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Teaching Harper Lee's

To Kill A Mockingbird

from

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by

Marie Y. Smith



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General Introduction to the Work

Genre

TO *KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* is a novel of historical fiction, a story in which the setting plays a significant part in the events and is anywhere from 25 years in the past to prehistoric times. The story may portray life in a particular time period or focus on a specific event in history. The key to effective historical fiction is the accuracy of the author's references to actual events and the authentic portrayal of characters in the time period. Characters in historical fiction may either be imaginary 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. During the three years in which the story takes place, the historical significance of the Great Depression is most evident in the schoolroom, when Scout describes the town children versus the country children. The year is also significant because the role of the African-American in United States society was still unclear, particularly in the South. Although the Emancipation Act had freed all slaves during the Civil War, the South still enforced segregation in the 1930s, which was a legal means of preventing African-Americans from obtaining equality.

Feminist Theory Applied to *To Kill a Mockingbird*



Notes on the Feminist Approach

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The social movement of feminism found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a literary theory to address the differences between literature by and about women and literature by men. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining older texts to reevaluate the portrayal of women as well, writing new works to fit the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes about women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing elements in literature that have been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that are believed to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and possibly harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females should be added and judged on a different, feminist scale.



Activity One

Examining Scout's relationship with Aunt Alexandra

1. Divide the students into small groups, and have each read (or reread) one or more of these chapters: 9, 13, 14, 23, and 29. Have them identify and discuss comments made by Scout, Atticus, Jem, Calpurnia, and Aunt Alexandra that illustrate the role that Aunt Alexandra plays in Scout's development as a Southern young lady. Have each group present its list and explanations to the class.
2. Points to consider for each comment:
 - What is the relationship between Aunt Alexandra and Scout when they are first introduced?
 - What does each comment mean with respect to the proper attitudes and actions of a Southern young lady?
 - What is the significance of each comment to Scout? To Aunt Alexandra?
 - What support do Aunt Alexandra and Scout receive from other characters in the book?
 - How does Scout respond to the comment?
 - What does Aunt Alexandra see as her role in Scout's life?
 - What does Scout think of Aunt Alexandra?
 - Has their relationship changed since they were first introduced?

New Historicism Theory Applied to *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although 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 change certain elements of that culture.



Activity One

Exploring the impact of Tom Robinson's race in the court case

1. Divide the students into groups of four. Have the students read (or reread) Chapters 19 and 20, paying particular attention to the interactions of Atticus, Mr. Gilmer, and Judge Taylor each with Tom Robinson. Have the students select one of the following scenes, and rewrite the questions, testimony, and summations presented in these chapters assuming that Tom Robinson is a white man rather than an African-American. (Try to make sure that every scene is selected by at least one group of students.)
 - Atticus questioning Tom (Pgs. 190 – 195)
 - Mr. Gilmer cross-examining Tom (Pgs. 195 – 198)
 - Atticus' closing arguments (Pgs. 202 – 206)
2. Have each group present its scene to the class in the order they appear in the book and explain the reasons for the changes it made in the scene.

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *To Kill a Mockingbird*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

The terms “psychological,” or “psychoanalytical,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking serious social mores.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory believes that dreams are where a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

17. Are there any inner conflicts within the character? How are these conflicts revealed? How are they dealt with? Are they ever resolved? How?
18. Do any characters perform uncharacteristic actions? If so, what? What could these actions mean?

Focus of Study

- Compare Harper Lee's life to Scout's life in *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- Examine the inner conflicts of Scout and Jem and how they each handle conflict as they mature
- Examine the characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird* for evidence of Harper Lee's attitudes toward social customs in the rural South as she grew up
- Explore Scout's psychological, emotional, and moral growth
- Evaluate Atticus' definition of a heroic character