

HARPER LEE'S *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* AS A BILDUNGSROMAN

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Abstract: Starting from Bakhtin's classification (1986) of the Bildungsroman, this paper offers evidence that Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) belongs to the fifth category of this genre. We argue that the novel deals not only with the emergence of the protagonist, but that it actually focuses on a transitional period both for Scout Finch and for the community of which she is a part. The plot traces not only Scout's development, but also the upheavals and the beginning of radical changes in an apparently stagnant society.

Keywords: Atticus Finch, Bildungsroman, Maycomb, Scout Finch, the American South, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

1. Introduction

This research adopts the position that Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is a Bildungsroman. The theoretical framework for the analysis of the novel from this standpoint is provided by Bakhtin (1986), Lukács (1971) and Moretti's (1987) conceptions of this genre. In Bakhtin's (1986: 21) view, the Bildungsroman or "the novel of education" can be "designated in the most general sense as the novel of emergence". According to him, the Bildungsroman depicts the path of the individual towards maturity and seriousness, and this education is achieved through life experience, through contact with the world. Hence, the surroundings and experience are viewed as a sort of a school (idem: 22).

Bakhtin cites five categories of the genre. In the novels included in the first four subgenres, the maturation of the individual takes place in a stable community. Therefore, whereas the individual changes, the environment in which this transformation occurs remains the same. On the other hand, novels belonging to the fifth subgenre are characterised by the parallel transformation of the individual and the fictional world of which s/he is a part. As a consequence, the environment is no longer stable, but changes profoundly, and the period in which this happens is transitional both for the developing individual and his/her social community (idem: 22-24).

The initial hypothesis of this paper is that *To Kill a Mockingbird* belongs to the fifth subgenre of Bakhtin's classification of the Bildungsroman. Although it may seem that the novel emphasises only the development of the protagonist, Jean Louise (Scout) Finch, this article will demonstrate that it also highlights the social conditions that led to radical changes in the course of American history. Therefore, the focus of this Bildungsroman is not, as it is usually contended, on the individual's adaptation, total submission to or rejection of the society. In Lukács'

(1971: 132) words, this genre reflects optimism about “the reconciliation of the problematic individual [...] with concrete social reality”. The beginning of the novel is featured by solitary individuals who over time get a better understanding of their fellows and form a community. This community is, in Lukács’ view, achieved through certain effort and struggle (idem: 133).

The pattern of reconciliation between the problematic individual (Scout) and her surroundings will be the focus of this research. I am going to show that Scout matures from a prejudiced and bigoted child into a better version of herself, into an individual who values all members of her community. Her father, Calpurnia, and Miss Maudie Atkinson function as her ethical models that testify to the fact that it is possible to have integrity and be faithful to one’s principles and, at the same time, be a respected member of society.

In his influential *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987), Franco Moretti defines the Bildungsroman as a contradictory literary form. He asks a crucial question – how is it possible for the Bildungsroman to simultaneously confirm the individuality and autonomy of the character, on the one hand, and of the social laws, on the other? Does society itself, being a system that naturally strives for homogenization, not contradict the individual’s endeavour to independently find meaning and his/her own moral code? Moretti argues that this contradiction cannot be overcome. In his view, the protagonist of the Bildungsroman should not attempt to “solve the contradiction, but rather learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival” (Moretti 1987: 10).

My paper asserts that the maturation of Jean Louise Finch should be viewed precisely as a reflection of the contradiction that Moretti defines as a key feature of the Bildungsroman. Although Jean Louise is, at the initial phase of her development, a rebel, her family, surroundings, and turbulent life events transform her into a more rational human being, capable of combining valid social norms with her own principles and values adopted during her upbringing. The path towards a kind of a “fusion between external compulsions and internal impulses” (idem: 16), however, is a thorny one, and the following sections will deal in detail with its stages.

2. Social conditions in Maycomb

The plot of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in Maycomb, a fictional town in Alabama, in the 1930s. Maycomb is represented as a typical Southern town based on inequality and boundaries. Inequality is, of course, most visible in the racial segregation of the population of this town. African Americans, although freed from slavery a few decades ago, are still forced to do the hardest jobs and to live apart from the whites. In most countries of the American South, the so-called “Black codes” came into force during the Reconstruction period (1865-1877), and after the end of this era, they were followed by Jim Crow laws, which aimed to ensure the subordinate position of African Americans. In a word, though officially free citizens, in practice they were treated as lower beings, second-class citizens. Unfortunately, tensions in the American South were further exacerbated by historical events, such as World War I and the Great Depression. As stated by Johnson (1994: 4), the war and poverty intensified racial intolerance, and the whites reacted violently to anything they interpreted as a potential threat to order and stability, and most fiercely to the challenge of white privilege.

