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Form and Content in Harper Lee's *To Kill A
Mockingbird.*

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Resumen

Matar un ruiseñor (Harper Lee, 1960) es una de las novelas más populares de la literatura norteamericana. Utilizando un original punto de vista, esta obra ofrece una perspectiva crítica del contexto económico y social del Sur de los EE.UU. en los años treinta del pasado siglo. Este ensayo analiza la voz del narrador y el punto de vista, así como los temas más relevantes: el contraste entre la infancia y la vida adulta, la crítica social y la función de la empatía. De esta manera, el análisis refleja cómo la estructura influye en la presentación del contenido en su denuncia del racismo y la injusticia en general.

Palabras clave: Literatura sureña, racismo, crítica social, Bildungsroman, focalización, voz narrativa.

Abstract

To Kill A Mockingbird (Harper Lee, 1960) is one of the most influential and popular novels in the history of U.S. Literature. By using an original point of view and narrative voice, this masterpiece offers a critical perspective of the social and economic aspects of the South of the U.S. during the decade of the 1930's. This essay analyses the voice of the narrator as well as the more relevant themes: the clash between childhood and adulthood, racism, violence, and the role of empathy. In this way, form and content work together to expose prejudice and injustice.

Keywords: Southern Literature, racism, injustice, Bildungsroman, focalization, narrative voice.

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1. Introduction

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*¹ (1960) aligns with the tradition of the Southern Renascence together with other authors such as William Faulkner (1897-1962), Flannery O'Connor (1925-64) and Carson McCullers (1917-67) (Metcalf 7). In 1920 the South became the literary centre of the United States and the Southern Renascence was born. Before the Civil War, there was a sense of glory and grandeur. But, after it, the South became the most depressed area of the country in terms of economic and social aspects (education, gender and especially race). Under these circumstances, the conditions were not adequate for the development of a significant body of literature. However, their unexpected defeat in the Civil War may explain the emergence of the Southern Renascence and together with it Southern Gothic, deeply enrooted in the American literary tradition. In other words, the misery they could not assimilate led them to an obsession with the past, which is depicted through this distinctive Gothicism. Thus, all these factors contributed to make sense of their own identity. Instead of presenting supernatural events, Sothern Gothic introduces the reader into an atmosphere of intense realism, filled with violence, humor, the obscene and tragic elements. Furthermore, the sense of the grotesque, the irrational, the menacing is related to the disintegration of the normal and familiar. These devices reflect the decline of moral values as well as the fear of the Other, which is especially reflected in the tensions between blacks and whites. The most important racial conflict in those years was the Scottsboro trial². It inspired many writers such as the poet Langston Hughes or Richard

¹ From now on, I will refer to the title of the novel as *TKM*.

² A group of black youths were arrested after being falsely accused of rape by two women. After some time, it was discovered that the women had fabricated the whole

Wright, who depicted these conflicts in their work. Thus, following these writers, Harper Lee took part in the production of a Scottsboro narrative (Cottle 247): *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960). This historical event proves that after the Civil War the South moved from slavery towards racial oppression. The trial has a clear parallelism with the novel due to the fact that both involve the lynching of a black man, the Southern jury, and a lower class woman accusing a black man of rape (Durst 9). The publication and reception, negative as well as positive of the novel was conditioned by the context of the 1950's. In my opinion, the South of the 1930's would have been less prepared to receive the criticism the novel holds. Nonetheless, the critique it received is an indication of its great influence. In fact, since its publication this novel has been a compulsory reading in secondary schools for the values for which it stands (Bloom 9). In addition, the novel is a formative book that has been used to explore "legal morality" taking Atticus as a model of lawyer (Durst 17). The success of the novel has affected historians such as Gary Wills who claimed: "I just knew, the minute I read it that she (Harper Lee) was right and I had been wrong" (Durst 16). The narrator triggers a moral debate: the issue of justice and equality in the South (Metcalf 5).

