



Learning to Look Back: Child Focalization, Retrospective Memory, and Ethical Education in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Abstract

This article examines how Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* transforms the recollection of childhood into a contested form of ethical education. Existing discussions frequently emphasize Scout's innocence, the novel's cultivation of empathy, or its problematic treatment of race. Less attention has been paid to the interaction between the adult narrator who remembers and the child consciousness through which past events are focalized. Drawing on narratology, memory studies, narrative ethics, and critical approaches to literary pedagogy, this article argues that the novel organizes Scout's memories as a curriculum of interpretive revision. Readers initially encounter Maycomb through the child's partial knowledge, social misreadings, and imaginative projections; they are subsequently required to reconsider those judgments as the narrative reveals the operations of class hierarchy, racial violence, gender regulation, and communal exclusion. This temporal distance between the experiencing child and the remembering adult makes ethical learning a formal process rather than a collection of moral statements. Nevertheless, the educational affordances of this structure remain limited by the novel's unequal distribution of voice and interiority. Tom Robinson and Maycomb's Black community become central to Scout's moral development without receiving comparable narrative subjectivity. The article therefore concludes that the novel's pedagogical value depends on critical teaching practices that examine focalization, memory, silence, and historical context rather than presenting empathy as an adequate response to structural injustice.

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Introduction

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is still very much associated with literature education. Its accessibility, child-centered narration, courtroom plot, and explicit concern with prejudice have made it a staple of secondary-school and university curricula. The novel seems to offer a relatively easy moral vocabulary to learn: we are encouraged to reject prejudice, protect the vulnerable, resist majority opinion, and imagine what other people are thinking. Scout Finch's gradual transition from imaginative fear to recognition shows that the novel is actually a story of moral education.

But the educational status of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is becoming increasingly controversial. Critical scholarship has asked whether the novel makes racism seem less real to White readers or easier for White readers to read. These Black characters are also somewhat less interior than their white counterparts while racial violence is largely mediated from the perspective of a

White child and the moral authority of her father.

Macaluso (2017) ^[12] further suggests readers must read the novel “against” and not just “admirable,” because uncritical teaching can reinforce the same racial assumptions that it is supposed to repudiate. Similarly, when teachers treat racism as something that can be seen as a moral error and not something historical or institutional (Borsheim-Black, 2015, 2018) ^[3, 4], the practice of teaching in the classroom can reinforce discourses of Whiteness as well as historical and institutional structures (Borsheim-Black 2015) ^[3].

The question then is not simply whether the novel is educational. A more probing question is what kind of learning that the narrative form enables, the limits of that learning, and the pedagogical context under which it can be critically examined.

The question we are here to present is to use childhood perspective and retrospective memory for our argument. Scout is usually seen as a child narrator, but that is just half the picture. The events are seen only through the eyes of Scout as a child but are seen from the perspective of an older Jean Louise Finch who is looking back at some future time. So, the novel has two positions: the child who experiences Maycomb and the adult who picks, arranges, and narrates those events.

The adult narrator can provide context to the child, but she often does not provide any clear interpretation so that readers are trapped in the child’s confusion. What seems to be a transparent childhood voice is, in fact, a careful relationship between immediacy and hindsight.

The distinction is important because memory is not a neutral storage system from which the past can be retrieved unchanged. Narrative memory picks our start, identifies turning points, establishes causal relationships, and, in retrospect, gives events a meaningful significance they might not have had when they were first experienced.

Bruner (1991) ^[5] argues that narrative is one of the principal ways in which people shape reality, and McAdams (2001) ^[13] describes life stories as interpretive structures that connect memory with identity. As Freeman (2010) ^[8] argues, hindsight can also provide moral and psychological insight because later knowledge reorganizes the meaning of previous events.

Reading from this perspective, *To Kill a Mockingbird* isn’t just a child learning some moral lessons. It is an adult consciousness reconstructing the episodes in which a moral identity can be told.

The article makes three related claims. First, the focus of the novel as a retrospective makes for a curriculum of error and revision. Readers come to know Scout’s initial misconceptions about Boo Radley, social class, gender, institutional authority, and racial justice but are forced to re-evaluate them. Ethical learning then is based in correcting interpretation but not in the passive acceptance of Atticus’s principles.

Second, the novel makes perspective-taking a theme and a narrative process. Readers don’t just learn that they should take another person’s position into account; they are constantly confronted with the instability of judgment based on incomplete knowledge.

Third, this type of education is morally compromised because of the story’s racialized presentation of narrative. The memory of a White girl’s childhood becomes the primary place in which racial injustice becomes emotionally significant, while Tom Robinson’s consciousness is largely

inaccessible.

The analysis is not about whether the novel is just educational or harmful. A binary judgment would reproduce the moral simplification which the novel’s best moments require readers to resist. The author of the article considers *To Kill a Mockingbird* to be a pedagogically productive but ideologically constrained book.