The social community of Maycomb is conservative and patriarchal. Unwritten, but strictly defined rules, boundaries, and distinctions are of utmost importance here. This community is not only racially intolerant, but represents a society that is age-, class- and gender-conscious. People there are divided into castes, everyone knows his/her place and acts accordingly. Every deviation from the expected pattern of behaviour is viewed as a threat to community stability and is sanctioned with suspicion. As summarised by Tavernier-Courbin (2007: 47), “[i]t is a world where people belong to a group or class or race, and expected to remain within their unit, and are judged by the way they fit into it”.

Such group or crowd behaviour is one of the prevailing characteristics of the citizens of Maycomb. One of the major themes of Lee’s novel is the protagonist’s search for balance between her desire to belong, to be a member of the community, and her striving to act according to her conscience. However, it is not easy to develop in a community which seems suspended in time, which resists change and progress and whose institutions propagate conformity and “support the racist and sexist status quo” (Fine 2007: 64).

The rigidity of social institutions in Maycomb is most visible in the example of the school. Miss Caroline, Scout’s first-grade teacher, is very unpleasantly surprised when she learns that Miss Finch can read. Instead of praising the child who is ahead of her peers and finding a way to encourage her to progress further, the teacher criticises Scout and embarrasses her in front of the whole class. No deviation from the prescribed model is to be tolerated, be it positive or negative. Miss Caroline, as a model citizen of the American South, who was taught to conform to the valid rules, simply does not know what to do with a child who is already writing in the first grade, when the school system prescribes that children should start to write in the third grade. The implication is that the school system does not encourage the pursuit of authentic knowledge, but rather reflects society’s efforts to mould and homogenise its members, to teach them to conform to norms and institutions from a young age. As a consequence, Scout begins to hate school. Unfortunately, though it possesses a great potential, the school as an institution actually “takes her away from real education” (Butler 2007: 122). The novel suggests that real education does not take place in school, but, rather, through reading, guidance by the morally elevated individuals, and through experience.

Critics often interpret Jean Louise Finch as an unconventional character and rebel, due to her reluctance to conform to the existing rules and norms of her community, including the imposed genteel behaviour expected of girls in the American South in the 1930s. Despite the fact that Scout is not a typical girl, but rather an adventurous tomboy, it should be emphasised that she is simultaneously very conventional and Southern in some respects. When the reader first meets her, Scout is a prejudiced and class-conscious girl. Not only is she racially intransigent; she is also haughty towards those who are lower in the social hierarchy than her. This is best exemplified by the scene when Scout mocks little Cunningham for not showing good manners at the table. Moreover, Scout is prone to violence. This paper argues that critics are wrong when they interpret Scout’s habit of resolving disputes with her fists as an expression of her rebellion against society. In fact, her violent and impulsive behaviour is rather a reflection of her assimilation of the Southern code of honour. As Laura Fine explains (2007: 82), “[i]n the code of honour, fighting in people of lower classes is a way of asserting power and delivering justice”.

That Scout embodies many of the faults of the American South is also evident in her initial attitude towards her father. At first, Scout and Jem, her brother, do not think highly of Atticus, because he does not seem to possess qualities that are valued in the American South:

Our father didn't do anything. He just sat in an office, not in a drugstore. Atticus did not drive a dump-truck for the county, he was not the sheriff, he did not farm, work in a farm, or do anything that could possibly arouse the admiration of anyone. [. . .] He did not do the things our schoolmates' fathers did: he never went hunting, he did not play poker or fish or drink and smoke. He sat in the livingroom and read. (Lee 1962: 93-94)

Such an attitude demonstrates that Scout has a long way ahead of her. She adopts the beliefs of her society that smoking, drinking, playing poker and hunting are the best proofs of masculinity. Obviously, her perceptions of the world and what is right are somewhat skewed and it will not be easy for her father and nanny to get her back on the right path, the path of true values, tolerance, understanding and empathy. As Laura Fine (2007: 81) persuasively argues:

The novel is indeed a Bildungsroman in which Scout must grow from innocence to maturity. She must learn empathy and compromise. [. . .] It is Scout who makes the journey [. . .], a journey from prejudice to tolerance, from ignorance to wisdom, from violence to self-control, from bigotry to empathy.