Above all, the uniqueness of Harper Lee's novel lies in the peculiarity of its narrator which combines the features of an adult voice with the focalization of a child: Scout (Bloom 29). The centre of Scout's look is his father and his case: Tom Robinson's trial. As a Bildungsroman, the novel portrays Scout as a witness and participant of a series of crucial events that will be essential for her process of maturation. She will learn, feel and grow from them, simultaneously with the reader. As Mieke Bal states: "The point

story. The legal wing of the American Communist party assisted the black men: some of them were released while others were arrested (Cottle 247).

of view from which the elements of the fabula are being presented is often of decisive importance for the meaning the reader will assign to the fabula” (50). The simplicity of the child will ease the reader the approach and understanding of the Southern complexities in terms of segregation. Thus, in this essay I will analyze the most relevant structural aspects of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, such as time, focalisation, and narrative voice (first part), and then I will discuss the most important thematic elements of this novel (second part).

2. Structure

2.1. Time

2.1.1. Setting: Maycomb as a microcosm

First of all, it is crucial to distinguish between fabula and story. Bal states that “A story is the content of the text, and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and ‘colouring’ of a fabula; the fabula is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors” (5). Time is one of the elements of the fabula. In this novel, the treatment of time is crucial to criticize the main social problems of the 1930’s that somehow persisted in the 1950’s. It is relevant that while the novel was published in 1960, its events move from 1933 to 1935 (Metcalf 5). The 1930’s was the period of the Great Depression, which deeply afflicted the lower classes. Furthermore, there was a lot of competition in jobs between blacks and whites that promoted racism. Harper Lee wrote the novel in the context of the 1950’s: the time of the Civil Rights Movement lead by Southerner Martin Luther King. Furthermore, Brown vs. Board of Education, a case against the education system in which segregation in education was declared unconstitutional. Another important event was the Montgomery bus strike in 1955. Though it did not put an end to segregation in the

South, this strike had an important role in the decline of this form of racism. Thus, by traveling back in time to the context of the 1930's, the novel would appeal to react to what was wrong in the 1950's, bringing to the surface the feeling of guilt placed in the collective unconscious of the American citizens in relation to racism and slavery, especially in the South.

Scout is a motherless child who lives in a provincial town: Maycomb in Maycomb County, which keeps a profound parallelism with Harper Lee's hometown: Montgomery, both villages located in a Southern state, Alabama. This town works as a microcosm that helped Lee to comment critically on the South. Maycomb contradicts the romantic idealization of villages as peaceful and harmonious places. In fact, the first time Maycomb is mentioned, it is described as:

...an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew 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 then: a black dog suffered on a summer's day; bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade of the live oaks on the square (*TKM* 5)³.

The idea of microcosm is highlighted through the figure of the child (Scout). Due to the fact that she has never left its boundaries, Maycomb is the only world she knows, as Dolphus Raymond tells her: "You haven't seen enough of the world yet. You haven't even seen this town but all you gotta do is step back inside the courthouse" (222). Therefore, it is in the courthouse that people from different backgrounds are represented, and where it can be seen that the complications in Maycomb originate in the hypocrisy, mendacity, lack of empathy, cruelty and ignorance of its inhabitants.

³ Further references to this novel are noted parenthetically.

Humorous are the limits that some characters are capable of transgressing to remain part of the group. For example, Dolphus Raymond pretends to be a drunkard so that people forget about his living with a black woman and his colored children, as Tavernier-Courbin has pointed out (48).

The concept of “background” is important in the Southern tradition. This notion refers to the Southern importance of genealogy and ancestors. At the beginning, Scout feels humorously ashamed for the absence of European roots in her family: “Being Southerners, it was a source of shame to some members of the family that we had no recorded ancestors on either side of the Battle of Hastings” (3). In addition, the discussion between Jem and Scout trying to unravel the meaning of “background” is also remarkable. Jem believes education is the difference that separates them and finds four types of folks: “There’s the ordinary kind like us and the neighbors, there’s the kind like the Cunninghams out in the woods, the kind like the Ewells down at the dump, and the negroes” (239). This classification dehumanizes them. Conversely, Scout strongly contradicts his brother: “Naw, Jem, I think there is only one kind of folk, Folks (240)”. After hearing Miss Maudie’s words, Scout adds another definition to the notion of background: “the handful of people who believe in a fair trial for everybody” (261).

The novel also offers a diagram of the most influential social structures in the South, most of them corrupt: The church, the court, and the school: Firstly, the Court System supports the racist status quo (Fine 71). This can be appreciated during Tom Robinson’s trial. Secondly, the church adopts the racist ideology of the court. In fact, blacks and whites are separated in different churches. This criticism against the church can be associated with the hypocrisy of superficial women in the Missionary Society.