Its value is more in the moral clarity and conviction that Atticus Finch is known for than in the fact that stories influence memory, perspective determines judgment, and empathy and narrative exclusion are to be mixed.

Child Focalization, Retrospective Memory, and Ethical Reading

A narratological distinction between narration and focalization is a crucial starting point. Genette (1980) ^[9] distinguishes the question of who speaks from what someone perceives in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: the speaking consciousness belongs to a very old Jean Louise but the perception is often limited to Scout’s childhood memories. The result is a retrospective first-person narrative in which the speaking self has knowledge that the experiencing self did not.

Smith and Watson (2010) ^[20] call this temporal division a fundamental feature of life narrative: the person who tells the story is not the same person who is being narrated. Lee exploits the distance between these positions without always marking the transitions between them. Adult vocabulary, historical explanation, and retrospective summary can come into passages otherwise shaped by the child’s perceptions. At other times, the adult narrator can block any explanation and take care to keep the child’s perceptions unchanged.

The reader might catch hypocrisy, sexual implication, racial intimidation, or economic desperation before Scout does. Mohammed and Alhadi (2020) ^[14] recognize child narration as a means by which the novel exposes social distinctions and deceptive appearances. Scout’s narrative force does not come from childhood innocence alone, though. It relies on the adult narrator’s ability to reconstruct innocence as an interpretive limitation.

This duality makes it harder to think of a real child voice. Children’s literature scholarship has repeatedly found that the voice of childhood is produced by adult writers and expressed in adult-controlled terms. Nodelman (2008) ^[17] describes the “hidden adult” in children’s literature, in which texts that privilege child protagonists or childlike language are constructed out of adult expectations of childhood. Nikolajeva (2010) ^[16] also stresses the uneven power distribution between adults, authors, and young characters.

To Kill a Mockingbird wasn’t written for children, but it is a crossover book and classroom novel, and so this dynamic seems to be especially significant. Scout is able to communicate with her childlike spirit, but her immediacy is a product of later literary construction. Blackford (2010) ^[2] shows how Lee’s narrative strategy combines melodramatic structures and naïve perception that young readers can understand in a way that is beyond Scout’s comprehension.

This sort of inference is at the heart of the novel’s educational effect. When readers discover that Scout’s interpretation is incomplete, they are in a position of child and adult understanding for Scout. They may be connected to Scout because they share her passion and feelings and sympathy but also their discomfort because they know more than she does. The novel is thus double reading: it is about what the child

sees and what the child cannot yet understand.

Retrospective memory serves to heighten that double reading. The opening sentence does not begin with the trial and does not have a general account of racial conflict. It begins with Jem's broken arm and ends with a later dispute between the siblings about when the actual events leading to the injury started. Scout attributes the beginning to the Ewells, but Jem goes even further back to the summer and Dill's obsession with Boo Radley (Lee, 1960/2006, Chapter 1) ^[11].

The dispute is essentially innocent, but it raises a serious question of narrative causality. Where does a morally significant story start? Does it start with physical violence, with the racialized courtroom conflict that motivates revenge, or with the children's earlier habit of turning an isolated neighbor into an object of entertainment? By presenting both causal scenes, the adult Scout connects the public story of racial injustice to the private story of childhood misrecognition.

The trial and the Boo Radley plot are not competing moral stories. They are linked by the children's gradual education in the danger of treating another person as a simplified narrative. Boo is initially envisioned as a Gothic monster; Tom Robinson is reduced to a criminal stereotype by Maycomb's racial order; Mayella Ewell is told in two competing narratives of victimhood, poverty, gender, and racial power. The adult narrator takes them back together in a way such that the misreading of someone is the novel's central ethical problem.

Phelan's (2007) ^[18] rhetorical theory of narrative is useful here because it sees narrative development as a series of moral, interpretive, and aesthetic judgments. And as a story moves along, readers keep having to reexamine narrators, characters, actions, and consequences. In Lee's novel, those judgments are constantly re-evaluated.

The reader's early admiration for Boo Radley's performance at the beginning becomes ethically uncomfortable when Boo's vulnerability and attention to detail are recognized. Jem's faith in legal evidence becomes untenable after the verdict. The missionary circle's language of Christian benevolence is grotesque when matched with its members' support for racial hierarchy. The novel's educational experience isn't so much about making correct judgments but instead about knowing that the wrong judgment was made so confidently.

Narrative empathy is part of that process, but it is not just a moral outcome. Keen (2007) ^[10] makes a distinction between the experience of empathizing with fictional characters and genuine altruistic action in the world outside the text. Literature might inspire feeling, identification, or an imaginative point of view without ever leading to ethical action.

Such caution is especially important for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a novel that is frequently defended on the grounds that it teaches empathy. The novel may indeed invite readers to feel for Scout, Jem, Boo, Tom, Mayella, and even members of the lynch mob. But, as a matter of fact, being able to feel for characters is not enough to account for the structures that render some characters vulnerable and others powerful.

Ethical education is about affective engagement and critical analysis of the narrative conditions that define that engagement.