3. The development of Scout Finch

The maturation of Scout Finch can be divided into two phases. The first phase refers to the acquisition of high moral values which occurs under the guidance of her father, her nanny, and Miss Maudie Atkinson. The second phase coincides with the facing of the world outside Scout's home, which is in stark opposition with the elevated moral perspective of the Finch household.

When it comes to the first phase, it can be summarised as a guidance, under the influence of which beliefs based on differences between races, classes and sexes are rejected. Under the influence of her father and two female role models, Scout learns important life lessons. The most important lesson Atticus teaches his children is the difference between man-made, artificial laws that are arbitrary and changeable, and the natural, universal law that comes from the essence of the human being and is based upon reason, empathy and tolerance. According to that law, all people are born good. Natural law does not recognize differences in race, class or caste. Scout quickly learns this lesson from her father, and reacts to Jem's soliloquy about caste in Maycomb with a remark worthy of someone much older and more experienced: there is, indeed, only one type of "folks" – "folks".

Having adopted such an attitude, Scout, unlike most of her fellow citizens, realises that African Americans are not second class human beings and should not be denied the presumption of innocence. Second, she is taught not to look down on anyone just because s/he is lower on the social ladder than she is. In contrast to Aunt Alexandria, who treats people according to their social position, Atticus and Calpurnia teach the children that they should not think highly of themselves and that everyone deserves respect, even those who are labelled as "white trash". Third, Atticus' unconventional attitudes are perhaps best exemplified by the fact that Scout is not expected to grow up to be a typical Southern lady. Quite the contrary,

Aunt Alexandria, a prototypical Southern lady, is overshadowed by what is presented as a possible alternative of femininity, i.e., behaviour of women like Calpurnia and Miss Maudie.

Furthermore, Atticus himself possesses some traits that are generally associated with women, such as tolerance, passivity, and abhorrence of violence. As Shackelford (1996: 111) confirms, Scout is most influenced by her father, with whom she identifies. Atticus's personality is the best evidence that femininity and masculinity are social constructs and that features which are traditionally attributed to either the male or the female gender are actually present in everyone. Unsurprisingly, Atticus brings up his children without taking into consideration their different genders. What is more, his indifference towards Scout's unladylike behaviour, which is exemplified by his tolerance of her boyish style of dress, implies that Atticus encourages Scout to reject the artificiality and boundaries imposed by society.

The fact that Atticus does not expect Scout to wear dresses and gives her a rifle on her birthday does not mean that he does not want his daughter to develop into a lady. Of course, he does not want her to become a lady in Aunt Alexandria's sense, a lady whose focus is on her appearance and behaviour in accordance with established rules. His father wants her to be a lady in a more Stoic sense" (Seidel 2007: 86), a lady who is kind and polite, but not artificial and hypocritical like the ladies who pretend to practise mercy, but are actually prejudiced racists, who look down on people who were born in a less privileged class. These ladies and their society are the main reason Scout dreads growing up and prefers the company of men:

There was no doubt about it, I must soon enter this world, where on its surfaces fragrant ladies rocked slowly, fanned gently, and drank cool water.

But I was more at home in my father's world. [. . .]. Ladies seemed to live in faint horror of men, seemed unwilling to approve wholeheartedly of them. But I liked them. There was something about them, no matter how much they cussed and drank and gambled and chewed, no matter how undelectable they were, there was something about them that I instinctively liked. They weren't – "Hypocrites, Mrs Perkins, born hypocrites," Mrs. Meriweather was saying. (Lee 1962: 236)

However, the truth is that there are in Scout's surroundings other female role models she can look up to. For example, although she cannot completely identify with Calpurnia, since Calpurnia belongs to the under-privileged race of the American South of the 1930s, she can learn from Calpurnia how to adapt to society. Calpurnia, who uses a dialect with her people and standard language with the whites, is aware that any other behaviour would offend those close to her, because it would seem like bragging and showing off. Miss Maudie Atkinson is another role model who "is not afraid to stretch conventions for gender identity" (Fine 2007: 65). Like Scout, she does not like wearing dresses and spends most of her time outside. Still, the Maycomb community respects her because she is, just like Atticus, a person of integrity, an individual who is the same in her house and in the town. She reveals to the children some details from Atticus's life that make Jem and Scout see him in a completely different light.