These women are racist and disapprove of Atticus's and Scout's values. The encounter between Scout and this society dismantles Miss Maudie's idea: the bigotry of the members of the jury does not give a truthful image of morality in Maycomb. However, Scout's encounter with the Missionary Society deeply worries and disappoints Scout (Durst 104). To conclude, Scout's different teachers reveal different problems regarding education in the South. The ostracism against blacks is also present in it. Another teacher, Miss Gates, explains the difference between the concept of Democracy in USA and Hitler's Dictatorship in Germany. In the process of establishing the difference between these two terms, she bases the definition of persecution on the notion of prejudice. Thus, she condemns the persecution of the Jews in Germany but not the injustices that threaten the black community in USA. However, this is a contradiction since these prejudices do not only affect the Jewish community but also these blacks who have to be unfairly punished in lawsuits.

Tom's death is the most important moment of dramatic climax in the novel that strongly influences the course of the narrative. Because of its central significance, the event is presented extensively. The last scenes of the trial are described in slow-motion:

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 (232).

Furthermore, when she hears the words of the jury "Voice coming from far away" (233) she reproduces them several times "Guilty... Guilty... Guilty..." (233). This slow-motion highlights the drama, the fatality, and the nightmare of Scout: her expectations

of winning the trial are frustrated and together with them, the idea that man is good by nature. The trial marks the point of departure for the children's loss of innocence.

2.1.2. Circular Structure: time destroyer, time restorer

The development of the human personality is the essence of the Bildungsroman. According to Northrop Frye's (1957) this development can be associated with a circular structure: childhood corresponds to spring, romance; youth to summer, comedy; manhood to autumn, tragedy; decrepitude to winter (qtd. in Golban 14). Following this scheme, the seasons in the novel are used in order to accentuate the passing of time and the path of the children towards adulthood. In this way, for the children, summer is their "best season" (38), it is the time when there is not school, when most of the pranks take place, and when Scout spends time with her love: Dill. Winter is a time of danger and endurance for the characters: Miss Maudie overcomes optimistically the fire at her house and Atticus shoots the mad dog that threatens the neighborhood. Jem destroys Mrs. Dubose's camellias after she insults Atticus. In spring the land regenerates, flowers bloom, and relationships are restored: It is in spring that the children find Boo's gifts in the oak. The regeneration of Mrs. Dubose's beautiful garden corresponds to the reconciliation between Jem and Dubose: it is in spring that Mrs. Dubose gives Jem a camellia to thank Jem for his help. Thanks to him, she has overcome her morphine addiction. The tragedy comes in autumn when Mr Radley puts concrete in the knot hole to stop the interchange of tokens and therefore communication between Boo and the children. Furthermore, the novel ends in fall, which underlines that the children are in an adult stage. However, despite this classification, Scout states, "There are no clearly defined seasons in South Alabama; summer drifts into autumn, and autumn is sometimes never followed by winter, but turns to a days-old spring that melts into

summer again" (66). This can be seen when the trial is about to end, a moment in which she feels that summer has turned to winter:

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 (232).

This coldness she feels after the trial derives from the general feeling of fear among the inhabitants of Maycomb when facing the Other.

According to Ursula: "a circular structure suggests a repetition with difference that improves the beginning, everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning" (qtd. in Dubey 83). In this novel, it can be seen that there have been improvements in the end although not everything has changed. Towards the end, there is a restoration that goes back to the initial normality not only in the life of the inhabitants of the village but also in the lives of the family: "Things settle down after a fashion as Atticus said they would" (273). A proof of this is that, as in the beginning, Atticus is reelected for the state legislature. Apart from this, Scout learns from his father to fight "with her head", not her fists (K. Lee 81). That the end improves the beginning can be appreciated when the narrator mentions a discussion with Jem that takes place after their adventures: "We were far too old to settle an argument with fist-fight, so we consulted Atticus" (3). This shows the success of the education Atticus brings to his children.

