# To Kill A Mockingbird: The Values Of The Southern States Of America

By encapsulating tropes of the Southern Gothic genre, Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) highlights the flawed idyllic vision of the supremacist and racist Southern States of America in the 1930s. She ultimately states that within the novel the human experiences, that being the experiences of African Americans, are the novel's primary concern, subsequently stating that human experiences are the primary concern of all good fiction. Lee challenges the ideology and social parameters of the South, where the colour of your skin determines your worth, drawing on contextual influences to reflect the values of the era. Like most Gothic novels, Harper exposes a problem she had seen in society: the true fragility of the social order, with her own social commentary presenting an ideology of her own. The inhabitants of Maycomb, a fictional town somewhere in Alabama, attempt to make sense of the world around them but are still haunted by the racist past and historical realities of the South: slavery, racism and white supremacy. Through strategic presentation, the underlying horror of the novel is partly offset by the use of humour, irony, and character archetypes of Southern Gothic literature. Viewing the novel through both its historical context and formal structure has allowed me to see the correlation of contextual and structural influences that Harper has reflected upon to express timeless social concerns about the experiences and treatment of black Americans. A revival of the genre, black gothic, can be seen in modern media. Through the same utilization of the tropes of Southern Gothic, movies such as Get Out (2017) by Jordan Peele, and music videos like Childish Gambino's This is America (2018), refer back to the same notion of white supremacy and racism. The relevancy of this topic creates an enduring resonance with diverse audiences.

Harper contrasts tones to reflect upon underlying truths. Like many novels within the genre, there is a light, comedic tone to the story which creates a general feeling of unease. To reference a modern equivalent, Get Out (2017), purposefully uses ironic humour as a way to bring forth suspense and feelings of evil beneath the surface. In that film, when Chris is trying to escape his girlfriend, who he discovered is an evil white supremacist, Jordan Peele contrasts two shots: Chris escaping and his girlfriend, Rose, sitting on her bed listening to "I had the time of my life". In Childish Gambino's This is America, the lyrics and symbols in his video create humour and unease, for example when he shoots the black choir. His facial expressions and body contortions are theatrical, creating humour, and the use of irony while referencing historical events. The humour in To Kill a Mockingbird is not as directly contrasting, but still engenders feelings of unease. Some light humour within the novel can be seen through the ham costume and Dill's public pantless events. This comedic element to the tone juxtaposes the later, very serious and dark tone of the novel at the court case scene and the later deaths that occur. By doing this, Lee eludes to the fact that in ordinary conversation, light humour has the potential to suppress or downplay a difficult topic like racism.

Lee specifically draws on the common character archetypes of the Southern Gothic genre: the villain (Tom Robinson), the damsel in distress (Mayella Ewell) and the hero (Atticus Finch), ultimately expressing her view on the stereotypes that society attributes to race. Through the plot of Tom's trial, the accusations that were made against him and the reality of his character, the audience can get a sense of what the common experiences of African Americans were in

that era. “I seen that black nigger yonder ruttin on my Mayella.” The use of the word ‘nigger’ holds extreme historical significance. This degrading word refers back to times of slavery, further eluding the fact that black people were still considered below whites. ‘Ruttin’ is usually a verb attributed to animals, and through this animalistic comparison we see how Bob Ewell, like society, sees Tom as a dangerous animal. Tom is never directly presented as a ‘villain’ through Harper’s eyes, but rather through the eyes of society. Tom was accused of raping a young girl, a very serious accusation, and without any second thought, the society of Maycomb jumped to the conclusion that he was guilty. “Judge Taylor was polling the jury: 'Guilty ... guilty ... guilty ...' Their immediate beliefs directly align with characteristics of the stereotypical ‘villain’ archetype: someone who society needs protection from. Then we have the character archetype of the ‘damsel in distress’, which in this case is Mayella Ewell. She is presented as an innocent young girl, worthy of society’s protection. “That nigger yonder took advantage of me an' if you fine fancy gentlemen don't wanta do nothin' about it then you're all yellow stinkin' cowards, stinkin' cowards, the lot of you.” This quote effectively shows the common mindset towards black people and how they are seen as a ‘threat’ that Mayella needs protecting against. Mayella manipulates the jury even though she knows she is lying. She is placing her life above that of a black man who she knows to be innocent. Although Tom is presented as a ‘villain’ and Mayella a ‘damsel in distress’, the reality is that they are polar opposites. As it turns out, Mayella lied about Tom raping her and is not a ‘damsel in distress’ at all, at least in relation to Tom. The reality of Tom Robinson’s true character is that he is more aligned to the archetype of a ‘damsel in distress’. It is his experiences, as the ‘Mockingbird’ that shows his innocence and the need for protection in society. In chapter 10 Miss Maudie states “It’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” This phrase becomes a metaphor throughout the novel for the victimization of the innocent. This ironic reversal of roles allows Lee to make a statement: that the social conscience of the era was wrong and unjustified.

By presenting a critical depiction of society, Harper illustrates her hope for the moral reformation of society. As a member of society, even if you weren’t openly racist you would automatically consider Tom to be guilty due to repressed racism that many white people hold as a result of historical influences. Within the novel, Harper does not critique the characters harshly, but she addresses the issue with care, in hopes of educating. Using Atticus’ archetype of ‘the hero’, Harper attempts to connect with possibly naive and innately racist readers to issues of racism, as at the time of publishing in 1960 many members of society still carried beliefs of white supremacy. Lee uses Scout as an extension of the reader and Atticus as an extension of herself. “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.” By employing the technique of pathos, a once naive reader would confront their own values, considering things from the perspective of another person, for instance, Tom Robinson. It is then that the reader would possibly begin to repair their own moral code. Harper critiques Southern society by confirming the notion that your beliefs are dictated by your selfish benefits. If a white supremacist woke up one day to find that they were now the very race they despised, it would incite a very different viewpoint. Harpers uses Atticus as a catalyst for individual moral growth, presenting her ideology and hopeful outlook into a future without racism and supremacy.

Ultimately, Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird communicates the attitudes and values of the Southern States of America in the 1930s, portraying the experiences and unjust racism that African Americans faced. By applying the Southern Gothic genre, Harper demonstrates her own ideology and values in the hopes of educating future generations. Reading about the human experiences of other people make an audience more empathetic as a whole, by seeing and

making judgements on flaws in their own society. A modern day equivalent of the genre, black gothic, addresses the same topics racism and white supremacy that is still unfortunately seen in the modern day. Although written for a 1960s audience, To Kill a Mockingbird transcends eras and relates to a modern-day society through the universality of its topics.