What is more, Miss Atkinson teaches Scout how a real lady deals with insults. Scout has to learn that "both acceptance and revolt are necessary to make

life more livable” (Tavernier-Courbin 2007: 41). Furthermore, Scout has to learn when it is advisable to react with silence and which situations require speaking out. What Miss Atkinson attempts to teach Scout is that small insults should be dealt with quiet dignity, whereas real evil requires revolt. However, a true lady or a gentleman attempts to assess the situation realistically. If there are allies, people with morally correct principles, in the surroundings, there is a greater chance that the voice of honourable people will be heard, and that they will oppose evil with united forces (Shaffer 1994: 534).

It is important to notice that Scout Finch succeeds in attaining maturity regardless of the fact that she grows up without a mother. In many novels dealing with the American South, female characters brought up by their fathers alone grow up to be Southern belles, destructive, and narcissistic women. Such a character is largely the result of wrong upbringing, where the father focuses on the physical appearance of his daughter. Fortunately, such outcome is avoided in the case of Scout Finch, whose father does not compliment her looks, but insists on the adoption of true moral values. Moreover, Atticus, along with Calpurnia, succeed in creating a healthy family environment, characterised by love and honesty. Atticus builds an open relationship, full of trust, with his children. Jem and Scout believe him because “what Atticus preaches, he also practises” (Johnson 1994: 102). There are no lies, secrets, duplicity or hypocrisy in the Finch household – in Atticus’s view, respect is earned through consistency and honesty. Atticus chooses not to burden his children with form and rigid rules, but is determined to punish them when they do not show respect to people. Therefore, when Jem destroys Mrs. Dubose’s flowers, he is immediately sent to read to this old lady, so as to discipline himself and learn respect. Moreover, Atticus is extremely polite to this grizzled, unpleasant lady. He explains to his children that they should appreciate Mrs Dubose, if for nothing else, then at least for her decision to overcome her addiction to morphine, even though she is dying. In this way, Atticus demonstrates in practice the truth of the saying that is his life motto: “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” (Lee 1962: 34).

Atticus teaches his children what true courage is. Both Jem and Scout are taken aback by the news that it was their father, seemingly the most harmless man, who shot a rabid dog that appeared out of nowhere in February. The surprise culminates in the knowledge that Atticus is actually reputed to be the most accurate marksman in the town, whose nickname was Ol’ One-Shot. Miss Maudie explains to the children that their father never mentioned his talent, because he “realised God had given him an unfair advantage over most living things. I think he decided he wouldn’t shoot till he had to, and he had to today” (Lee 1962: 102). From this story Scout comes to a realisation what true courage is. Brave persons do not prove their strength to those weaker than themselves, but resort to the use of force only when it is really necessary. Courage, hence, is not being proven with fists, but with willpower that restrains innate tendencies and impulses.

4. The potential for progress of the Maycomb community

When Scout and Jem have learned the lessons of their instructors – Atticus, Calpurnia, and Miss Maudie – they are ready to face the world in all its ugliness and complexity. As it turns out, the Maycomb society stands in stark opposition to the Finch home in many respects. The final stage of Scout’s maturation is to learn

how to live in a world full of boundaries, injustice, and inequality. As Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin (2007: 41) asserts, although those facts of life are “ugly, they are reality” and Scout and Jem will have to “learn to live with them and let live with a minimum of suffering”. What Atticus and other moral “instructors” teach the children is that people are inherently good, no matter how cruel or evil they may seem. In order to understand them, one has to see the world from their perspective, to walk in their shoes.