Critical Approach and Scope

The present study uses theoretically informed close reading. It examines the novel's temporal framing, shifts between adult narration and child focalization, distribution of interiority, ordering of remembered episodes, and recurrent scenes of interpretive correction. The analysis draws on four intersecting fields: narratology, which clarifies the relationship between voice and perspective; memory studies, which conceptualizes recollection as retrospective organization; narrative ethics, which considers how formal choices shape readers' judgments; and critical literary pedagogy, which addresses the racial and institutional consequences of teaching canonical texts.

The analysis focuses on the published novel rather than on authorial biography, adaptation, reception history, or comparison with *Go Set a Watchman*. This restriction is deliberate. Biographical parallels between Lee and Scout may be relevant to literary history, but treating the novel as transparent autobiography would obscure the formal construction of its retrospective voice. Similarly, the article does not assume an idealized or universal reader. Actual readers differ in age, race, nationality, historical knowledge, and experience. Rosenblatt's (1994) ^[19] transactional theory makes clear that meaning emerges through an encounter between text and reader rather than residing wholly in either. References to "the reader" therefore designate interpretive positions invited by the narrative, not identical responses produced in every individual.

Remembering from Two Temporal Positions

The novel's educational structure depends on its ability to preserve the experiential immediacy of childhood while subjecting childhood to retrospective design. Adult Scout does not simply report what happened. She establishes patterns that the child could not have recognized. The opening debate over Jem's broken arm is the clearest indication that the narrative is an act of causal reconstruction. Events acquire significance because they are remembered as part of a sequence leading toward injury, knowledge, and altered perception.

The temporal distance between the narrating and experiencing selves is visible in the contrast between Scout's language and her understanding. At times, the prose contains social, geographical, or historical knowledge far beyond that of a six-year-old. At other moments, Scout reports adult behavior without understanding its sexual, racial, or political implications. The oscillation has sometimes been described as inconsistency, but it also performs an important educational function. Adult narration provides sufficient orientation for readers to understand Maycomb while preserving enough childhood limitation to make interpretation active.

The school episodes illustrate this technique. Scout's first teacher, Miss Caroline, views the child's literacy as a pedagogical problem because it has developed outside the prescribed educational sequence. Scout cannot fully articulate the institutional absurdity of being told not to read

with her father, but the retrospective narrative arranges the scene as a satire of educational standardization (Lee, 1960/2006, Chapters 2–3) ^[11]. The child experiences confusion and punishment; the adult narration permits readers to see how institutional authority can mistake procedural conformity for learning.

The encounters with Walter Cunningham and Burris Ewell similarly transform apparently minor childhood experiences into lessons about social classification. Scout initially understands poverty through visible behavior and family reputation. Calpurnia's correction at the dinner table teaches her that economic difference does not remove a guest's dignity. Yet the episode also exposes the limitations of the Finch household's paternalism. Walter is welcomed, but the social hierarchy separating the Finches from the Cunninghams remains intact. Scout learns courtesy before she learns structural analysis.

Memory allows the adult narrator to place this domestic lesson alongside the school's inability to respond adequately to entrenched poverty. The Cunninghams and Ewells are both poor, but Maycomb explains them through contrasting hereditary narratives: one family is respectable and self-reliant; the other is degraded and irresponsible. Scout inherits these classifications before she can examine them. The remembered episodes show how communities teach children to transform social conditions into stories about family character.

This process corresponds to Bruner's (1991) ^[5] account of narrative reality. Communities do not merely transmit facts; they provide conventional plots through which behavior becomes intelligible. Maycomb explains individuals by assigning them to established family narratives. The Radleys are secretive, the Cunninghams honorable, the Ewells disgraceful, and the Finches respectable. These narratives reduce interpretive uncertainty, but they also make social judgment repetitive. A person is expected to reenact the story already attached to a name.

Child focalization initially reproduces this system. Scout accepts much of Maycomb's inherited knowledge because it is the only explanatory framework available to her. At the same time, her literalism exposes contradictions that adults have learned not to notice. She is confused when respectable Christians express concern for distant suffering while supporting racial injustice at home. She cannot reconcile the condemnation of European dictatorship with the acceptance of racial hierarchy in Alabama. Her incomplete socialization becomes a critical resource because she has not yet learned to maintain the conceptual separations that permit adult hypocrisy.

The adult narrator's role is crucial. The child notices contradiction, but the adult memory selects and juxtaposes the relevant scenes. Retrospection turns scattered childhood puzzlement into an intelligible pattern. The novel's ethical education therefore emerges from the interaction between a child's unassimilated perceptions and an adult's capacity for narrative arrangement.

Defamiliarizing Maycomb through Child Perception

Child focalization allows familiar social practices to appear strange. Scout often reports customs without the diplomatic language through which adults justify them.

Her perspective strips social conventions of some of their rhetorical protection. Gender expectations, class prejudice, racial segregation, religious performance, and educational authority become visible because Scout has not fully acquired the vocabulary required to naturalize them.

