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Considering the Audience for a Comprehensive Understanding of “To Kill a Mockingbird”

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Abstract

This essay seeks to show that the prospective audience for reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee is students with a developed moral code who possess the ability to actively and accurately reflect on whiteness and how it lends to systemic racism and social injustice, likely students who are in their final years of high school or in a higher education institution. The primary focus of this essay is to consider how racism is taught and to whom, with a concentration on negating whiteness as a baseline, opposing the statement of looking at racism through a lens of colorblindness, and the importance of teaching racism in an age-appropriate manner.

Keywords

To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee, racism, white privilege, colorblindness, banning books, class system, racial inequality, whiteness, racial identity, power, oppression, discrimination, antiracist, injustice

Introduction

When considering the appropriate audience for *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, a person, the surrounding community, and greater society should contemplate the overarching story of the novel and what the aim of the book seeks to achieve to determine at what level these ideologies are most likely to make the greatest impact. To accomplish this feat,

there must be open and active conversation surrounding racism and how to successfully teach an antiracist agenda through the consideration of teaching whiteness as privilege to students who possess the ability to be self-aware and open to expanding their understanding of what racism looks like. Topics like racism are both difficult to teach and hard to read because the themes are uncomfortable. Books are banned because it is easier to ignore hard topics than it is to deal with them in a productive way that contributes to the betterment of society and forces the oppressor to take accountability. Books portraying racial injustice should not be banned; they should be taught by individuals trained to deconstruct the themes and explain them in a way that encourages active participation in the discourse surrounding racism. Consequently, this will lead to society taking steps toward lessening racial injustice. *To Kill a Mockingbird* should be taught to late high school or college aged students who have the desire to learn and possess the ability to reflect on how whiteness lends to privilege. The book should be taught by teachers who know how to teach with an antiracist agenda so the book can be understood in totality through a lens where whiteness is not the baseline and race is not colorblind.

Readers Defined

Readers, more often than not, disagree on who should read this book, why the book should or should not be read, and if the book should be banned and not read at all. Some say that the book should be taught to middle schoolers, while some argue for high school or college aged. Some say that the book should not be seen as the go-to book for teaching an antiracist agenda because of Atticus Finch's position as a white savior, while others say the novel is well deserving of the Pulitzer Prize. There also arises the separate issue of white authors writing about the lives and problems of people of color. Many white authors will use racist scenarios and racist language to convey an overarching theme in the name of education but fail to recognize that it is not their story to tell, nor is it their place to teach racism from a point of view where their perspective of ending racism is a white man who tries to save the

day. In the article “‘It’s Pretty Much White’”: Challenges and Opportunities of an Antiracist Approach to Literature Instruction in a Multilayered White Context” (2015) by Carlin Borsheim-Black, the author discusses the lack of people of color’s voices in literature. The article states:

“The lack of voices of people of color in typical literature curriculum, this research asserts, constitutes a hidden curriculum that perpetuates Whiteness as normal and neutral. Conversely, Morrison (1992) has argued that problematic racial ideologies are inextricably woven into the text and subtext of many of the most commonly taught novels in middle and high schools” (p. 408).

Borsheim-Black went on to talk about how the literature curriculum itself is a perpetuator of racism (p. 408). In all, the current system for determining and teaching racism to students should be evaluated for aspects of racism that are more “hidden” in their approach.

Themes

The themes in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, at first glance, are all well and good. Atticus Finch teaches his children how to live their lives with empathy and to consider another person’s plight before a judgement is cast. He leads with education, love, and the understanding that all people are people; everyone deserves to have their existence validated. However, the tables turn when the reader truly considers Atticus Finch. He is the town’s hero, the best shooter, best lawyer, most educated, and, by extension, the most respected. He is also a white man. He uses his position of whiteness and privilege to take on Tom Robinson’s case even knowing that it will be a loss. It is, ultimately, the job of the oppressor to uplift Black voices and people of color as a whole so that they can tell the stories of their experiences, hardships, and way of life without the tinge of whiteness to overtake it. Atticus Finch, ultimately a good-hearted white man, does embody a white savior in that he does his best to save Tom Robinson, but he does not, however, use his whiteness to pave the way for Black voices to rise. He does not seek justice for Black people overall; he merely helped one

person for his own sense of moral justice. In the article “Teaching ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ Today: Coming to Terms with Race, Racism, and America’s Novel” By Michael Macaluso, he said, “... the story of Tom, the wrongly accused African American character, is used as a means to an end of the development of its white characters (e.g., Atticus, Scout, even Boo) and is given little agency in this story about race. In other words, in telling a story about race, the novel “frames Atticus Finch, a White man, as the hero and frames Tom Robinson, an African American man, as the helpless, crippled victim” (p. 280).

These themes can be tricky for any adult person to understand, let alone a child who has a baseline knowledge of racism, in all the multi-faceted ways it presents in life, and it is imperative for this book to be taught in a way that highlights white privilege with an open discourse about how reading books like this through a lens of whiteness can contribute to oppression. If white students cannot separate themselves from their whiteness, if they cannot understand the themes of the novel truly, it could cause more harm than good. Students who are of the ability to reflect on their position in life and the position of others should be able to read the novel, likely students who are in their final years of high school or college aged students. Around these ages, a person is more likely to have developed a moral code and can understand their place in the world, to some extent.

