

# Child Narration in Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird"

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## ABSTRACT

Children's stories have a significant role in American literature. Such a role is regarded as both instructive and entertaining. A child narration, to Harper Lee (1926–2016), the American novelist, reveals some hidden messages about how a child can develop and can succeed to conform to society. A narrator, to her, could or could not be a character in the events. If a child narrates the events of a novel, he/she will definitely simplify the topics he/she narrates. Hence, Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* portrays a world that is exotic to the reader. The present paper aims to explore how the novel introduces the struggles and the disadvantages of Western society through a child's narration, which includes the point of view and language. It also tackles how the capacity of childhood innocence shows people's behavior clearly. This study tries to find some answers to the following questions: Why did Lee use child narration? What is the aim of using first-person narration? Was the narrator successful in reflecting the truth of events as adults did? The paper also aims at shedding light on the western problems through the child's eyes. It attempts through child narration to expose people's deceptive appearances, racism, and class distinction.

**KEY WORDS:** Child Narration, Harper Lee, Narrative Techniques, Point of View, Racism, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Harper Lee is an American novelist (1926–2016) who is widely known for her two novels: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (TMK) (1960) and *Go Set a Watchman* (2015). Lee's childhood was the greatest inspiration for her novel, TMK. Some events and characters were influenced by the American South, where Lee lived (Bloom, 2004, p. 11). Certain places and characters in TMK show a great resemblance to Lee's early life. For instance, Lee shares the same birthday as her protagonist, Scout. Lee was born in 1926, so she had the same age as Scout at the beginning of her novel. The

people who grew up with Lee were almost alike. In addition, Lee's father, Amasa Lee, was also a lawyer like her second main character Atticus Finch. Hence, it can be determined that the narrator of this novel is absolutely Lee in her childhood (Bloom, 2004, p. 12). However, Lee affirms that TMK is a mere fiction, and it does not reflect her childhood events and memories.

Lee never intends to become a very famous writer. She has largely avoided fame resulted from a literary work. In an interview with Newquist (1964), she started her "limited objectives" behind writing TMK:

*I want to do the best I can with the talent God gave me. I hope to goodness that every novel I do gets better and better, not worse and worse.... I would like to leave some record of the kind of life that existed in a very small world. I hope to do this in several novels to chronicle something that seems to be very quickly going down the drain. This is small-town middle-class southern life as opposed to the Gothic, as opposed to Tobacco Road, as opposed to plantation life (p. 44).*

In these lines, Lee clarifies that she has something different about the way of life and area of the country that has been recorded to some extent. Lee obviously leaves "some record." Lee was not the first novelist

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who employed child narration for expressing real-life situations. Charles Dickens (1812–1870), George Eliot (1819–1880), Mark Twain (1835–1910), and J. K. Rowling (1965), and many others are the most prominent novelists who deliver their messages through child narrators. Lee distinguishes herself by pinpointing some current problems that affect children and society in a bad way (Haggerty, 2010, p. 25).

Lee's narrators are not always the focal characters; they have been called the "viewpoint characters." That is to say, the narrator is one of the most common narrative voices whether first- or third-person viewpoints used in the novel. He or she is also called the "character voice," a conscious "person," a living human narrator. In this case, "the narrator is a more relatable, realistic character who may or may not be involved in the actions of the story and who may or may not take a biased approach in the storytelling." Scout in *TKM* is a clear example (World Heritage Encyclopaedia).

Scholes et al. (2006) claim that a narrator, in general, is the one who narrates events from a different point of view as inscribed in a text. Distinct from the author or implied author, he/she is the person who tells a story. In a book of fiction, the narrator defines the novel's point of view. When the narrator is a total participant in the novel's action, then the narration means to be in a first-person, whereas a novel, told by a narrator in the story, is a third-person narrative. In addition, work could have more than one person in the whole novel (Herman et al., 2010, p. 442).

In a work of fiction, specialists attempt to give different meanings to this term. For example, Fischer (1971) argues that the narrator can be described in terms of the distance he holds to the author, to the reader, and to other fictional characters. The distance can be moral, intellectual, physical, and emotional (p. 86).

Harper Lee used the first-person narrative to invent an exclusive view of a situation existed in the novel. The tale reveals events with elements which are sometimes emphasized and other times neglected. Hence, it depends on what a narrator observes, sees, or knows. In *TKM*, Lee's aims of using 6-year-old Scout, as a narrator, are to clarify the distance, and in particular, to support the novel events (Stratford, 2017, p. 1).