The novel finishes in a circle because events occur in a repeated fashion. At one point Atticus answers Jem why they have declared Tom guilty: “I don’t know, but they do it. They’ve done it before and they’ll do it again”(235). In fact, at the beginning Scout is talking about the origin of the trial when she says “I said if he wanted to take a broad view of the thing, it all began with Andrew Jackson” (3). Additionally, after the trial there are people who still think the same and react to Tom’s death in a cold manner. For instance, Miss Rachel believes it is better not to defend one’s principles so as to avoid being harmed: “If a man like Atticus wants to butt his head against a stone wall, it’s his head” (236). Similarly, Misses Tutti and Frutti Barber still have prejudices against the Other, when their pieces of furniture are stolen by the kids of the neighbourhood: Thus, they accuse of the burglary to fur sellers they describe as “dark” and “Syrians” (277).⁴

⁴ The circle also aims to highlight that the child, Scout, has gained knowledge but her process of maturation is not complete. This will be developed in the section: The Loss Of Innocence: Growing Up.

2.1.2 Narrative voice and Focalization

Narrative voice is the most remarkable and complex aspect of the novel. According to Mieke Bal in her *Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*: “The insight of the agent that sees must be given a status other than that of the agent that narrates” (101). In this novel, the agent that sees and perceives is the child, Scout, whereas the agent that narrates is the adult Scout. The narrator is homodiegetic, since Scout is a character in the story; and autodiegetic, because she is also the protagonist. Thus, the language of the narrator is that of an adult while its focalization is restricted to that of a child who does not always understand the adult world (Bloom 29).

The narrator is reliable in the sense that the events she tells are true for her, but this reliability is conditioned by her age. Malcolm Bradbury argues that the moral question presented through the eyes of a child “prevents an adequate moral judgment of the fable” (Bloom 30). Firstly, memory can be tricky since there is a temporal gap between the events recalled and the present time of narration. Moreover, sometimes the narrator seems to contradict herself: At one point Scout claims: “We acquired no traumas from watching our father win or lose. I’m sorry that I cannot provide any drama in this respect; if I did, it would not be true” (189). However, later she claims: “the events of the summer hung over us like smoke in a close room” (268). Additionally, the episode of Ewell attacking the children might not be completely truthful. In fact, Heck Tate proves that Scout has been mistaken in retelling it to them just because she was frightened. According to him, Scout “was too scared to know exactly what happened. It was mighty dark out there, black as ink. ‘d take somebody mighty used to the dark to make a competent witness...” (302).

The novel reflects the opinion of writer James Salter about life: according to him, there are two lives: the one that people believe we are living and the real one that involves desire, trouble, thought and fantasy⁵. The gap of time allows the adult narrator to fill the real events of the past with wishful thinking, especially considering that Scout is a creative and imaginative narrator who enjoys reading adventure and Gothic novels. Maycomb is described as a boring town: “there was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County” (6). Harper Lee claimed in an interview that as in the 1930’s they had not toys to play, they relied on their imagination. So, the only way the children had of escaping these barriers is through the use of imagination. In keeping with the characteristics of that kind of setting, Scout projects her fantasy to the reality of Maycomb so as to be able to make sense of her own identity for being an outsider while expressing her fear that arises from the prejudices against the Other. For example, this occurs when Jem (Scout’s brother) forgets his trousers in the Radley Yard and goes to pick up them at night. While Scout is waiting for Jem to return she describes her fears and desperation as if she were the heroine of a Gothic novel, which is quite humorous. “It would take longer, so it was not time to worry yet. I waited until it was time to worry and listened for Mr. Radley’s shotgun” (62). The night after their second assault to Boo’s house, Scout’s feelings of remorse results in a state of madness and insomnia:

Every night-sound I heard from my cot on the back porch was magnified threefold; every scratch of feet on gravel was Boo Radley seeking revenge, every passing Negro laughing in the night was

⁵ As Viry, a character in James Salter’s *Light Years*, points out: “There are really two kinds of life. There is the one people believe you’re living and there is the other. It is this other which causes the trouble, that other we long to see.” (24)

Boo Radley loose and after us; insects splashing against the screen were Boo Radley's insane fingers picking the wire to pieces (61).

In this episode nature is personified: "the chinaberry trees were malignant, hovering, alive" (61). In this Gothic metonymy, the trees are used to express her fear.

The bleak atmosphere of Maycomb intensifies Scout's Gothic vision: parents who neglect and abuse their children, incestuous relationships, and the excessive consumption of alcohol by the members of the mob or Miss Rachel, the violence manifested in the incident between Ewell and Boo Radley as well as in Tom Robinson's death (Durst 40). Furthermore, the feeling of living in a hostile atmosphere in which everybody feels threatened by this violence is highlighted by the fact that many characters like Mr. Radley, Mr. Underwood or Judge Taylor carry a gun. An example is when, after the second prank of the children in the Radley place, Scout hears Mr. Radley shooting (59).

