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WITHOUT SENTIMENT

Harper Lee and Emotion: Fiction is Not Fiction Without Sentiment

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Similarly to most American novels of the period, *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee provides a selection of social issues and concerns which are taken up and placed within the framework of fiction. Loss of juvenile innocence and racial inequality are only two of the societal questions present in the text, of which a number of readings are possible. There is also the treatment of those whose mental faculties are lesser than average and cultural prejudice. All can be emotive issues for individuals and groups. The following discussion addresses the over-preponderance of emotive material in a work whose primary business is to entertain.

Most material that emerges from the entertainment industry in the United States can be said to be sentimental in some way. This is not necessarily a negative statement. A number of commentaries and critical reviews of this indubitably famous novel – and also of its cinematic version – seem to weigh heavily on the aspects of racial and social discrimination (Tompkins, 35), which rouse emotional feelings that are palpable. Yet it is sentimentalism that strikes the reader or viewer of the following century the hardest (McGann 105). During the many decades that have elapsed since the writing of Lee's novel, the events, premises, and concepts addressed in this book have come to seem more and more saccharine.

Sentimentalism is not restricted to romance novels. Although *To Kill a Mocking Bird* defeats categorization in a pigeonholing sense, it cannot be classed as a strict romance. It contains aspects of social commentary that place it well outside that genre. It contains little or nothing of male-female romantic attraction. One can be sentimental about other areas of life than romance, however, and

American literature is notable for its idealistic attitude relating to loyalty, politics, liberty, religion, history, and patriotism (Braudy 1973).

The relationship between Scout, Jem, and their widowed father Atticus Finch is described and developed by Lee within the environment chosen to frame the story: that is, the years of the Great Depression. This historic period and its privations is dire enough. To have the brooding overlay of widowhood, and the question of raising children in ‘a proper way’ deals the novel the blow of social weight (McGann 92).

Harper Lee’s excellent narrative skills make this novel entertaining due to the visual quality of the prose. Its descriptions too serve to make the reader enjoy the settings, believe the environment created by the author, and be able to visualize the action. Because of the subtlety and skill of description, the romantic aspects of the working people – with their problems, joys and everyday escapades – become a historically-imbued romantic rendering of ordinary folk. This becomes iconic, if not entirely gothic. Most Americans can relate to the situations and scenes, to be taken by ‘nostalgia and sentimentalism’ (Braudy 1973).

Few American novels of the time escape this saturation with emotion. In his book *The Poetics of Sensibility: a Revolution in Literary Style*, Jerome McGann writes it can be treated as a unit of exchange, as most people can relate to having an expression of emotion when reading a certain book or watching a film. Perhaps some readers consider it fitting, but many can see it as a surfeit of sentimentalism, even if critics agree that it cannot be omitted from popular fiction.

References

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