The regulation of Scout's gender provides a recurring example. Aunt Alexandra treats femininity as a social destination toward which Scout must be disciplined. Clothing, speech, domestic behavior, and participation in women's gatherings are presented as signs of proper development. Scout experiences these expectations as restrictions on movement and identity. Her resistance is not formulated as a systematic feminist critique, but it reveals that gender is taught through repetition, correction, and anticipated social judgment.

Seidel's discussion of Scout's resistance to Southern codes is relevant here: the child's nonconformity enables the narrative to expose forms of identity that Maycomb presents as natural or hereditary. Scout is expected to become a particular kind of Southern woman, just as Jem is expected to inherit particular models of masculinity, courage, and family honor. Their development consists partly in discovering that these models are internally contradictory. Courage may involve physical action, endurance, moral independence, or the ability to accept defeat. Femininity may signify restraint and appearance, yet the women who most insist on decorum frequently participate in cruelty and exclusion.

The novel's humor is central to this defamiliarizing function. Scout's literal interpretations reduce adult claims to their practical consequences. Institutional language, religious performance, and social etiquette become comic when measured against observable behavior. Humor produces readerly pleasure, but it also creates distance from Maycomb's self-description. Readers are encouraged to see the town not as it sees itself but as its contradictions appear to a child who has not learned to conceal them.

Nevertheless, childhood perception is not inherently liberating. Scout also participates in cruelty when ignorance combines with imagination. The Boo Radley games convert an inaccessible person into a communal legend and then into a form of entertainment. The children repeat rumors, stage domestic violence, and attempt to force Boo into visibility. Their behavior resembles the adult community's reliance on inherited narratives. They do not know Boo, but they possess a story that allows them to treat him as if he were fully known. The narrative gradually dismantles this story. The gifts in the tree, the repaired trousers, the blanket placed around Scout during the fire, and Boo's final intervention accumulate as evidence of an unobserved relationship. Boo has been watching the children with care while they have been watching his house with fear and curiosity. The asymmetry is ethically important. The children imagine Boo as an object, whereas Boo recognizes them as vulnerable subjects.

The adult Scout narrates these episodes as a sequence of interpretive correction. Each event could have been remembered as an isolated childhood adventure, but memory organizes them into a pattern of failed recognition. The educational value of the Boo plot lies not simply in the final discovery that Boo is benevolent. Such a reversal could replace one stereotype with another, transforming a monster into a saint. More significantly, the plot shows that the

children's demand to see and define Boo is itself invasive. Ethical recognition requires limits on curiosity as well as the acquisition of accurate information.

The filling of the tree hollow marks a particularly important moment. Nathan Radley's decision ends the indirect exchange between Boo and the children. Jem's response suggests that he understands the emotional significance before Scout does, but the narrative does not provide Boo's perspective. Readers infer injury from absence. This is one of the novel's most effective educational techniques: the ethically relevant consciousness remains unavailable, and readers must interpret the meaning of silence.

Such inferential reading differs from uncomplicated identification. Readers cannot fully enter Boo's mind, and the novel does not supply an authoritative explanation. Instead, they must recognize the inadequacy of the knowledge through which he has been judged. Ethical learning occurs not through possession of another person's interiority but through awareness that interiority exists beyond one's access.

A Curriculum of Error and Revision

The novel repeatedly places Scout and Jem in situations where inherited explanations fail. These failures form a curriculum more consequential than the formal education represented by school. The children learn by revising interpretations of their father, their neighbors, legal institutions, racial hierarchy, and themselves.

The mad-dog episode offers a compact example. Scout and Jem initially regard Atticus as old, physically unimpressive, and deficient in the skills through which children measure masculine distinction. His ability as a marksman reveals a concealed history and forces them to revise their understanding (Lee, 1960/2006, Chapter 10) ^[11]. Yet the episode does not simply establish Atticus as a conventional hero. His refusal to display the skill suggests an alternative relationship between power and identity. Ability does not require performance, and courage is not reducible to aggression.

Mrs. Dubose's story complicates the lesson further. Atticus defines her struggle against addiction as a form of courage even though she remains verbally abusive and racist. The children are asked to distinguish endurance from moral goodness. This distinction is educationally difficult because it resists the division of people into entirely admirable or entirely contemptible figures. Scout and Jem must acknowledge a quality in someone whose behavior harms them.

However, the novel's distribution of interpretive generosity is politically uneven. Considerable narrative attention is given to explaining the complexity of prejudiced White characters. Mrs. Dubose's addiction, Mayella Ewell's isolation, Mr. Cunningham's participation in the mob, and even Bob Ewell's class resentment receive contextual framing. Tom Robinson, by contrast, appears primarily within the legal narrative constructed around his accusation and defense. The novel asks readers to reconsider the humanity of White people who participate in racist systems while offering comparatively restricted access to the ordinary interior life of the Black man destroyed by those systems.