Hard Conversations-Racism

When conversations of race arise, it is not uncommon to hear a person claim they are colorblind. The implication of this statement is that they do not see people as Black or White, but as a whole person where the color of their skin is a non-issue. To claim colorblindness, as a white person, is white privilege. In refusing to see, acknowledge, and respect racial and cultural differences, a white person effectively ceases to have an uncomfortable conversation because it is uncomfortable, and they feel they do not have to sit with their feelings of discomfort since the problem does not relate to or impact them directly. The privilege of having white skin means that racism does not influence a white person’s everyday life the way it does with a person of color. People of color do

not get to choose to avoid this conversation because racism happens to them, not because of them, as is the case for white people. According to the Equal Justice Initiative report (2018) titled “SEGREGATION IN AMERICA,” the authors stated, “During Reconstruction, violence, lynchings, and large scale massacres were used to maintain white control” (p. 10). Historically, white people are the aggressors. White people enslaved, tormented, and dehumanized Black people for generations. They formed lynch mobs, constructed the idea that Black people are less than, and have systematically perpetuated the ideology that white people are the predominant force politically, socially, racially, and financially. Barbara Harris Combs, author of “Phylon” (2018), said: “Some call everyday racism by other names. It may be classified as microaggression. Forms of it may be identified as colorblind racism. This author utilizes the term everyday racism because it draws attention to the fact that these discriminatory practices and treatments are a normalized part of everyday life. It speaks to the lived, daily experience of oppression faced by people of color who are prejudiced and dismissed (or worse) by the larger society” (p. 39).

White people do not and cannot experience racism because the oppressor holds the power. White people can experience prejudice, but without power, there is no real systematic and institutionalized oppression. The only way for white people to help end racial bias is to have an open and honest conversation to examine their privilege and to consider the Black experience through intentional and direct education aimed at dismantling a racist and harmful system of oppression. The problem with claiming colorblindness and statements similar is that it is not helpful, and it does not negate racism. It is a denial of cultural differences that halts the conversation instead of expanding it. To truly negate racism, a person must see color. To see color, and to respect it for what it is—that is the goal. A person must see the differences and respect that they are different, but not unequal. Black skin, Black culture, Black language—it is altogether a different experience than white skin and white culture, and white people have no right to tell stories that do not belong to them. Claiming colorblindness is a crutch that enables a white person to continue their life without

introspection of their own biases. In the article, “Walk the Walk but Don’t Talk the Talk: The Strategic Use of Color-Blind Ideology in an Interracial Social Movement Organization (2015) by Angie Beeman, the author noted that the colorblind ideology began as a response to the Civil Rights Movement which bolstered the idea that skin color should not matter (p. 127). Beeman said “In contemporary society, this often translates into the belief that racism no longer matters” (p. 127). If race and skin color no longer matter, then there is no conversation to be had about racist policies, inequalities, and disparities, and nothing will be fixed. The colorblind ideology perpetuates the notion that racism does not exist and therefore encourages, not discourages, racism in everyday life (p. 127). To negate race bias, a person should learn about other cultures, new languages, and different ways of life with respect for them as an outsider. One is not better than another, one is just more familiar, and that familiarity is where the problem lies. Atticus Finch tells a young Scout that she would get along better with all types of people when she can “... climb into his skin and walk around in it” (p. 33). This is an important lesson to learn.

Harper Lee’s Story through lens 2022

There has been speculation about Harper Lee’s right to write a story such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a white woman, and according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Harper Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* based on events that happened in her own life. Lee grew up in Monroeville, Alabama, and her father, like Atticus Finch, was a lawyer who represented two Black men accused of murdering a white store employee. While the resemblance of Lee’s life to the plot of the novel is clear, and Lee’s intentions were likely not to cause harm, but to tell a story resembling her own life, the fact remains that she was a white woman, and while she may have witnessed racism and the disparities that accompany racism, she did not have the authority to use derogatory language that does not belong to her as a white woman nor did she write a story that incites true change relative to social injustice. The story, ultimately, is about a white man and his white children who witness and empathize with Black characters, but they do little else to further the conversation about why racism is inherently wrong.

The story also paints a white man as the hero and the Black man as a helpless victim. White people have one job in the conversation of racism, and it is to listen to what the Black community is saying. It is important that the Black community leads while the white people listen and follow. It is not to tell stories with language and experiences that do not belong to them. The intention may have been education and empathy, but the impact is what matters, and the impact of the story is that the white man is a hero, and the Black man is helpless, which perpetuates the idea that white as a race is superior.