The community's gossip contributes to distorting the children's vision of reality, and creating prejudices about the Other. "Inside the house lived a malevolent phantom. People said he existed, but Jem and I had never seen him. People said he went out at night when the moon was down, and peeped in windows" (44). Boo is inoffensive, but Mrs. Crawford's rumors and stories about Boo make the children imagine Boo as if he were a version of Dracula (Durst 21), or a "madman in the attic" of the Gothic (Blackall, 21). But Boo is not the only victim of rumors, the bad character of Mrs. Dubose has made people think that she keeps "a CSA pistol concealed among her numerous shawls and raps" (110).

Similarly, as a result of social prejudice, Scout sees Dolphus as an “evil man” and an alcoholic, but finally she realizes that his bottle of whisky is filled with coke and that he is nice. In the same way, the Radley place becomes an imaginary haunted house for the children, full of dramatic echoes: “It was a melancholy little drama, woven from bits and scraps of gossip and neighborhood legend” (44).

3. Contrasts between adulthood and childhood

3.1. Atticus: father, teacher and moral leader of Maycomb

The epigraph “Lawyers, I suppose, where children once” (1) reveals the main themes of the novel: childhood and adulthood. Although in the novel the main character and narrator is the child Scout, who portrays the events from her point of view: as Bal remarks “It is possible for one person to express the vision of another” (101). Since *TKM* is a novel of apprenticeship, Scout mainly observes and listens to what happens around her. The name “Scout” is relevant because it means: learning, being in contact with nature, to explore, to listen. Scout specially gazes at the adult world, at the centre of which is his father, Atticus, and the events surrounding the trial. The trial is the central event of the novel because of its implications in relation to racism. That it is a subject of controversy can be appreciated in that it is “a gala occasion” (176). The act of narrating the trial is entrusted to an external witness: Scout. Thus, the novel explores two types of relationships: Those of Scout with children of her own age and these of Scout with the adults. But in her relationships with adults, she focuses on Atticus in his life as: father educating his children, a citizen in Maycomb and a lawyer defending Tom Robinson.

Atticus is omnipresent because he is a recurrent focalized object and central topic in the narrator's text. Atticus's omnipresence is important in the narrative due to the fact that the reader identifies with the narrator, Scout, in her learning process. It is through her father that Scout opens her eyes and becomes aware of the problems in Maycomb. Scout is a child who admires, and even idealizes his father, and asks him questions about the world. Atticus explains what Scout finds difficult to understand. Thus, the effect achieved is the vision of an adult (Atticus) regarding the issue of racism, marginalization or education, among other aspects criticized. This vision is embraced by Scout.

From the very beginning there is a humble description of his office "Atticus's office in the courthouse contained little more than a hat rack, a spittoon, a checkerboard and an unsullied Code of Alabama" (4). His generosity can be appreciated in that he invests money in his brother's education (5). Furthermore, a popular and provincial man "he was Maycomb country born and bred, he knew his people, they knew him" (5). In this way, Atticus is established as moral leader for the community. In fact, the name "Atticus" can be associated with Attica, embodiment of the Greek hero that signifies democracy. His qualifications elevate him as an Emersonian hero for being a non-conformist who questions the past (Erisman 37) for defending the case of Tom, a black man or educating the children on the idea that having rights is not exclusive of people with "background" : all of us are born equal.

Atticus is omnipresent because he is a model for the rest: in fact, the characters often allude to him. In this manner, he is represented as a model of success: in the conversations with Scout, Miss Maudie gives the reader direct knowledge of his traits.

For instance, Miss Maudie says to Scout the reason why Atticus has been elected for the state legislature “Whether Maycomb knows it or not, we’re paying him the highest tribute we can pay a man. We trust him to do it right” (261). Furthermore, his positive values as his integrity constitute a model of leadership: “Atticus Finch is the same in his house as he is on the public streets” (33). Besides, Atticus is taken as a model of reference for their children: “We had two weeks of the coldest weather since 1885, Atticus said (...)” (70). In fact, the children, before reacting to a situation, they think about the way Atticus would do it. “Aunty,” Jem spoke up, “Atticus says you can choose your friends but you sho’ can’t choose your family, an’ they’re still kin to you no matter whether you acknowledge ‘em or not, and it makes you look right silly when you don’t” (247). Finally, Atticus interrupts the games and adventures of the children in order to provide moral advice that will prepare them for the trial in the second part: Empathy, courage, moderation and justice. The last sentence of the novel represents a summary of Atticus’s omnipresence: “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” (309).