The lynch-mob scene demonstrates both the power and the danger of the novel's educational method. Scout enters a situation she does not comprehend and recognizes Mr.

Cunningham as the father of a schoolmate. Her attempt at ordinary conversation interrupts the collective identity of the mob by addressing one man as an individual embedded in familial and economic relationships (Lee, 1960/2006, Chapter 15) ^[11]. The scene dramatizes a central principle of the novel: social categories can be destabilized by personal recognition.

From the child's perspective, the encounter is confusing rather than heroic. Scout does not formulate an argument against lynching. Her social innocence prevents her from responding according to the violent script governing the adults. Readers understand the danger that she does not, and this gap creates intense dramatic irony. Her lack of knowledge becomes effective because it produces an unanticipated form of address.

The scene is pedagogically compelling, but it risks transforming racial terror into a lesson about the recoverable decency of White men. The mob withdraws, and the narrative emphasizes the restoration of Mr. Cunningham's individuality. Tom Robinson's fear during the encounter receives less attention. The episode may therefore encourage the belief that personal connection can dissolve organized racial violence without sustained political or institutional action.

Delgado's (1990) ^[6] argument about voice is relevant: stories do not become ethically adequate merely because they express humane values. Who speaks, whose interpretation governs, and whose experiences become narratively available remain matters of power. In the mob scene, the White child's recognition is represented as morally transformative, while the Black prisoner remains largely silent. The scene teaches readers something important about deindividuation and moral interruption, but it also centers White moral agency within a crisis produced by anti-Black violence.

The trial extends the curriculum of revision from interpersonal judgment to institutional authority. Jem believes that evidence should determine the verdict. His confidence reflects both childhood idealism and the civic narrative through which the legal system legitimizes itself. The proceedings appear to expose inconsistencies in the accusation, yet the jury convicts Tom. Jem's shock is therefore epistemological as well as emotional. He discovers that an institution may preserve its procedures while violating its declared principles.

Scout's understanding remains less explicit, but the adult narrator positions the children in the Black balcony, spatially separated from the White courtroom participants. Their physical location enables them to witness both the trial and the response of the Black spectators. The scene constructs an education in perspective through architecture. The children see the legal performance from a location associated with those excluded from equal civic participation, but they do not thereby become equivalent to the Black community. Their access is temporary, and their family status remains protected.

The trial consequently produces knowledge without eliminating privilege. Scout and Jem learn that Maycomb's racial order can override evidence, but the consequences do not fall equally upon them. Tom loses his freedom and then his life; the Finch children experience disillusionment, social hostility, and eventually physical danger. The narrative's emotional center remains the children's loss of innocence

rather than Tom's loss of life.

Baecker (1998)^[1] argues that the novel's Africanist presence is crucial to the construction of its White characters and themes. Morrison's (1992)^[15] broader account of the Africanist presence in American literature helps clarify the problem: Blackness may function as the imaginative field through which White identity defines its freedom, morality, fear, or innocence. In Lee's novel, Tom Robinson's persecution becomes a decisive event in Scout's and Jem's moral development. The narrative condemns his treatment, yet its structure also makes Black suffering instrumental to White ethical education.

This does not invalidate the children's learning, but it changes how that learning should be evaluated. The central pedagogical question becomes not only what Scout learns but also what narrative conditions make her learning possible. A critical reading must hold together the genuine transformation of the child's understanding and the racial inequality through which that transformation is narrated.

The Porch, Perspective, and the Ethics of Hindsight

The ending of Boo Radley's story demonstrates the novel's most explicit convergence of memory, space and ethical perspective. After Boo saved Scout and Jem, Scout accompanies Boo home and stands on the Radley porch. There she imagines the years before the events as they might have been in Boo's house (Lee, 1960/2006, Chapter 31)^[11]. Things are rearranged in a new space.

It is often seen as the fulfillment of Atticus's instruction to look through another person's eyes. But it comes to bear that even perspective-taking transforms from an abstract moral maxim into a retrospective narrative. Scout does not get direct access to Boo's consciousness. She looks back in time on the same events and reorders them from another place. Perspective-taking is thus an exercise in memory as opposed to a full occupation of another mind.

The scene is like the very structure of the book. As Scout stands on the porch and reconstructs childhood events from a new position, adult Jean Louise narrates the past from a distance. For hindsight, a porch becomes a spatial figure. The past is a piece of history, but from another perspective the experience is different.

Freeman (2010)^[8] makes a case for the ethics of hindsight. It is possible that looking back in time can distort the past, imposing coherence but it can also reveal patterns that were not yet apparent in the heart of experience. Adult Scout's narrative does both. It provides a unified education from a series of disparate childhood experiences but it does so in a way that could obfuscate the historical and racial reality of those episodes.

The porch scene brings emotional closure, as Scout finally perceives Boo as a neighbor and not a fantasy object. She sees the gifts, the blanket and his attention to the children as part of a long-term relationship. The narrative takes her safely to Atticus and back home where she is in the literary area. The ending therefore resolves the Gothic threat on the Radley house and confirms the child's larger moral perspective.