Teaching & Whiteness

To better understand how *To Kill a Mockingbird* should be taught, as well as to whom it should be taught, is to learn what whiteness entails in the broader sense. According to Borsheim-Black, Critical Whiteness scholars define whiteness as “a socially constructed racial category that has been used to justify and legally defend social inequality based on race. Whiteness is not objective or biological but arbitrary and malleable” and then Borsheim-Black continued to define it further by saying, “Whiteness can also be defined as a racial discourse, an ideology, that is continually constructed and maintained in ways of speaking, thinking, and interacting, as well as in institutional policies, societal norms, and epistemological values” (p. 410). The concept of whiteness is not a small conversation that spans across one or two class sessions. This is a discussion that requires discourse from multiple viewpoints over periods of time. This is not quite a discussion that younger adolescents should be introduced to via reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Introducing antiracist books written by people of color specifically for children of a younger age will set the stage for a more thorough understanding as their brains grow to span the depth of thinking that this book requires of the reader to garner a truer understanding of important concepts such as this.

Parent to Child

A major theme in the novel, as in life, is a parent’s influence on their child’s personality. Children are sponges who rely on their parents

or caregivers to take care of them, give them a good life, and teach them, hopefully, how to be good, successful people in the world. Scout was a good child. She leads with her heart, and she was very innocent and well-intentioned, even if some of her methods were questionable. A child learns about the world through the eyes of their parents before they go to school and learn a new perspective with a new, presumably trustworthy, adult. Scout clashed with her teacher when she gave insight into the lives of the people in her town, and she was punished for it. There was also a scene where the Finch family was visiting with Atticus's brother, Jack, and his family. Francis, her cousin, said something horrible and offensive so she beat him up. Francis told Jack only that Scout had hit him, and Jack did not ask for her side before he spanked her. She repeatedly questioned racism and the class system and received harsh punishment for it (or the behavior was somehow excused) by the adults who she loved, cared for, and trusted. Scout and Jem watched the trial, and both were distraught, but Jem suffered from severe disillusionment at the unfair trial given to Tom Robinson. From his perspective, the trial was clear cut—Tom Robinson was innocent. When he saw racial inequality firsthand, he was confused and distraught, rightfully so, as his primary caregiver was a decent person with a fairly solid moral code. Both children learned the unfairness of racial injustice, though they remained primarily untainted by the nastiness of the racism that surrounded them from seemingly all sides.

Teaching & Racism

To comprehend *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and similar novels, the teaching approach is of paramount importance. Give it too little thought, and the children fill in the blanks themselves. Teaching from a perspective of colorblindness or whiteness as neutral negates the original problem and creates a new one. So how should antiracism be taught? The primary goal is to disrupt whiteness by aiding white stu

dents in developing an awareness of their white privilege and of their own racial identity (Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 409). Borsheim-Black said:

“In classroom practice, antiracist pedagogy acknowledges the importance of racial and cultural identities; honors voices and experiences of people of color; teaches through collaboration and dialogue; examines power and oppression; examines discrimination as systemic; critiques traditions of schooling; and advocates for social action” (p. 409).

With the recent controversy in the media regarding teaching racism to students of any age, these practices may very well be removed from classrooms in general, effectively ceasing the necessary conversation surrounding the harmful aftermath of centuries of systemic racism and oppression.

Conclusion

It is easy to refuse to have a conversation about hard topics. It is easy to decide that these topics are too big, too old, and no longer require a discussion. Therefore, the topic is shelved and labeled as harmful. In the article “Precious Knowledge: Using Banned Books to Engage in a Youth Lens” (2015) by Alyssa Niccolini, she said “What we don’t or refuse to include in our curricula—or what we are prohibiting from including—speaks as loudly as what we do include” (p. 23). This is the case with banning books that contain social justice issues like racism, sexuality, or offensive language. When society as a whole decides that a topic should not be spoken about, the opportunity for collective growth diminishes. In refusing to speak about racism, white people are refusing to acknowledge and take responsibility for hundreds of years of colonization and trauma, and consequently, the aftermath it has left for the people of today. Knowledge is power. Teaching our children and unlearning harmful lessons

as adults is how society counteracts the hate that is instilled in many people as children. Banned books are likely banned because the subject matter is hard to read, but having hard discussions is the only way that humanity can grow and learn together to create a more healthy and equal life for everyone.

In considering who should read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a person must consider the complexity of the themes prevalent throughout the novel. At first glance, the novel is about a lovely progressive family where the strong white patriarch strives to live a life full of empathy and who comes to the rescue of a Black man falsely accused. Upon further inspection, however, it is revealed that there is no real conversation about racial injustice, but the furtherment of a white savior who follows his own sense of moral rightness in one particular case of racial injustice. It opens the conversation for racism, in that racism should be taught by the people who experience it, people of color, and their voices should be uplifted by the oppressor, white people. It is not the job of a white person to speak for the experience of people of color, and Black people specifically, in regard to this particular book. Topics like racism are important for individuals and for society as a whole to create a space where oppression has no place and stopping the ban of books with sensitive subject matter is praised instead of feared. Late high school or college aged students should be able to comfortably create an antiracist dialogue given that the conditions are right. The topic of racism in literature should be considered separate from whiteness as a baseline and taught through a lens that examines power and oppression and honors the voices of people of color.

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