

Three Pages, in One Glance Michael Clay Thompson

When you first learn to write a research paper, a three-page typed paper can seem overwhelming, but it really is a very short paper. Here is an entire three-page, typed paper (four, including the Works Cited page), shrunk to five-point type; as you see, it only contains about ten paragraphs and five long quotations. A three-page research paper is about quality, not quantity.

Michael C. Thompson
Mrs. Johnson
English 8
4 April 2002

The Intention of the Mockingbird

It is not uncommon for an author to select a title that points, arrowlike, to the core of a book's meaning. That is what Jack London did, for example, with *The Call of the Wild*, and what F. Scott Fitzgerald did when he called *Gatsby* great. By writing a book about an ordinary day in the life of an ordinary man, and then calling it *Ulysses*, James Joyce did much to direct readers' attention to his theme, and Ernest Hemingway did the same by using a line from a John Donne poem for the title of his novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

If Harper Lee had not called her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, it is possible that readers would have scarcely noticed the mockingbird references in the text. After all, there are many wonderful lines, many engrossing characters, and many scenes that transfix a reader. We can imagine that the novel might have had many titles: *The Day of the Recluse*, for example, or *The Maycomb Event*, or *The Prosecution of the Innocent*. Of all the possibilities, however, Lee chose the title we know, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and the choice itself, which at first may seem unlikely, attracts our curiosity. What did Harper Lee intend us to see, by calling this novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

The title phrase appears in chapter ten, where it is introduced in a literal, rather than metaphorical, way. The story is already under full development, the reader has a strong sense of the Finch family (named, we note, for a bird) and of Maycomb as a community, and Atticus has already accepted the responsibility of defending Tom Robinson. He has told Scout that they are not going to win the case, because "we were licked a hundred years before we started" (Lee 76). Lee has drawn a powerful contrast between the values of the Finch family and the racist bigotry that surrounds them, and the ugly language of racism has begun to threaten the quaint and charming--and sometimes inspiring--elements of the book. This background recedes, though, when Atticus gives the children their B.B. guns:

When he gave us our air rifles Atticus wouldn't teach us to shoot. Uncle Jack instructed us in the rudiments thereof; he said Atticus wasn't interested in guns. Atticus said to Jem one day, "I'd rather you shot at tin cans in the back yard, but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." (90)

Scout notes that this was the only time she ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something; puzzled, she asks Miss Maudie about it:

"Your father's right," she said. "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." (90)

In these lines there is little indication that the metaphor should ascend to the level of a title; indeed, there is no indication that it is a metaphor. The idea is that Finches should not kill mockingbirds, not that finches shouldn't. Not senselessly killing a mockingbird because it is harmless sings its heart out seems to be literal, to be nothing more than a good piece of fatherly advice. Afterwards, to her surprise, Scout finds Jim shooting not bluejays but tin cans.

Later in the same chapter, however, the mockingbird's significance increases. A mad dog is coming, fear pervades the atmosphere, and Harper Lee writes that "Nothing is more deadly than a deserted, waiting street. The trees were still, the mockingbirds were silent . . ." (94). Here we see the mockingbirds as harbingers, their silenced song a warning of danger.

The killing of mockingbirds reemerges in chapter twenty-five, so subtly that it almost goes unnoticed. Jem finds Scout on the back porch, tormenting a roly-poly, and says, "Don't do that, Scout. Set him out on the back steps" (238). Scout obeys, but thinks about Jem: "He was certainly never cruel to animals, but I had never known his charity to embrace the insect world" (238). Scout asks Jem why she shouldn't mash the roly-poly, and Jem replies, "Because they don't bother you" (238). A few pages later Mr. B.B. Underwood, whose name reminds us of the air rifles that Atticus gave the children, writes an editorial in *The Maycomb Tribune*, his subject the killing of Tom Robinson:

. . . he was writing so children could understand. Mr. Underwood simply figured it was a sin to kill cripples, be they standing, sitting, or escaping. He likened Tom's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children . . . (241)

In B.B. Underwood's editorial, the mockingbird theme rises to a higher level. By using the identical words "a sin to kill," Harper Lee signals her awareness--the language is not coincidental--and by directly referring to the "senseless slaughter of songbirds," as a metaphor for the killing of Tom Robinson, she plunges us into the task of comparison. Tom Robinson's innocence, his helplessness, his beautiful spirit, all of this has been killed, and with his death, the community has senselessly killed something good in itself.

When we next meet the mockingbird, Bob Ewell is about to attack the children in the dark. The children are walking to the schoolhouse for their play; they toward the Radley house, "a scary place" (255), talking about ghosts. As they pass the Radley house, Scout mentions Boo, who "doesn't mean anybody any harm"--reminiscent of Miss Maudie's description of mockingbirds and Jem's comment about the roly-poly. Then, they are directly in front of Boo Radley's house:

High above us in the darkness a solitary mocker poured out his repertoire in blissful unawareness of whose tree he sat in, plunging from the shrill kee, kee of the sunflower bird to the irascible qua-ack of a bluejay, to the sad lament of Poor Will, Poor Will, Poor Will. (255)

Like Boo Radley, who will soon have a more prominent role in the story, this mockingbird is "solitary." Like Boo, it sings alone, and like Boo, whose house is always kept closed, it is in the dark.

From this point, where the solitary mocker sings in front of Boo's house, things happen fast. The children are attacked by Bob Ewell and saved by Boo Radley, who is forced out of his solitude in order to save the children. In the process, Boo kills Bob Ewell with a knife, but Sheriff Tate, in a poignant and heroic stance, announces that Bob Ewell fell on his knife. When Atticus objects to this interpretation, feeling that there should be a proper inquest, Sheriff Tate stands his ground, and uses the word sin:

To my way of thinkin', Mr. Finch, taking the one man who's done you and this town a great service an' draggin' him with his shy ways into the limelight--to me, that's a sin. It's a sin and I'm not about to have it on my head. (276)

Worried that his children will see a flouting of the truth, and blame him for not upholding justice, Atticus approaches Scout:

"Scout," he said, "Mr. Ewell fell on his knife. Can you possibly understand?"

. . . "Yes sir, I understand," I reassured him. "Mr. Tate was right."

Atticus disengaged himself and looked at me. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?" (276)

In Scout's words the final meanings of the title come together. Putting Boo Radley through an inquest, or even announcing to the community that he had acted heroically, would cruelly expose him to the very thing he has spent his life avoiding. It would torture him, and he is good.

It is a sin to kill a mockingbird, to kill a roly-poly, to slaughter songbirds, to kill a cripple. It is a sin to drag a shy recluse into the limelight, when all he has done is save the lives of children being murdered. The mockingbird, that bothers no crops but sings all of the birdsongs, is the symbol of what is good in life: what is innocent, harmless, and beautiful. Though this goodness appears in many forms, it is wrong to kill it; it is senseless; it's a sin.

Works Cited

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: Warner, 1960.