But it also illustrates the limits of the novel's ethical design at once. Boo is the final product of the ending, not Tom. Boo survives and can be kept from exposure; Tom has already been killed. The sheriff's attempt to hide Boo's role is not only a mercy, but Scout knows the difference between exposing Boo and destroying a harmless mockingbird.

The symbolic logic is persuasive to those around us, but the two characters are in very different positions. Boo is protected by the discretionary decisions of White officials. Tom is destroyed by a racialized legal system even though Atticus is defending him. The parallels between them can help to recognize a common sense of vulnerability, but it can also obscure historical difference.

Boo's exclusion is familial, psychological and communal; Tom's persecution is based on race, law, labor and the political force of White accusation. If we view both as innocent "mockingbirds," we risk turning this unequal social condition into a universal moral category of harmlessness.

The child's perspective helps to make this a universalized view. Scout can recognize cruelty from everyone before she can truly understand the institutions that form vulnerability. Adult memory retains the emotional clarity of that recognition but does not always provide a structural vocabulary beyond it. The novel's ethics are strongest at the interpersonal level and lowest at the political level.

And the last act of looking backward is both ethical and incomplete. Scout has learned that proximity is no longer the same as knowledge, rumor is not understanding, and another person's life cannot be reduced to the role given by a community. And those are significant lessons.

But the end of the story may lead readers to feel moral satisfaction without having to face the system that killed Tom Robinson in the first place. Hindsight provides wisdom, but it also presents sentimental containment.

The Limits of Remembered Innocence

Childhood innocence is often regarded as the novel's moral authority. Scout's directness shows adult hypocrisy by example and yet her ignorance temporarily cuts her off from Maycomb's rules. But innocence is not an external source of social power. She may not understand racial hierarchy, but she has a family position in which ignorance serves the purpose of safety. Her misunderstandings do not carry the same consequences as those imposed on Black children or adults.

As much as innocence is a concept, it conceals how quickly children acquire social classifications. Scout knows of family reputations, racial terminology, gender expectations, and class distinctions even when she cannot explain them herself. Maycomb's ideology is embedded in everyday language and neighborhood knowledge. Childhood is not a place before culture but a place in which culture is absorbed, tested, and even resisted.

The novel's educational advantage is in showing this process. Scout is neither naturally prejudiced nor naturally immune to prejudice. She repeats assumptions, participates in ridicule, fights to defend family honor, and relies on inherited classifications. Ethical development has to be corrected by other people, unexpected experiences, and the failure of familiar explanations. This is not the simplistic idea that children are morally superior to adults.

But the retrospective narrative also shows Scout's innocence which helps you identify with her. Readers are often more likely to forgive her errors because they are a sign of developmental limitation. White adult characters are also given context: poverty, family tradition, addiction, loneliness, and social pressure are all factors contributing to their wrongdoings. The narrative is less expansive in imagining Black characters' inner lives.

Calpurnia is the most substantial partial exception. Scout gradually realizes that Calpurnia has a life, a language, a place in the community, and a social intelligence that goes beyond the Finch household. The visit to First Purchase African M.E. Church confirms Scout's earlier understanding that Calpurnia's identity is completely circumscribed by domestic service. But even this discovery is filtered through Scout's surprise. Calpurnia's world is significant when the White child enters it.

The scene can teach readers to identify code-switching, community autonomy, and the partial knowledge that is generated by domestic intimacy. It also reinforces the narrative that Black spaces are created for White education. The narrative does not sustain Calpurnia's perspective without Scout in it. Her subjectivity remains connected to the Finch family.

Tom Robinson's narrative position is even more limited. He speaks under conditions designed to test, discredit, and punish his speech during the trial. His testimony demonstrates Mayella's loneliness and the racial danger of a Black man who cares for a White woman. But the courtroom frames his interiority as legally relevant information. Readers know what he did, what he saw, and why he tried to help, but little about his life beyond the accusation.

His death is outside Scout's direct observation and is communicated through adult reporting. The brevity and indirectness might be indicative of Maycomb's abrupt end of Black life. It may also expose the limits of Scout's narrative access. Tom's death, however, is one point in the Finch household's moral education. Dill's pain, Jem's disillusionment, Atticus's exhaustion, and the response of White neighbors all develop in story form, but Tom's family is largely left out.

Macaluso (2017) ^[12] notes that the novel's treatment of racism can generate subtle racial ideology in the classroom if taught as a complete or authoritative account. Borsheim-Black (2015) ^[3] also demonstrates that traditional teaching will give students a way to be critical of prejudice but leave Whiteness, institutional power, and contemporary inequality on the margins. The child's remembered innocence will be more exacerbated if students are encouraged to identify with Scout without considering who else in the narrative isn't there.

