Race, Class, and Gender in To Kill a Mockingbird: Crash Course Literature 211

Crash Course: Literature
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John Green:

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature, and today we continue our discussion of *To Kill a Mockingbird.*

=====Intro - *Mockingbird* and Empathy (0:04)=====

So the takeaway from last week's video about *Mockingbird* was this: "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." And for me, at least, that's one of the great pleasures of reading. We get to escape the strictures of our narrow lives and travel through time and space, imagine the world from other people's perspectives. And by accessing this wide range of human experience, we can understand that other people are really real and isn't that an amazing thing to be able to do while you're also eating Cheetos?!?

Downside, you stain all your books with Cheeto fingers, but it's worth it!

[Crash Course Lit 2 Intro]

So some people argue that the empathy and understanding that we can get from reading is in fact, like, the point of all culture. In 1875, the English poet and critic Matthew Arnold argued that culture: "…seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light." If that's the point of culture, I'm not sure that we've done that well, especially since in that quote, Matthew Arnold said, "men" when I presume he meant, you know, people.

So *To Kill a Mockingbird* didn't "do away" with class structure, but it does critique social and racial divisions in the American South. And like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart, To Kill a Mockingbird* is a story about the past, but it is also very much a product of the time in which it was written. All right, let's go straight to the Thought Bubble today.

=====Thought Bubble - Race Relations in the 1950's (1:28)=====

So Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the 1950s—a decade of huge changes in the social landscape of the United States: Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus (precipitating the Montgomery Bus Boycott). Riots broke out after two African-Americans were admitted into the University of Alabama. And that was just in Lee's home state! In Mississippi, Emmett Till, a 14 year old African-American boy, was killed for allegedly whistling at a white woman, and the Supreme Court decided that "separate but equal" schools are inherently unequal in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954. Congress passed a Civil Rights Act in 1957 to support the integration of schools. In Arkansas, the governor used the National Guard to prevent nine African-American students from entering Little Rock High School, and President Eisenhower sent federal troops to integrate that school.

Lee reflects on her 1930s childhood from the perspective of the conflict-ridden 1950s. So yes, Lee is nostalgic for the sweetness and light of her youth, for summer days playing outdoors, lemonade on front porches, reading on a father's lap, but she's also unflinching in her critiques of the bitterness and ignorance that characterized social and race relations. That combination of nostalgia and criticism makes Mockingbird both endearing and enduring.

=====The Cunninghams (2:38)=====

Thanks, Thought Bubble. So our hero and narrator, Scout, is confused by the hatred and violence she witnesses in her town. At the start of *Mockingbird*, Jem explains the social order of Maycomb: "The thing about it is, our kind of folks don't like the Cunninghams, the Cunninghams don't like the Ewells, and the Ewells hate and despise the colored folks." Scout doesn't like this, she argues that there is, "just one kind of folks. Folks." Scout, I don't wanna cast aspersions, but that's *literally* the definition of communism.

But class is deeply entrenched in Maycomb; like, when Scout asks her Aunt Alexandra if she can invite a poor classmate named Walter Cunningham home, Alexandra tells her: "…you should be gracious to everybody, dear. But you don't have to invite him home." And when Scout pressures further, Alexandra finally says: "… he—is—trash, that's why you can't play with him. I'll not have you around him, picking up his habits and learning Lord-knows-what." But in the logic of the novel, Alexandra's thinking isn't just mean-spirited, it's flat-out dangerous, because Scout and Jem have actually already hosted Walter Cunningham—a fact that saves Atticus from a beating and (briefly) saves the life of Tom Robinson.

Because, remember when a mob converges on the jail to lynch Tom, they find Atticus waiting outside, right? Scout and Jem then arrive on the scene and when Scout innocently mentions to Mr. Cunningham, a leader of the group that wants to lynch Tom, that his son is "a real nice boy," a humbled Mr. Cunningham tells the mob to disperse. So it's by not honoring the class structure of Maycomb that Scout is able to achieve a small measure of justice.

=====Calpurnia (4:00)=====

It's also telling that it's not Atticus, or any other member of their white upper middle class social order, who taught Scout how to pay young Walter Cunningham proper respect. It's the family's African-American housekeeper, Calpurnia, because in fact, Scout's really rude to Walter when he eats at her house. She asks Walter "what the sam hill he was doing" after he pours syrup all over his food, and then Calpurnia summons Scout to the kitchen and lets her have it. Calpurnia explains that guests, no matter who they are, must be treated well and then tells Scout that if she is not going to behave, she won't eat at the table, she has to eat in the kitchen.

And Scout really respects Calpurnia, who, by the way, is a fascinating character. Unlike most African Americans in 1930s Alabama, Calpurnia reads, writes, she has excellent grammar. And Scout notices that Calpurnia chooses to speak differently with white people than she does with African-Americans. When Scout asks her about this, Calpurnia replies, "….Now what if I talked white-folks' talk at church, and with my neighbors? They'd think I was puttin' on airs to beat Moses." And Scout's awestruck by the notion that Calpurnia "led a modest double life… The idea that she had a separate existence outside our household was a novel one, to say nothing of her having command of two languages." This is again a moment of Scout learning to imagine others complexly, which, after all, is her real education.