Life in a society which mythologizes its past has far-reaching consequences. The fictional world of Lee’s novel is closed and isolated. The Maycomb community is marked by racial segregation and unthinking conformism. The novel implies that such a state of affairs is unsustainable. It is clear to many whites that, if Southern society is to progress, it must discard its out-dated myths. *To Kill a Mockingbird* penetrates into the two most entrenched myths of the American South – the myth of the African Americans as immoral and the myth of the supposed chastity of white women. Even though Atticus was unable to acquit Tom Robinson, a black man, charged with rape and assault, the very fact that the jury deliberated for hours on what decision to make speaks to the awakening of the consciousness of whites when it comes to racial prejudice. The mere presence of people like Atticus, Miss Atkinson and the judge, means that society has made progress, however small and insignificant it may seem:

“Atticus Finch won’t win, he can’t win, but he’s the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that. And I thought to myself, well, we’re making a step, – a baby step, but it’s still a step.” (Lee 1962: 218-219)

The Maycomb society, as an archetypal Southern community, is marked not only by racial bigotry and segregation. This society is a thoroughly closed one – there is no social mobility not only between whites and blacks, but also between members of different castes. Some members of the caste, i.e. Aunt Alexandria, are proud of their origins and high position on the social ladder. Alexandria teaches Scout to be aware of her status and not mix with members of lower castes. On the other hand, Atticus realises that a society based on castes does not reflect the real state of affairs in America in the 1930s. As exemplified by his attitude, aristocracy has to “rise above self-protection and exclusivity” in order to “embrace difference” (Johnson 1994: 111). Every individual citizen, but also the Maycomb community as whole, must reject prejudices and stereotypes inherited from the past. The novel implies that it is precisely this clinging to the past and tradition that prevents the American South from embarking on the path of progress and prosperity. Nostalgia for “the old order, gentility, honour and chivalry” (Seidel 2007: 30) should be suppressed by a somewhat more sceptical attitude towards the past.

As Erisman (1973: 128) notices, there are several characters in Lee’s novel that are more concerned with the present than with the past, and their presence testifies to the potential of the American South to open up. An awakening of consciousness among a few Maycomb citizens suggests that progress and growth are possible. Furthermore, the novel endorses a belief in “the redemptive world of children” (Butler 2007: 123). Whereas the majority of the Maycomb community agrees with Tom Robinson’s conviction, it is indicative that the children (Scout, Jem and Dill) instinctively feel that Tom is convicted only because he is black. These children, for whom the death sentence of an innocent man causes nausea and disgust, awaken the hope that all is not lost and that the future will be much brighter than the gloomy present.

5. Conclusion

Starting from the observation that *To Kill a Mockingbird* belongs to the very specific kind of the Bildungsroman – the subgenre that deals with the development of both the protagonist and his/her surrounding environment – we have offered evidence that Harper Lee’s canonical novel depicts the maturation of both Scout Finch and the Maycomb community. At the beginning of the novel, Scout is represented as an adventurous tomboy, unwilling to conform to conventional femininity. At the same time, she also embodies many faults of the American South. Her development may be divided into two phases. The first phase takes place in the Finch household, where she matures from a bigoted and prejudiced brat, prone to violence, into a more tolerant and empathetic little girl. Her father, Atticus Finch, teaches her that true courage is not proven with fists, but with willpower that restrains innate tendencies and a stormy temperament. Additionally, Scout’s behaviour suggests that she does not want to grow up, because she is afraid that she will turn into a hardened hypocrite, like many of the ladies around her. However, she learns that there is more than one kind of lady. Her father, her nanny, and Miss Atkinson teach her that it is possible to be faithful to oneself and be a respected member of society. They deserve the respect of the Maycomb community through honesty and consistency, that is, by practising what they preach. The second phase of Scout’s development takes place in the world outside the Finch home, a world marked by inequality and injustice. Scout has to learn to live in a society marked by injustice, boundaries, and inequality, but she is instructed not to judge others and to attempt to understand everyone and look at the world from another’s perspective.

At first sight, the Maycomb society is stable and coherent. What binds the citizens of Maycomb together is the memory of a “chivalrous and honourable” past. The majority of the characters prefer not to challenge the inherited caste system and stereotypes and prejudices that come along. Nevertheless, there are a few characters who are aware that, if the American South is to grow and progress, it must discard its threadbare myths. The presence of characters such as Miss Maudie Atkinson and Atticus Finch, as well as the children, who instinctively feel that the colour of skin should not deny the presumption of innocence, testifies to the awakening of consciousness of American society. The awakening of consciousness is a small but significant step in gradually turning away from the past and embracing the present.

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