## 2. CHILD NARRATION

Child narration is widespread in children's literature: Works about children are controlled by the adults' characters that support different kinds of topics and events where moral feelings are confirmed. It is significant for both children and adults to be involved with such a kind of literature for human development. In this respect, McQuillan (2000), a journalist assumes that "reading children literature is often considered important for developing children's ethical and

empathic understanding of society and its people" (p. 105). However, there is an exception: Works on children must be told by children themselves. A child narrator has to teach children about sympathy and moral estimates (Haugen, 2018, p. 5). Some novelists have to be defined by the use of adult's narration in their novels for the level of adults. They use children as narrators in drawing their images for difficult topics. Using a child's narration, techniques such as narrative point of view, voice, and time should be used skillfully to be communicated clearly, especially, the child's point of view, tone, and opinion vary from adults in terms of narrating crucial events.

In addition, Lee uses multiple ways to enlighten the child narration in her novel *TKM*, by illustrating the childhood's innocence and naiveté. Likewise, Scout, Lee's protagonist, states: "I never figured out how Atticus knew I was listening, and it was not until many years later that I realized he wanted me to hear every word he said."<sup>1</sup> By these words, Lee wants to clarify her essential target: Child's simplicity and innocence are important to realize different aspects of life.

Lee aims at giving lessons about life and experiences and teaching moral values. In this respect, Suzanne Keen (2007), a professor of English and a scholar of narrative empathy, illustrates the necessity of reading for children. She confirms how childhood reading could influence a person's ability to empathize and shape that person's empathetic abilities for the future (p. 69).

It is obvious that Lee has developed a first-person view from the beginning until the end of the events, the point of view of the mature. Whereas looking back to the situations of her childhood, Scout becomes a clear example to the above notion. Most of Scout's narrative is told with easy vocabulary and normal sentences of a young child who often melts slang with ungrammatical dialogue that it cannot be imagined.

Furthermore, Wilkinson (2016) clarifies how the voice and limited thoughts of the child, in terms of knowledge, experiences, and understanding, can offer an effective model for the critique of social and political problems, because of its straightforward and unselfconscious nature (p. 124). These thoughts can be noticed in various quotations as: "Nothing's wrong with him. Naw, I think there's just one kind of folks. Folks" (*TKM* 260). Here, the narrator, Scout, attempts to describe the world of adults from her own point of view saying that although people are levels and categories, they are different in their families, races, incomes, and heritage. For her, they are still people, because as a child, these things do not matter and have no crucial change for her view toward others.

In addition, it can be easily noted that southern pronunciation is used by Lee to illustrate the tendency of childhood as "Naw" Although the child's innocence is

expressed in this line thoughtfully, there is a deep meaning implied in it which is the equality of all human beings on the earth. Lee's proof that human beings are equal is a concept actually mentioned in this naïve line of a child.

In children's literature, it is impossible to imagine a novel so famous as *TMK*, especially in the studies of critics, as well as students for it, is a natural choice of controversial subjects such as racism, injustice, discrimination, and certainly innocence, and purity through a vision of a child (Haugen, 2018, p. 8).

Likewise, Schuster (1963) commented on the success of the child narration in this novel, stating:

*The achievement of Harper Lee is not that she has written another novel about race prejudice, but rather that she has placed race prejudice in a perspective which allows us to see it as an aspect of larger things: As something arises from phantom contacts (p. 511).*

Hence, it is necessary to support and teach generations how to learn about cultures societies and people in the world.

From another perspective, Malcolm Bradbury comments on Harper Lee's moral values, specifically, when she chooses to tell her story through the eyes of children, a strategy which could not bear because it prevents an adequate moral judgment on the fable. However, Lee has taken her risks and turned to be triumphant (Armstrong and Lee, 1987, p. 70).

The title of *TMK* has a little literal link to the importance of the events. In this novel, innocent people who destroyed by evil are just like the mockingbird, which symbolizes the notion of innocence. The author introduces a number of characters as mockingbirds: Jem, Scout's brother, Boo Radley, and an innocent person who is believed to be a horrible person due to the rumors spread. By time, he proves to be so innocent and Tom Robinson, an African-American who is put in trial for raping a white woman. In reality, he is innocent. These characters can be considered as symbols of innocence and purity, as well (Leerhsen, 2010, p. 19).

Similarly, Lee's title itself is a very remarkable attempt in giving readers a hint about the essential event of her novel:

*Remember it is sin *TMK* that was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to something and I asked Miss Maudie about it (Your Father's right "she said" Mockingbird do not do anything but make music for us to enjoy [...] but sing their hearts out for us. That is why it is a sin *TMK* (TKM 103).*

These lines explain the title of the novel in a simple way. They give the most important metaphors of the novel: Mockingbirds as symbols of innocent people who are exterminated by the vicious. Lee uses this

conversation to give readers an obvious connection between her title and her fundamental goal of the novel.

