



# Autobiographical Elements in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyse the autobiographical elements in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* which brings out the similarities in the life of the novelist Harper Lee and that of the protagonist, Scout. They both tend to share some coincidental situations in their lives wherein they seek answers to the questions which were asked by themselves and by others (public). Even though they were discriminated by their gender, they never listened to the public.

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## Introduction

The author of the book, Harper Lee, has a strange resemblance to the protagonist of the novel, Scout. She is depicted as an impulsive tomboyish girl who feels bored at her school because she is gifted intellectually. In addition, as the novel develops, she is portrayed as a sharp observer and an open-minded person. Harper Lee, as a child, didn't show a ladylike character and was open about everything. Like Scout in the book, she also developed an impartiality which was taught by her father, Atticus. He preferred to do what was good, instead of going along with the public's opinion on everything. The primary coincidence that should be noted between Harper Lee and Scout in the novel is that they both broke the social barriers. They looked at situations in general, instead of merely accepting what was socially imposed by other people during the time period in which they lived. Not just Harper Lee and Scout are similar to each other but so were their families, especially their fathers. Scout's father in the novel was a rare soul who saw beyond partiality and saw goodness and lends a helping hand for the needy people who were financially instable and the people who came under the line of racial discrimination. Scout's father is most notable in the book for defending an African - American man who was accused of raping a White woman. His philosophy about humanity is exhibited when he states, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view until you climb into his skin and walk around it" (Lee, 33). He gave importance to the man's life and the truth which laid within the depths, without even thinking what others will think about him and about his family. Atticus' selfless nature towards the truth is what made him unique from other Caucasian people.

On the other hand, the character of Atticus Finch was inspired by Lee's father, Amasa Coleman Lee, a newspaper

editor and an attorney. In 1919, he defended two Black men who had been charged for murdering a Caucasian White storekeeper. Eventually he lost the case. When the men were convicted, they were sentenced to be hanged and mutilated, and later Lee's father was so disillusioned that he abandoned criminal law. While both the lawyers (Atticus and Amasa) lost their court cases, they encouraged their daughters with a strong moral lesson. Clearly this incident made an impression on young Nelle (Harper).

Lee's influence for the character of Scout was inspired by her youth experience itself. Scout in the novel is portrayed to be academically superior to her classmates and someone who would rather roll around in the dirt than sit and drink tea even though she was forced to wear a dress and act like a lady before the church ladies who were complaining about an African mission in the novel. "You're mighty dresses up, Miss Jean Louise" (Lee, 253).

When Harper Lee was a student in her small Alabama town, she hated school as she was not challenged enough. It was not until she was in high school that she was persuaded by her English teacher, who introduced her to the beautiful world of literature and writing. Even though she did not love her pre-secondary years, she gradually enjoyed her college. Harper Lee behaved the opposite comparing to other women, with her tomboy behaviour which did not disappear even she grew out to be a young adult. During her time at Huntington College, she was "an exceptional student focusing on studies and writing instead of makeup, clothes, and dating like other girls" (famousauthor.org). Harper Lee's unique attitude towards life vitalized her observant nature which prepared her to create social changes in her works and in reality.

The 'Spooky Neighbour' Lee illustrates in her novel, was inspired by a family who lived in a broad-up house in the street wherein Scout grew up. The real name of the character

Boo Radley is Arthur. The kids' called him "Boo" because just seeing him scared the children and even the neighbours in Maycomb with disturbing thoughts. Jem cooks-up a story about Boo with all the rumours that he has heard before to make both Dill and Scout frightened so that they will not be interested to dig much about Boo. Jem being the eldest amongst them, he was the most terrified person which he didn't wanted to display out to them, especially to Dill.

'Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that's why his hands were bloodstained—if you ate an animal raw, you could never wash the blood off. There was a long jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time'. (Lee, 14).

In the book, Boo Radley is a loner who leaves presents for the children in a tree. He may have been referred after a real man named Son Boulware, who lived in Monroeville when Lee was a child. According to Capote, "He was a real man, and he lived just down the road from us. We used to go and get those things out of the trees. Everything [Lee] wrote about it is absolutely true." (Mentalfloss)

Lee demonstrated the neighbour kid Dill after Truman Capote. As a child, Capote – the creator of *In Cold Blood* and *Breakfast At Tiffany's* – lived nearby to Lee. They played together and even shared Lee's. The two youngsters were outside the groups of friends of their affectionate Southern town. "Nelle was too rough for most other girls, and Truman was too soft for most other boys". (Adrien, 1)

The depression – era in Maycomb, where the novel was set, looks somewhat like Lee's residence of Monroeville, Alabama. In the book, Maycomb is depicted as "an island in a patchwork sea of cotton fields and timber land". In 2013, Lee brought a claim against Monroeville's museum, who she blamed for misusing her popularity. (Mental Floss, 1). Lee has also described about the cotton fields in the novel wherein Mr Link Deas owns the cotton fields that Tom Robinson worked in – stands up for Tom in court. "Yes suh, I had to pass her place goin'to and from the field every day." "Whose field?" "I picks for Mr. Link Deas." "Were you picking cotton in November?" (Lee, 210).

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is primarily a book about the faults and hypocrisy of the society. Harper Lee courageously wrote about racism even when it was a very controversial topic during the time period in which this book was written. Caucasian citizens were just starting to become aware of issues on racism due to the Civil Rights Movement and this novel created even more of an understanding. Many readers, in particular, could relate to the character of Scout and were intrigued by looking at racism through the eyes of a child. Scout, throughout the novel, develops a broad perspective about her society. During one point in the book, Scout expresses a desire to go to Calpurnia's (their housekeeper)

African – American church and later to her house, but was unfortunately stopped by her Aunt Alexandra.

'You all were coming back from Calpurnia's church that Sunday?

Jem said, Yessum, she took us.

I remembered something. Yessum, and she promised me I could come out to her house some afternoon. Atticus, I'll go next Sunday if it's all right, can I? Cal said she'd come get me if you were off in the car.

You may not.' Aunt Alexandra said it. (Lee, 149)

In addition, Scout recognizes the duplicity of her town when her teacher exhibits hatred towards Adolf Hitler and sympathy towards the Jewish people, even though she overheard her heartlessly saying that African - Americans needed a lesson to be taught. "Over here we don't believe in persecuting anybody. Persecutions comes from people who are prejudiced. There are no better people in the world than the Jews, and why Hitler doesn't think so is a mystery to me" (Lee, 270).

Harper Lee's character of Scout is an incredibly talented, wise girl and even today still influences the readers. In conclusion, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a novel that has contributed greatly to the moral advancement because of its intense characterisation with the violence and the prejudice that was illustrated without any masking. Through Harper Lee's character of Atticus, we learn more about the prejudices in racism, particularly seen in the court of law. In addition, Scout is a character we all can relate to and give a new definition of what being a girl means. This novel is a true classic, not only because it was popular, but because it revealed the pores of society and inspired us to fix them up.

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