3.2. Poetic justice: a romantic approach to the child to fight against injustice

According to the Romantics, children have a special visionary capacity due to the fact they are in contact with nature and have not been polluted with the corruption of the adult world. The purity of the child is emphasized by Dolphus Raymond when he confesses that he uses his alcoholism to cover the controversial fact that he prefers living among blacks better than with the hypocrite whites of Maycomb. Dolphus entrusts the children his secret because adults “could never understand the way I live like I do because that’s the way I want to live” (221). Children are the only ones who are able to feel pain and compassion when injustices come. In fact, Atticus says after the trial “it seems only children weep” (235), emphasizing the insensibility of the adult world.

Atticus in the end is affected by the rigid morality of the adults forgetting an important notion: poetic justice. The purity of the child can be manifested in that it is the child who reminds Atticus of this important concept. The novel unfolds two moral problems: the accusation of an innocent black man and the murder of the villain (Ewell) by a lunatic (Boo). The first problem is not solved; the second is treated with poetic justice⁶ (Sullivan 29). Atticus’s bitterness after the trial turns him into an old man. “his age was beginning to show, his one sign of inner turmoil (...) the grey patches growing at his temples” (294). This leads him to judge severely the attack of Ewell: Sheriff Heck Tate convinces Atticus to consider the incident as an accidental fall of Ewell on his own

⁶ Poetic justice is “a literary device in which, ultimately virtue is rewarded and vice punished. In modern literature it is often accompanied by an ironic twist of fate related to the character’s own action” (Wikipedia). In other words, poetic justice corrects that in justice sometimes morality is forgotten. The reader does not have access to the real events, therefore it is in the power of the narrator to modify the events as she pleases by using the literary device of poetic justice so as to correct that in the world justice contradicts moral values.

knife. Making the incident public would mean the end of Boo's life. Atticus feels that not blaming Boo would imply the end of his own values and would disappoint his children (Durst 95). This is related to Cicero's "Summa Lex, Summa Iniuria", which means that the most strict application of the law can sometimes result into the greatest injustice. The event of Boo killing Ewell with the purpose of saving the children's life is parallel to Atticus using the rifle to kill the mad dog. In both events violence has to be used to protect the community from a threat. Moreover, from the beginning Atticus teaches his children the concept of justice unraveling the most powerful symbol of the novel, the mockingbird: when Atticus gives the children a gun for Christmas, he tells them: "I'd rather you shot at tin cans in the back yard, but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (99). Miss Maudie explains to Scout the metaphor: "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (100). Therefore, the mockingbird is associated with Boo and Tom whereas the bluejay stands for evil: Ewell. However, when Atticus asks Scout if she understands what the Sheriff has said, Scout reminds Atticus of what he has previously taught her: "It'd be sort of like shooting a mockingbird. Wouldn't it?". Thus, the child, due to her peculiar vision, becomes the teacher of the adult whose mind is polluted by the corruption of the adult world. The description of Atticus as an old man changes at the end when his step is described as "youthful". It is Scout who makes "his youthful step return" (305).

3.3. The loss of innocence: growing up

The circular structure discussed above is emphasized by the correlation between beginning and end. Thus, by establishing contrasts between beginning and end, the process of maturation of the characters can be appreciated. In the first part, Scout beats Walter Cunningham at school and refuses to make amends and be polite to him, but in the second part, Scout has an argument with Aunt Alexandra because she forbids Scout to play with him. Furthermore, fear is involved in the process of maturation. At the beginning Scout is frightened at haints whereas in the end Jem and Scout laugh at them by repeating the song of the beginning: “Haints, hot steam incarnations, secret signs, that old thing, angel bright, life in death, get off the road, don’t suck my breath” (280). Moreover, the most terrifying places for the children, Mrs. Dubose’s house and the Radley place constitute the most appropriate settings for their rite of passage. Firstly, the Radley Drama⁷ the children represent at the beginning is a trial for them since they have to face their fears: Boo trying to kill his father. Playing the roles of their neighbors in their drama helps them to follow Atticus’s advice: “to walk around in the shoes of others” (80). Secondly, the encounter of the children with Mrs. Dubose is crucial to develop their empathy and courage, which will prepare them for the harshness of adulthood (Metcalf 75). In the first part of the novel, the children add to their games that of watching Atticus in court. However, the seriousness of the court clashes with the innocent games in the Radley yard. These spaces make a contrast between the rationality of the lawyers and the moral values of the children while “ironizing the differences between the official law and the law in men’s hearts” (Lesley, Marx 11). The courthouse, also a dark atmosphere, determines their first step into adulthood. In fact, it is after the trial that Scout says “So many things had happened to us, Boo Radley