Lee makes her narrator explain the event in an innocent method to mix between the innocence of a mockingbird and her pure and naïve narrator to show her main aim, the injustice. This is why critics, readers, and students considered this novel as one of their favorite ones.

### 3. THE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Literary techniques are specific constructions of the language which the writer uses to convey meaning: A writer's use of a literary technique should exist with a word or phrase or group of words or even phrases. Techniques are various, they can be presented through irony, metaphoric images, paradox, similes, and symbols. Lee uses these techniques in her novel to illustrate her goals completely. Scout represents at first a very simple character even in narrating the events, and then the author seeks to fulfill her goals through Scout. For instance, Scout says: "Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough" (TKM 322). Scout addresses her neighbor, Radley whom the children believe that he is a horrible person due to rumors. However, readers, because of Scout's narration, recognize his innocent character.

It is clear that Scout, as she is a child full of innocence, understands her father's comment literally because she thinks that she can see Radley from his porch, whereas the readers can easily distinguish the metaphoric meaning of this quotation because her father wants to say that appearances are most of the time deceptive. Lee focuses on appearances when she explains the relationship between Tom and Boo Radley, two victims of their society because of their physical descriptions. Clothes play a very important role in judging people (Armstrong and Lee, 1987, p. 54). Likewise, Scout states:

*I looked from his hands to his sand-stained khaki pants, my eyes traveled up his thin frame to his torn denim shirt. His face was as white as his hands, but for a shadow on his jutting chin. His cheeks were thin to hollowness; his mouth was wide; there were shallow, almost delicate indentations at his temples, and his gray eyes were so colorless, I thought he was blind (TKM 311).*

Boo is described as a victim of his thoughts; he imprisons himself to run away from the society that hurts him and hurts others. Undeniably, he is full of kindness for he seriously strives to save children.

In the same way, Tom is also a victim, but from a different point of view, Scout explains a very important problem when she says:

*Atticus had used every tool available to free men to save Tom Robinson, but in the scout courts of men's hearts, Atticus had no case. Tom was a dead man the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth and screamed (TKM 276).*

Hence, Tom is a victim of racism because, according to the narrator, he received his judgment even before the court begins because of his race.

Thus, Lee's goal through this resemblance is to present her characters as mockingbirds, as people who can stand others without taking in revenge. Likewise, a mockingbird that chants beautiful music relieves others without causing any harm. Lee has chosen a very beautiful metaphoric image to explain her point of view brilliantly.

Lee also shows the events in a juxtaposed way to give a moral lesson by contrast when, Atticus, Scout's father, surprised his children by shooting the mad dog because their father used to be a sample of kindness:

*With movements so swift, they seemed simultaneous, Atticus's hand yanked a ball-tipped lever, as he brought the gun on his shoulder. The rifle cracked ... (TKM 110).*

This situation surprises Scout and her brother, Jem, because they consider their father as a lamb, as a man who will never hurt others, but by killing this mad dog, his image has changed. This contrast aims to emphasize the author's thought about a society which stresses on people's changeable attitudes.

In addition, it can be figured out that Lee is fond of similes and images which are necessary to the messages needed to be delivered. Scout's experiences of people, places, and actions are given during the events of novel. For example, the hard-working hands of Calpurnia, Finch family's African-American housekeeper, are described when she gives Scout a stinging slap because Scout behaves in a cruel way toward her friend in school. In this respect, Scout says:

*Calpurnia was something else again, she was all angles and bones [...] Her hand was wide as a bed slat and twice as hard. She was always ordering me out of the kitchen, asking me why I could not behave as well as Jem when she knew he was older (TKM 6).*

Lee attempts in these lines to give a full description for the slap and how rough it is by giving the features of the housekeeper's hands to give a hint that her hero does not suffer from racial problems because she accepts to be slapped by a black woman who tries to teach her to be polite.

Accordingly, using symbols and similes, Lee aims to demonstrate how, for a lot of reasons, people's values are changed. Lee wants to clarify the reality of her society and to criticize it at the same time (Armstrong and Lee, 1987, p. 56).

#### 4. NARRATIVE LANGUAGE

In TMK, many varieties of language are given, these differences and modes contribute in an essential treatment to the amusement of reading the story within it, popular slang of the children can be easily recognized. A special atmosphere is produced by descriptive passages. This atmosphere is created in the novel incessantly (Bloom, 2004, p. 56). Hence, Scout personifies the language of her surrounding atmosphere which is clear in her behavior and her moral evolution.