The solution is not to dismiss focalization as an artistic flaw or make it impossible for a novel to represent everyone's consciousness at once. All stories select and limit. The key thing is to make those choices visible. The absence of Tom's persistent interiority is not just a lost element to be retrieved; it is a part of the novel's racial form. It shows what experiences the remembering narrator can narrate, what experiences the community makes legible, and what lives are instruments in another person's story.

Educational Value beyond Moral Identification

The novel's educational value is strongest when teaching goes beyond whether students like Atticus or Scout. Character admiration can lead to moral simplification, and identification can lead readers to interpret their feelings as being moral. A more rigorous pedagogy would look at the ways in which the narrative renders certain judgments possible.

The first educational affordance is narratological literacy. Students can identify how the adult narrator is different from the child focalizer and identify when their views get merged or diverge. Such analysis makes the construction of voice visible. Instead of viewing Scout's story as a transparent report, students learn to ask what the adult narrator knows, what she does, what she does not, and why childhood misunderstanding still survives.

This question could be structured around episodes of delayed comprehension. Students could follow what Scout believes about Boo Radley, what evidence is available, and how the meaning of earlier events changes retrospectively. The aim is not simply to characterize character development but to understand revision. The same method could be applied to Jem's understanding of law, Scout's understanding of class, and the children's evolving views of Atticus.

A second affordance is metacognitive education. When readers know that Scout does not know better, they are conscious of their own inferential behavior. But the book also suggests that readers may share Scout's mistakes as well. In a classroom discussion, there are three levels of judgment: what Scout believes, what the adult narrator seems to understand, and what contemporary readers might conclude from a different historical perspective.

This three-level model prevents hindsight from being self-congratulatory. Modern readers can easily dismiss Maycomb's explicit racism but fail to recognize subtler forms of exclusion in the novel, the classroom, or society in general. Macaluso's (2017) ^[12] recommendation to read against the novel is wise because it treats literary interpretation as an examination of ideology and not merely a measure of personal tolerance.

A third affordance concerns narrative ethics. Students can understand how sympathy is spread around the world and why some characters get an explanation while others remain externally represented. The approach has the same result as a lesson in perspective taking. Rather than assuming readers can enter any person's world, students have to confront the limits of narrative access.

Such limits are good from a moral perspective. Atticus's moral teaching often talks about entering another person's point of view, but the porch scene does not really give Boo's thoughts. Scout then reconstructs his view from evidence. A critical pedagogy can distinguish respectful inference from appropriation. Students should not be encouraged to create marginalized voices as if imagination automatically overcomes historical difference. They can instead identify what the text does not disclose, look at historical records, and consider why particular voices can't be found.

A fourth advantage is historical literacy. The trial is not a matter of prejudice and fairness in itself. It cannot be understood in isolation. Students must know about Jim Crow segregation, racialized sexual accusation, lynching, voter exclusion, labor relations, and the unequal functioning of Southern legal systems. Racism would be seen as a collection of offensive attitudes of the ignorant.

Historical context also complicates the treatment of Atticus in the novel. His defense of Tom is morally important, but a single focus on individual courage can be blind to the larger networks of Black resistance, legal activism, community organization, and political resistance that confronted racial

injustice. The White narrative of the novel should therefore be part of a wider archive rather than the primary narrative of Black life.

A fifth affordance is language and classroom ethics. The book contains racial epithets that cannot be taken as neutral historical vocabulary. Elliott's (2026) ^[7] study of English teachers demonstrates an ongoing debate over whether such language should be acknowledged in the classroom, left out, or spoken out as a matter of course. To be sure, the study does illustrate the importance of having the term's history and consequences on the page.

Teaching must not assume that literary context removes the capacity of racist language to harm students. The use of such language must be structured and planned, not improvised. Educators must explain the historical significance of the term, clarify expectations before reading, understand the composition and views of the class, and not force students (especially Black students) to be some sort of representation of racial experience. The educational intent is not to recreate verbal violence in order to make them feel valid but to understand how language is part of social power.

The novel also contributes to comparative pedagogy. Borsheim-Black (2018) ^[4] suggests a critical race approach that places canonical texts in analytical frameworks that allow the reader to question their assumptions. Comparative reading can not just add a Black text as a corrective supplement, but must also include *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the center of the reading process.

The relationship between texts should be considered as an object of investigation. Students can compare who tells stories of racial injustice, who gets to be inside the story, who is able to describe legal violence, and whether empathy is linked to collective action.

These approaches change the value of education. A good literary text does not have a moral worldview. It may be valuable because its formal accomplishments and ideological limitations create challenging questions. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not a monument in education or a self-sufficient manual of tolerance. It is most useful as a text for students to think about how ethical feeling is narrated, whose memories become culturally authoritative, and how literary sympathy can be embedded in structural silence.

Discussion

The analysis reframes the relationship between education and childhood in Lee's novel. Scout's childhood is more than an innocent lens through which adult corruption can be exposed. Childhood itself is narrated retrospectively, and it's a place where the adult self constructs an account of moral growth. Because of time distance, the educational narrative is achieved. This distance allows the novel's trademark sense of humor and seriousness to be achieved.