⁷ A play the children write during the summer about their neighbors: The Radleys.

was the least of our fears" (268). She even feels remorse when recalling those times in which Jem and herself had tormented Radley. Jem considers himself "too old for Halloween" (278). Maycomb has prepared a House of Horrors for the children to enjoy Halloween, and Scout describes her experience in it with no emotion: "We squandered our first nickels on the House of Horrors, which scared us not at all" (283). This is highlighted by a moment in which the children are supposed to touch objects that correspond to parts of the body: "Here's his eyes," we were told when we touched two peeled grapes on a saucer. "Here's his heart," which felt like raw liver. "These are his innards," and our hands were thrust into a plate of cold spaghetti." (283). As the child has lost her innocence, she cannot enjoy Halloween as much as when she was younger.

The most remarkable moment in which the process of maturation seems to be complete is Scout returning home after having accompanied Boo to his house. She describes a whole picture of the neighborhood by saying: "I've had never seen our neighborhood from this angle" (307). As a result, the angle from which she sees the neighborhood coincides with the angle from which Boo sees it. Therefore, she has reached Boo's vision by abandoning the prejudices of the neighborhood and understanding his personal circumstances. This shows that she has learnt Atticus's first lesson: "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"(33). Indeed, Atticus's lesson is repeated at the end by using her own words to express that she has learnt it so well that she has made it her own: "One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around them" (308). At the beginning Scout states "I knew nothing except what I gathered from Time Magazine" (36), but in the end she

claims “As I made my way home, I thought Jem and I would get grown but there wasn’t much else left for us to learn, except possibly algebra” (208). It is evident that after such shocking event, the unfair trial, they have gained knowledge and experience. Similarly to Dill’s paradoxical presentation: “I’m little but I’m old” (7), when Scout is going back home she says “I felt very old” (308), which clashes with her behavior THAT is still infantile: “but when I looked at the tip of my nose I could see fine misty beads, but looking cross-eyed made me dizzy so I quit.” (208). Thus, they have gained knowledge but they are still children. That is the reason why a circular structure closes the novel.

4. Empathy and racial discrimination: the solution against segregation

It is through empathy, one of the main themes of the novel, that the problem of justice is solved. Both Scout and the readers through the figure of Atticus are encouraged to practice empathy. As Atticus says “you never understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk through it”(33). As has been previously explained, Scout learns from his father to fight “with her head”, not her fists. During the Mrs. Dubose episode, Atticus encourages the children to avoid harsh judgments and to respect Mrs. Dubose’s virtues rather than condemn her faults. Furthermore, empathy is a weapon against violence. This is shown in the second part of the novel: Atticus is protecting Tom, armed with a book rather than a gun, from a mob that comes to attack them. Despite the fact that Scout is small, her courage and empathy work as a weapon to defend his father and dispel the mob. Among the unknown faces she spots that of Mr. Cunningham and starts with him a conversation about his son Walter “I beat him up one time but he was real nice about it. Tell him hey for me, won’t you?” (164). Scout’s story about her rejection of violence reminds the mob of their humanity and manners. Thus, the mob controls their violent instincts against Atticus

and leave the scene. K. Lee states that Scout tackles this problem because she remembers Atticus's lesson about politeness: talking to people about their interests. Thus, Scout asks Mr. Cunningham about his son and personal issues and then, he dispels the mob (K. Lee 89) Moreover, Calpurnia sympathizes with Boo when she thinks of his father as "The meanest man ever God blew breath into" (12). Even Scout, afraid of harming Boo, seems reluctant to participate in Jem's games aimed at mocking Boo just because they are cruel. Her feeling of being an outsider at school makes her empathize with Boo. This can be seen when she compares her sadness to the description of the house: "When I passed the Radley Place for the fourth time that day—twice at a full gallop—my gloom had deepened to match the house" (31). Dill also empathizes with Boo at the trial. Tom justifies his escape from Mayella's house at Ewell's arrival because he was frightened; the cruelty of Mr. Gilmer against Tom brings Dill's tears. Scout gives the reason for Dill's cry: "I guessed he hadn't fully recovered from running away" (219).