Basing on this, Miller (2010) points out how Scout not only personifies language but also events and attitudes. She is expected to sustain or present this way: "Languages are absorbed by the body and performed quite literally by Scout" (p.194). Such a presentation of language clarifies exactly Scout's intention while using language to justify several attitudes. She works hard to keep her dignity and attempts to overcome fighting with other children so that she can make her father and her brother Jem proud of her because she succeeds to keep calm in any difficult situation (Armstrong and Lee, 1987, p. 75). For instance, she describes a situation as:

*Somehow if I fought Cecil I down. Atticus so rarely asked Jem and me to do would let Atticus something for him, I could take being called a coward for him. I felt extremely noble for having remembered and remained noble for 3 weeks (TKM 87).*

Scout tries to embody a symbol of child's attitude toward a sacrificing father, at the same time, she uses her own language as a child to show readers, in an innocent way, her capacity to tolerate with others and resist her anger for her father's sake despite her age.

Having a child narrator is a very crucial problem for the novelist who has to overcome some linguistic difficulties. Hence, the novel starts far from the events it describes; it permits the writer to use "adult" or maybe a more sophisticated language than that of a 6-year child. Using adults' words said by a child narrator will definitely raise some inquiries whether it is proper to use them or not (Watkin, 2012, p. 35).

Lee skillfully deals with this matter, for that reason, in the opening paragraphs. There is not only Scout's language but also a blending of the child's reported speech which proposes their tone and tendency to use specific vocabulary. As a result, the immediate declaration is what a child can recognize; besides, there is a more complicated use of language that deals with the sentence structure and an ironic tone in the sentence structure, sometimes (Bloom, 2004, p. 56). The narrator uses the description of her own town to give a previous sight of her town when she says:

*Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first know it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red*

slop; grass grew on the sidewalks, the courthouse sagged in the square. Somehow, it was hotter than (TKM 5).

This introductory description is intended to give a whole image for her town where she used to live. It is obvious that the author is totally influenced by her past life. The description of a child is filled with poverty images of "tired" town and "red slop" of streets. Yet, it can be clearly recognized from this quotation that the narrator wrote this after her childhood period when she mentioned "when I first knew it" may be as an adult. This point is important for Lee to clarify the period of narration age. The writer is the master of the children's language; Scout's is full of live conversations, common language, dialogues all these make for strived reading, and attribute the narration a genuineness (Steinmetz, 2011, p.13). Scout and her brother Jem themselves have a realization of language, which is clarified when Jem is speaking about Miss Maudi, who lives across the street from the Finch family and had known them very well:

*You know, she can talk really pretty sometimes. One time I asked her to have a chew and she said no thanks to that chewing gum cleaved to her palate and rendered her speech, less, does not that sound nice? (TKM 69).*

Jem reveals his admiration for Miss Maudi's attitude toward his offer of chewing and he realizes that she is a pretty lady because she refuses to have something that could be badly reflected on her language fluency, so he affirms that the manner of speaking is very important to judge a personality. It is important to discover that TMK with these images portrays all people's levels which can be connected with each other when they speak each other's language. The different kinds of categories can also be portrayed through their different use of language which clarifies their own statuses.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The American society perceived Harper Lee's TMK with a huge curiosity because it is narrated through a child's point of view. The narrator has great participation because the events focus on the problem of racism. Yet, Scout has a good relationship with her society. During the severe actions, she becomes a quiet child, gradually she learns to respect people. Scout's development into an independent person clarifies the effects of her family and society as well. In addition, because childhood is a period of curiosity and learning, children explore their environment with a different point of view.

Critics have given a little attention to adult fiction which is narrated by children, but it is important to enlighten the strategy of narration which can portray the real emotions of people in a certain society by an innocent view. However, the novel encourages readers to judge characters based on their education class and

race before meeting them personally. It portrays life through an obvious, pure, and honest look because it is narrated by a child. The events and the whole situations symbolize the injustice of society and the reign of the race, class and even the cruelty.

It is important to read this novel to discover the reality of life and the weird behavior of society. Besides, reading this novel makes people see the world in an innocent eye of a child who judges the event in a very simple manner. Hence, Lee wants to produce her protagonist, Scout, as a character who comprehends the racist culture of Southern United States to represent the blind reaction to racism prejudices in her society using a narrative style.

Lee has chosen Scout to be the narrator of her novel because of her innocence, lovely sense of justice, and pure point of view toward the loss of virtue that Lee attempts to convey as the most essential goal. Adults fiction narrated through the child's views and opinions let readers think sympathetically.

The narrative style is used to improve empathy, as well. Novels affected by child's view could encourage a reflection of uncommon social struggles and evolve an understanding of other cultures and otherness as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Lee, H., 2010. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Random House, 101. All subsequent quotations cited in the text are from this edition, with the abbreviation TKM and the page number(s)