The adult narrator can preserve the comic logic of childhood while arranging episodes according to consequences that the child could not predict. Boo Radley games are entertaining before they become shameful; school conflicts are trivial before they reveal institutional assumptions; the trial is first interpreted through faith in evidence before it exposes the racial limits of law.

The structure resembles a curriculum because at each stage you update the previous one. But it differs from a

conventional curriculum in one respect: learning does not erase the earlier error. Adult Scout continues to tell the story of the child's mistakes in detail. Memory is a part of knowledge. We are not asked to forget that fear of Boo after learning Boo's identity, but to reinterpret that fear as evidence of how stories produce otherness.

It is a model for education that has more than just our own. Ethical education is often seen as replacing false beliefs with right ones. *To Kill a Mockingbird* suggests that maturity in ethical education may be a product of remembering how true beliefs are reasonable. Such memory can reduce moral self-confidence by illustrating that prejudice, exclusion and misrecognition are not always perceived as intentionally evil. They can be recreated through inherited stories, normal language, institutional routine and selective attention.

But the same insight can also be used to excuse the perpetrators and to shift victims. Contextualizing Mr. Cunningham, Mrs. Dubose and Mayella Ewell should not erase their participation in wrongdoing. The novel's focus on the understanding of others can become politically conservative when it asks for sympathy for White prejudice without telling a story as complex as Black resistance and suffering.

The pedagogical challenge is to ensure that explanation and accountability are in sync. The students can examine why characters behave as they do without turning cause into justification. They can recognize Atticus's bravery without treating him as the only source of moral insight. They can recognize Scout's growth as well as why Tom's death is treated as a story of that development in a narrative context. Retrospective focalization is how we frames this work. It points out the novel's formal strength—the carefully controlled relationship between adult arrangements and child perception—but also its ideological limits to explore.

The question is no longer whether Scout's voice is innocent, reliable or genuine in that sense. The question is what the adult story achieves by recalling childhood using that voice. That also explains the durability of the novel in education. The text invites readers to take up several roles simultaneously: child and adult, participant and observer, knower and non-knower. Such doubleness resembles the education process itself. Students need to learn from a different perspective but take a distance to see it. They need to revise interpretations without believing in what they will learn.

But the novel cannot be considered to have produced such critical consciousness. Rosenblatt (1994) ^[19] does indeed teach us that text does not determine when and how, and in what order. The same scene might have one classroom looking at institutional racism and another one looking at individual kindness. Pedagogical framing, reader experience, historical knowledge, and classroom power all shape the meanings gained.

So, assertions that *To Kill a Mockingbird* "teaches empathy" are not enough. Empathy is not a fixed property that can be transferred from book to reader. It is a response that may be structured through narrative techniques and conditioned by social position. The reader may empathize with Scout strongly yet not feel concerned with Tom's limited voice. They may respect Atticus but ignore Black collective agency. They may feel morally better even if they don't talk about the

institutions that form injustice.

A more reasonable claim is that when the novel is read critically we understand how unstable perspective is. It shows that people act on stories about other people, that partial knowledge can turn into fact and later understanding can reorganize memory. In this case, its most important educational question is not “How can readers become like Atticus?” but “How does narrative position and social power determine what can be seen, remembered and judged?”

Conclusion

“*To Kill a Mockingbird*” makes childhood memory an ethical concept. The novel’s intersection of adult narration and child focalization turns Scout’s early experiences into a series of interpretive errors, corrections and retrospective judgments. Readers come across Maycomb through the child’s curiosity and limited knowledge, but they are constantly forced to reassess what she sees. Boo Radley’s school scenes, lynch-mob confrontations, trial and final porch scene form a curriculum of revision in which perspective-taking is a moral theme and a story process.

This structure gives the novel a great deal of educational potential. It can develop close reading skills, metacognitive awareness, historical inquiry and a sensitivity to the limits of individual knowledge. The novel is particularly effective in demonstrating that moral knowledge is not created from innocence. It comes from the pain of knowing that familiar stories, institutions of respect and confident judgments are not right.

In the same way, the novel’s remembered childhood is structured by racial inequality. Scout’s moral development is told in full while Tom Robinson and Maycomb’s Black community are relatively limited in talking and remembering things. The story of Black suffering is central to White ethical education without the same narrative autonomy. And so, the novel’s focus on interpersonal empathy can mask the institutional character of racial injustice.

These limitations do not make the novel useless to education. They decide how it should be taught. An academically responsible teaching should examine the dichotomy between narrator and focalizer, the selective organization of memory, the unequal distribution of interiority, and the historical context in which the trial occurred. It should also distinguish emotional identification from political understanding.

The lasting educational significance of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not so much as its status as an immortal moral guide or even the supposed purity of Scout’s childhood voice. It is that it provides us an opportunity to study how an adult narrative looks back how memory turns experience into ethical meaning, and how even a story that is about understanding people can replicate the exclusions that it is asking readers to confront.

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