So Calpurnia's "double life" is a textbook example of what W.E.B. Du Bois called a "double-consciousness" in his famous book *The Souls of Black Folk* (published in 1903). Du Bois describes "double-consciousness" as the "sense…of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

And Calpurnia is acutely aware of how she looks in the eyes of others. She has internalized the racism of whites as well as the classism inside her own community, and she treads carefully in both worlds. And she's also a woman, so she has to navigate gender expectations. Like although Calpurnia usually allows Scout to wear overalls, she dresses her up for church. And I think that gesture represents more than professional pride. It also demonstrates how deeply ingrained ideals of Southern femininity are in Calpurnia's life: it's one thing, and certainly this heroism shouldn't be dismissed, to allow a girl to "act like a boy" at home.

But when it comes to her church and her community, Calpurnia ultimately forces Scout to conform to the gender roles that we discussed last week.

So that's one way that race and gender discrimination manifested itself in Maycomb. Another is the experience of Tom Robinson. Despite being proven innocent beyond a shadow of a doubt, Tom is sentenced to death. So how is Scout supposed to make sense of that? Well for this, we turn to Atticus Finch.

=====Open Letter to Movie Adaptations (6:35)=====

He's sort of a Gregory Peck - oooh. It's time for the open letter.

Oh, look at that, it's the movie tie-in edition of my own book, *The Fault in Our Stars.* An open letter to movie adaptations. I just want to state, for the record, that this was Meredith's idea. It's not like I need Crash Course to inform you that the paperback edition of my book is now available for just $12.99.

"Dear Movie Adaptations,

"Why are you so often so bad? The standard narrative is that movie adaptations are bad because you can't fit a whole novel into a movie. But one, that doesn't explain *Where the Wild Things Are,* which is, like, 32 pages long. And two, you will rarely in American literature come across a more interesting and complex book than *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which had, like, the greatest movie adaptation of all time!

"I think it's ultimately because movie people know that they need to make something that will appeal to millions and millions of people, whereas books don't have to have that broad of an audience. Because let's face it, not that many people read them.

"But, Movie Adaptations, when you're good, and I think I've been lucky enough to get a good one, you're not obsessed with getting the broadest possible audience, you're obsessed with trying to make a good movie. So more of that, and less pandering with gratuitous sex scenes and explosions." Oh Stan, always pandering with explosions.

"Best wishes,

"John Green."

=====Atticus Finch (7:46)=====

Right, but Atticus is magnanimous. I mean, he waves at old Mrs. Dubose, the morphine addict who screams insults at Jem and Scout. Like although Atticus knows that Mrs. Dubose doesn't approve of his own actions, he still recognizes that she has, quote, "real courage"—something he defines as, "…when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what." Real courage, seeing it through even when you know you're doomed, like the Demi Moore *Scarlet Letter* adaptation. They knew it was gonna suck, but they just kept going. No one knows who Demi Moore is anymore, Stan. We gotta update our references. Did Mila Kunis make any terrible movie adaptations? Meredith has informed me that Mila Kunis is also old.

But this is precisely the kind of courage that Atticus displays when defending Tom Robinson. Like before the trial, Atticus tells his brother that he knows he is already "licked": "You know what's going to happen as well as I do." But Atticus still defends Tom passionately, although to be fair, it's not that difficult to argue in court that a man with a damaged left arm would have had a difficult time punching someone on the right side of their face. Now that was his job, but outside the courtroom, he also holds an all-night vigil near Tom's cell. Atticus is fighting for more than abstract principles of social justice. He wants to serve as an example that will prevent his children from, quote, "catching" racism, which he calls, "Maycomb's usual disease."

Astoundingly, Atticus even has compassion for Bob Ewell, the drunkard who beat (and likely raped) his own daughter, Mayella. I mean, Ewell successfully pinned this on Tom Robinson, knowing full well that a conviction would lead to the death penalty. And Ewell stalked Tom's wife, spit in Atticus' face, and threatened, then later attacked, Jem and Scout. And when Jem's a little incredulous that Atticus is able to empathize with Ewell, Atticus replies, "Jem, see if you can stand in Bob Ewell's shoes for a minute. I destroyed his last shred of credibility at that trial, if he had any to begin with. [….] So if spitting in my face and threatening me saved Mayella Ewell one extra beating, that's something I'll gladly take. He had to take it out on somebody and I'd rather it be me than that houseful of children out there." That may seem like almost over-the-top in terms of heroism, but let's remember this is a Southern Gothic novel. It has to have its knight.

====="It's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (9:54)=====

All right, let's close today with Atticus' line that gives the novel its title: "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." When Scout asks Miss Maudie why, she learns: "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." So who's the mockingbird in this novel? Is it the elusive Boo Radley, confined to the nest of his home, but generous in his love for the Finch children? Is it Tom Robinson, whose kindness to Mayella Ewell was literally the death of him? Is it the author herself, singing her heart out about the imperfect gardens of her youth? Or is it Scout herself, whose education in empathy is also an education in race, class, and gender oppression? (It could also be Katniss Everdeen.)

But regardless of how you answer that question, *To Kill a Mockingbird* leaves us with a timeless takeaway: it requires courage to try on the proverbial shoes of others, to try to walk around in their skin. It's difficult but important to listen to other peoples' voices and to try to empathize across the barriers of sex and class and race. And ultimately, that's the great heroism of Atticus Finch. He's able to seek and find the essential humanity of others.

Thanks for watching, I'll see you next week.

=====Credits (11:04)=====

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