It is worth adding that Harper Lee mentions the novel *The Grey Ghost* in *TKM* as a kind of *mise en abyme* of the main text: It is mentioned at the beginning, in the games of the children and at the end in the hands of Atticus. Lee uses this novel to make the reader understand better the issue of marginalization, and the segregation of the blacks in the US. In this novel, the main character, a misfit, closely resembles the figure of Boo Radley. The ghosts are all these characters who feel alone in their condition of outsiders: Mayella, Scout, Dill, Boo, Dolphus or the black community. Atticus says "there were other ways of making people into ghosts" (12): gossips, rumors, injustice, and marginalization. The novel uses the notion of empathy as a way to solve the difficult concept of poetic justice, previously explained. The very name Boo makes

reference to his ghostly presence. But after Ewell's attack on the children, Boo becomes a hero and a member of the community. That Boo is recognized in the community is not only seen in the polite treatment of Atticus and Scout when welcoming Boo in house. Boo establishes a bond with Atticus by giving him a gift: the life of his children (Rowe 15). Subsequently, Atticus tells him: "thank you for my children, Arthur" (305). Furthermore, when Scout says "Hey Boo!" (298), he ceases to be an outcast. In fact, K. Lee asserts that Scout is a realist who has learnt to accept people's faults seeing the best in each person (90). From this moment on, the children realize that Boo is not a ghost. Therefore, when Boo becomes Arthur Radley, the supernatural atmosphere vanishes (Rowe 15). Scout claims in the end "nothing is real scary except in books" (309). Nothing is as terrifying as the gossip, fiction, prejudices that turn people into ghosts. Later, Scout says "he was real nice..." (295) referring both to the protagonist of *The Grey Ghost* and Boo. Then, Atticus answers Scout "most people are when you finally see them" (295).

5. Conclusion.

As I have tried to demonstrate, the mastery of Harper Lee in *TKM* lies in the characteristics of her narrator because: Firstly, it connects the racism that affected the South in the 30's to the context of the 50's, when the book was published. Secondly, through focalization, she creates a powerful, though sometimes distorted, vision that shows Scout's precocious awareness towards injustice. Furthermore, the main themes of the novel: the clash between adulthood and childhood or the notion of empathy help the reader to engage with the social criticism that the novel conveys. *TKM* has been regarded as a bildungsroman as well as a children's novel. Its narrator, Scout, triggers a feeling of nostalgia in the adult reader, transporting her/him back into the world of

childhood. Simultaneously, it attracts younger readers for the simple fact that it is narrated by a child. The reader admires Atticus as a moral leader in the same way Scout does, wanting to be like him. Thus, it is through the simple explanations of Atticus that both Scout and the reader gradually learn to understand the complex issue of racism and segregation. Although Scout's sensibility is somehow affected, she is able to learn from her crisis (Tom's death) and tries to improve her surroundings. Thus, the child resists the general feeling of disappointment after Tom's death, keeping her enthusiasm so as to bring hope. Just as Scout is a reminder of humanity for the mob, the nostalgia the novel brings is a reminder of the humanity these adults have lost. In a world in which racism, cruelty and hypocrisy are the root of the troubles, the child refuses to be blinded by them, and overcomes the fear of the Other through the figure of Boo/Arthur Radley. Therefore, Atticus's idealistic struggle has been effective since he may have not changed the mind of Southerners but he has greatly contributed to the growing up of Scout. The efficacy of Atticus's lessons and Scout's voice and point of view are unquestionable because in the US, the novel has had the greatest impact after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published. For this reason, Harper Lee was awarded with the presidential Medal of Freedom. *TKM* reflects the need to preserve the memory of the past but also the importance of gaining knowledge and experience from the older. It also shows the importance of courage to improve society and to defend one's values. This is what Atticus teaches and what Scout and the reader learn.

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