justifying miracle” and re-envision it as drawing upon “a whole life-world” (Understanding Contemporary American Literary Theory, Pg-91)

Novel in the South of the 1930s

President Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 when African Americans were still denied many of their basic rights. Conditions were little improved by the early 1960s in America when Lee sets her novel in the South of the 1930s. The civil rights movement was just taking shape in the 1950s, and its principles were beginning to find a voice in American courtrooms and the law. The famous 1954 U.S. Supreme Court trial of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* declared the long-held practice of segregation in public schools unconstitutional and quickly led to desegregation of other public institutions. However, there was still considerable resistance to these changes, and many states, especially those in the South, took years before they fully integrated their schools. Other ways by which black people were degraded by society included the segregation of public restrooms and drinking fountains, as well as the practice of forcing blacks to ride in the back of buses. This injustice was challenged by a mild-mannered department store seamstress named Rosa Parks (1913-2005). After she was arrested for failing to yield her seat to a white passenger, civil rights leaders began a successful boycott of the bus system in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 5, 1955. The principal leader of the boycott was the reverend Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968). In January 1957, King and other black pastors, such as Charles K. Steele (1914-1980) and Fred Shuttlesworth (1922-2011), organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, one of the leading organizations that helped end legal segregation by the mid-1960s. The same year that Lee won a contract for the unfinished manuscript of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which provided penalties for the violation of voting rights and created the Civil Rights Commission. African Americans would not see protection and enforcement of all of their rights until well into the next decade, when the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Civil Rights Bill of 1968 were passed. These

laws banned racial discrimination from public places, workplaces, polling places, and housing.

The justice system was similarly discriminatory in the 1950s, as blacks were excluded from juries and could be arrested, tried, and even convicted with little cause. One notable case occurred in 1955, when two white men were charged with the murder of Emmett Till (1941-1955), a fourteen-year-old African American who had allegedly harassed a white woman. Like the jury in Tom Robinson's trial, the jury for the Till case was all white and all male; the trial was also held in a segregated courtroom. Although the defense's case rested on the unlikely claims that the corpse could not be specifically identified as Till and that the defendants had been framed, the jury took only one hour to acquit the men of all charges. The men later admitted their crimes to a journalist in great detail but were never punished for the murder.

Race Relations in the 1950s and 1960s and *To Kill A Mockingbird*

The events surrounding race relations in the 1950s and 1960s have a strong correspondence with those in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is set nearly thirty years earlier. The South, which was still steeped in its agricultural traditions, was hit hard by the Great Depression. Small farmers like Lee's Walter Cunningham Sr. Often could not earn enough cash from their crops to cover their mortgages, let alone living expenses. Lee's novel captures the romanticism many white people associated with the Southern way of life, which they felt was being threatened by industrialization. Part of this tradition, however, protected such practices as sharecropping, in which tenant farmers would find themselves virtually enslaved to landowners who provided them with acreage, food, and farming supplies. The desperation sharecroppers felt was brilliantly depicted in Erskine Caldwell's (1903-1987) 1932 novel, *Tobacco Road*. The racism of the South—many blacks were sharecroppers—is also portrayed in Richard Wright's (1908-1960) novel *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938).

There was little opportunity for African Americans to advance themselves in the South. Schools were segregated between whites and blacks, who were not allowed to attend white high schools. Blacks were therefore effectively denied an education, since, in the early 1930s, there was not a single high school built for black students in the South. The result was that nearly half of all black people in the South did not have an education past the fifth grade;

in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Calpurnia tells the children she is one of only four members of her church who can read. Ironically, the Depression helped to change that when northern school boards began integrating schools to save the costs of running separate facilities. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (1882-1945) New Deal also led to the creation of the National Youth Administration (founded in 1935) and its Division of Negro Affairs, which helped teach black students to read and write. The Depression was particularly painful to blacks, who were already grossly underemployed in the 1920s. With worsening economic times, however, they found that even the menial jobs they once had—like picking cotton—had been taken by whites. The New Deal helped here, too, with the creation of the Federal Housing Administration, the Works Progress Administration, and other agencies that assisted poor blacks in obtaining jobs and housing.

Yet the oppressive society in the South often prevented blacks from taking advantage of this government assistance. Racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Shirts terrorized blacks out of their jobs. The vigilante practice of lynching was still common in the South in the early 1930s. “Both West Indian and Afro-American slavery resulted in the creation of an excluded group of black men and women subjugated by violence and deprived of the fruits of their labor.” (Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature, Pg-28). Only North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, and Alabama had laws specifically outlawing lynching as an illegal activity. (Surprisingly, only two northern states had similar laws.) By 1935, public outrage had reached a point where lynching was no longer tolerated, even by whites. In Lee's novel, for instance, the local sheriff tries to warn Atticus Finch of a possible lynch mob while a concerned citizen, B. B. Underwood, is prepared to turn them away from the jail with his shotgun.

