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—APPROACHING *To Kill A Mockingbird*—

Once begun, *To Kill A Mockingbird* almost teaches itself. Students generally both like it and learn from it, and this positive response is certainly the reason so many of us teach it year after year.

A classic almost from the day of its publication, *To Kill A Mockingbird* has moved into the American classroom and into the educational canon as thoroughly as any recent novel we can name. As teachers, we can see any number of reasons for this. First, *To Kill A Mockingbird* is an *adult* novel about *childhood* (as are many of our finest novels). Students relate easily to Scout's and Jem's efforts to meet adult expectations, to deal with the demands of school and peer pressure, and to enter puberty with some equanimity; they are involved in exactly these issues in their own lives.

To Kill A Mockingbird portrays both believable children and strong, admirable adult characters who ask the children to see the world clearly and assess both the gifts it offers and the damages it does. In their behavior, and with their words, the adults encourage Jem and Scout to acquire the courage necessary to live worthy lives in a difficult world.

Thematically, *To Kill A Mockingbird* deals with racism, an issue that has challenged our society's finest minds and hearts almost from the beginning of our American story—and it does so in ways that do not insult the reader's intelligence. As an historical novel, it provides opportunities to teach a portion of American history—the decade of the 1930s—in microcosm.

Finally, *To Kill A Mockingbird* is a good story—simple in structure and compelling in content. The Oscar-winning film version offers ample opportunity to discuss the issues of translation from one medium to another.

These attributes make *To Kill A Mockingbird* an obvious choice for a class novel, but for experienced readers and for teachers, there is another advantage: this novel is beautifully crafted. As we read, we can help our students examine Harper Lee's skill as a storyteller, pointing out strengths we want our students to appreciate in their reading and to aspire to in their own writing: an eye for the details of character and setting; a mastery of dialect; an ability to create a design that links two seemingly separate stories; a voice that captures a child's struggle to understand a mysterious adult world.

Perhaps most helpful in the development of our students' skills as readers of imaginative literature is Lee's ability to weave a rich fabric of symbols, images, and recurring motifs that clearly show us we are in the hands of an artist. In *To Kill A Mockingbird* the search for echoes, for second and third levels of meaning, is not some game teachers play; rather, it is an activity that reflects our desire as readers to attend carefully to the words of an author who has attended carefully to the mastery of her craft.

It is unfortunate that children's "classics" often become "Children's Classics" and soon "kids' books." *To Kill A Mockingbird* is not a kids' book. Neither is it simply an exposé of racism that chooses the obvious ploy of "letting a little child lead us." This is a rich novel—thematically, technically, and culturally—whose power and range allows us to help students broaden their focus.

APPROACHING *To Kill A Mockingbird*

This book focuses on several important aspects of *To Kill A Mockingbird*. There are far more possibilities than any one class would be able to (or would want to) explore; this means that teaching the book can be a different experience each year—a real advantage for a teacher who is routinely asked to offer a fresh outlook on material that has actually been taught for many years.

The list below touches briefly on possible angles of approach to *To Kill A Mockingbird*, many of them overlapping. Specific activities related to each approach can be found in *Setting the Stage: Prereading*.

- **Plot: The Conflict of Humanity and Society.** There is Boo's conflict with Maycomb, Tom's conflict with the white justice system, Atticus's conflict with his neighbors, and the children's conflict with the adult world. These conflicts echo and resonate with each other; the two major plot strands—Boo and Tom—mirror one another.
- **Social and Historical.** A factual view reveals a reflection of 1935 small-town Alabama. An issue-centered view centers on the differences between 1935 Alabama—the year in which the book is set—and a 1960 entry into the decade of Civil Rights activism—the year the book was published. Questions include *Who is innocent? How long can someone stay innocent? Can a society be innocent? Can a society sin? Can a society atone for sins committed out of innocence or ignorance?* This view calls for an evaluation of the progress of society toward Scout's "just one kind of folks" view of the world.
- **Major Themes.**
 - Prejudice:** learning how to judge in *reasonable* fashion. Major motifs associated with this theme: "standing in someone else's shoes," or examining point of view; superstition; secrets and hypocrisies; mockingbirds.
 - Growing Up:** family, society, self; finding your place. Major motifs associated with this theme: boundaries; "when to worry"; formal education.
 - Courage:** learning when, how, and what to fight. Major motifs associated with this theme: weapons and losing battles; boundaries; "when to worry." You may choose to cover all three, or, alternatively, to assign one-third of the class to each theme, making them experts on that aspect of the novel.
- **How to Read a Book On Its Own Terms.** This approach involves following structural strands (Boo and Tom); following motifs; understanding a title; understanding characters through inferences, predictions, and evaluations.
- **Comparison of Two Art Forms.** How to write a movie/how to film a book. A viewing of the movie warrants some examination of the betrayals of and faithfulnesses to the book. In addition, the class may benefit from a discussion of the interesting claim by some critics that Lee wrote the book with Hollywood in mind.
- **Key Words.** How to understand the changing/accumulating definitions of key words in this novel: *education, courage, prejudice, lady, background, trash*. The direct and indirect references to these concepts—as well as others the students identify—may be used as a lens through which the meaning of the book can become clear.

BACKGROUND

Author

(Nelle) Harper Lee, born in Monroeville, Alabama in 1926, has only this one novel to her credit, but it has been enough to earn her a Pulitzer Prize and a wide audience. Lee's mother was Frances (Finch) Lee; her father was Amasa Coleman Lee (of the Civil War Robert E. Lees). The character Atticus is apparently based on Lee's father, who practiced law in Monroeville. Her sister, too, is a lawyer who still practices in their home town. Lee herself studied law at the University of Alabama before she turned to writing (without completing her law degree). No doubt Lee chose the Charles Lamb epigraph to her novel, "Lawyers, I suppose, were children once," as a nod to her upbringing.

Structure

To Kill A Mockingbird is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the children's efforts to lure Boo Radley, the neighborhood recluse, into the light of day. The events of Part II center on Atticus's failure to acquit Tom Robinson for the rape of a white woman, and his subsequent success in luring the truth about the crime into the light of the courtroom. It is this oddly successful failure that endangers the Finch children's lives and draws Boo Radley into the light at last to save them from the vengeance of Bob Ewell. The two plots appear quite separate at first, but thematically they mirror each other as, respectively, a childhood and an adult version of precisely the same conflicts.

Setting and Atmosphere

In the early 1930s, the small town of Maycomb, Alabama, shows the effects of the Depression: the general hard times require that the community draw on its values of compassion, generosity, and endurance, and the Southern caste structure ensures that these values will come into conflict with deep-seated prejudices. The small-town setting also provides characters who are often unusual, but whom the townspeople themselves have long since labeled and now look upon with tolerance, if not affection. The children need to learn how to understand these men and women who form the background of their childhood.

Point of View

Scout tells the story of herself as she ages from six to eight in order to understand it for the first time—and to do so, some distance is required. The question of how old the narrator is has often been discussed by critics; many have formed conclusions that overlook the first few paragraphs of the book. The story is *not* told by a six-year-old narrator. Rather, the narrator is trying to record her world as it appeared to her when she *was* six years old. No child, no matter how precocious, could tell the story the way this story is told. Lee confines Scout's observations to two categories: what she really believes she saw, heard, felt, and thought at the time; and, on rare occasions, her reevaluation of the events.

Characters

To Kill A Mockingbird is filled with wonderful characters. It is a novel of personal development, in a sense a *Bildungsroman* in that it focuses on the growth and education of the young narrator, Scout