This approach may be used to look at Charles Dickens' novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, in the import that without knowledge of the French Revolution, the reader would not be able to get the picture the point to which the French people are oppressed and destitute. People living in war torn countries such as Afghanistan and Sierra Leone are more inclined to feel that the setting described in *A Tale of Two Cities* is not as hideous as their own, and therefore not a major issue. However, people from stable countries like Canada would most likely find the conditions in the novel appalling, as it is not something they are accused to in their own life.

New Historicism and *To Kill a Mockingbird*

New Historicism can be employed to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* when we discuss its plot and the setting of the novel, where African Americans were treated unfairly in the court of law. At that time, the unfair treatment was reasoned unobjectionable because it was believed that African-Americans were naturally less moral as a race. Jem and Scout are the heart of the story, filling it with their world of imagination, a world of fancy, and superstition, centralised on town myths such as the strange history of Boo Radley and imaginative diversions such as acting out stories from books.

Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop....[s]omehow it was hotter then.... bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade of the live oaks on the square..... But it was a time of vague optimism for some of the people. Maycomb County had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself. (Pg-31)

Scout's opening description of Maycomb emphasizes the slow step, Alabama heat, and outmoded belief of the town, in which men wear shirt collars, ladies use talcum powder and the streets are unpaved. This kind of description stipulate essential evidence of chronological setting and historical recollections, in addition to obsolete elements such as mule-driven Hoover carts and dirt roads, it also makes acknowledgment to the far-flung poorness of the town, implying that Maycomb in the midst of the Great Depression.

There's something in our world that makes men lose their heads—they couldn't be fair if they tried. In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins. They're ugly, but those are the facts of life. [...]

The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is in a courtroom, be he any color of the rainbow, but people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury box. (23.38-40)

According to Atticus, there is simply something about race which makes white people demented. His holding up Jem as an exclusion because of his teens suggest that whatever that X element is, it's found out and not innate perhaps it is able to be modified via schooling. He additionally recognizes, in case it wasn't already obvious, that law isn't a natural realm free of

the prejudices that plague ordinary life—it's concern for the equal issues as society at big. Generally, Atticus is a voice of wish for alternate, but here he flatly says that racism is a "truth of existence," suggesting that dropping Tom's case severely dented his optimism concerning human nature—otherwise that, having sat through the case.

Which, gentlemen, we know is in itself a lie as black as Tom Robinson's skin, a lie I do not have to point out to you. You know the truth, and the truth is this: some Negroes lie, some Negroes are immoral, some Negro men are not to be trusted around women—black or white. But this is a truth that applies to the human race and to no particular race of men. There is not a person in this courtroom who has never told a lie, who has never done an immoral thing, and there is no man living who has never looked upon a woman without desire." (20.47-48)

On the one hand, Atticus is totally proper: we need to judge people as individuals in place of through their race. No argument right here. However, check out the manner he calls the lie of racist stereotypes "as black as Tom Robinson's skin," yet again associating evilness with blackness, despite the fact that in a greater figurative way.

Informative Piece of Historical Literature

The novel has many historian elements to be mentioned, from the legends and secrets and techniques surrounding Boo Radley to Dill's imaginative testimonies and the children's superstitions. The unreasonable snow and the hearth at omit Maudie's, in addition to the later appearance of a mad dog, can be seen as contributing to a feel of supernatural foreboding leading up to the injustice that pervades Tom Robinson's trial.

However, this interpretation is balanced by way of the fact that each the snow and fireplace carry to the pleasant in people -school is cancelled. Scout and Jem build a fine snowman, the neighbours help to save Miss Maudie and her belongings, and she perseveres after the 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 atmosphere epitomizes *To Kill a Mocking Bird*.

The novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a clearly informative piece of historical literature through its use of emotionally charged passages, effective imagery, and lessons that the reader can certainly apply to normal life. The thoughts that characters such as Atticus hold forth are critical to cherish and their projects applauded. This novel conveys the methods and historical method with a form of passion. It allows mirroring, examining, and studying from the past and trying for a racist loose society day after today. “We never fells that we can simply put off all our historically conditioned longings, fears, doubts, and dreams, along with our accumulated knowledge of the world, and enter into another conceptual universe,” Greenblatt and Gallagher acknowledge. (Understanding Contemporary American Literary Theory, Pg- 92) In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* the plot certainly mirrored the culture of the South during the mid-20th century. Thus, it became an instrument to raise awareness of and modify certain elements of that culture.

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