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A Story for Whitey

Living in Utah is a sheltering experience, with the majority of residence having a white complexion and a decent education. Coming here is a culture shock for those from out of town. People are annoyingly friendly, with judgmental demeanors lurking beneath their plastic smiles. Most of the people dress moderately in style, and use Standard English when they speak, with an exception to some lazy habits when pronouncing certain words. The scenery of Utah is gorgeous, and the beautifully naive, yet educated, white people that reside here is a perfect audience for the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Were we to venture into the streets of North Las Vegas with this story and its dialogue, a different reaction would spread throughout the classroom at the first sight of the “N” word. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is said to be one of the best novels of the 20th century, but at what cost does this ancient story bestow its brilliance onto a classroom? Children of America today don’t connect with this novel anymore, and the literary cannon has continued to push this outdated story onto our future, perpetually fueling the ideas and concepts of segregation, racism, and bigotry. My purpose is to illustrate through an ethnocritic approach why *To Kill a Mockingbird* is racial biased literature; which shouldn't be required reading in general education curriculums, nor should it be considered one of the best novels of the 20th century.

Ethnocriticism allows us to take a look at literature from a multicultural point of view, evaluating the cultures that are portrayed and/or affected by such literature. Applying ethnocriticism to evaluate the books we require for curriculums would allow us to better serve all the children of America. We are a multicultural nation, with century old beliefs still lingering in our system. If educators want *To Kill a Mockingbird* to be incorporated into Jr. High

curriculums, a series of other books written by African Americans, Mexican Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Polynesian American, and so on, so forth should be incorporated into the curriculum to bring balance, and maintain the interests and respect of children of minority. This will also give us the opportunity to educate all students about the many different cultures and points of views America has living upon her land.

Social norms have taught us that there is a time and place for all behavior; this includes our use of language and dialect. The nanny to Scout, the main character and narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, explains this in the quote “Suppose you and Scout talked colored-folks’ talk at home- it’d be out of place, wouldn’t it? Now what if I talked white-folks’ talk at church, and with my neighbors? They’d think I was puttin’ on airs to beat Moses” (pg. 148). The same could be said about the book itself. Contextually, the word Nigger means Nigger, especially when said from the mouth of a white person, and we have white children reciting that word in front their black peers. How this doesn’t alarm anyone is beyond comprehension. How can we subject children to the harsh realities of history in this manner so early in their lives? We spend so much time stifling our teacher’s creative teaching methods with strict curriculums, and then throw this extremely controversial novel into the mix.

Quince Grieves is a middle school teacher, who wrote an article in 2012, titled “A White Woman Addressing Racial Complexity in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.” In this article she expresses how she feels *To Kill a Mockingbird* should be taught in schools, if it is going to be required reading. The article starts off with her expressing how embarrassed and naive she now feels about telling a young black student of hers it was okay to say the “N” because it was historical context. Needless to say, the boy refused to say the word, and his classmates followed his example by referring to the word as, “that word” (Grieves). In Jr. Highs throughout the nation,

English teachers are preparing their eighth grade class to read *To Kill a Mockingbird*; teaching black history through a young, white kid's perspective, in the 1930's. If this is to be the case in the year 2015, we must approach the subject with the intent to address the flaws of the novel as well. Grieves believes we must call attention to the lack of voice African Americans have in this story, and give students the opportunity to translate this story from another character's perspective. I agree if *To Kill a Mockingbird* were taught in this way, the novel's impact on students would be a positive one, allowing them to see the events of the story from the eyes of those involved, especially those without a voice, such as the Black American this story revolves around, Tom Robinson.

This story has a moral message that rings honor in the hearts and minds of "white-folk." White children finish this story feeling all warm and fuzzy in-side because they learned about the trials and tribulations in black history, because they are a step closer to tolerance, because they understand what moral values lie within the message; but this is a story about people they rarely encounter in life, in white suburbia, where this book is gloated and praised. Its colorful use of vocabulary and the skills Harper Lee executes when telling a story is what gives this novel its true beauty, but that is not the purpose of this manuscript in the academic field, and its true purpose has no right being in schools filled with multicultural children. At the end of Tom Robinson's trial, Atticus is explaining to Jem why Tom lost. He says, "In our courts, when it's a white man's word against a black man's, the white man always wins. They're ugly but those are the facts of life" (pg. 251-252). Children of minority today are faced with the realities of racism still, every day, with no intention of reading a book that freely uses the worst word they know in their vocabulary, especially from some white teacher, who knows nothing of what this story speaks of on a personal level. It is time we ask the black community if they think we should

teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* in our classrooms, and not assume the white politician creating our curriculum knows best.

To Kill a Mockingbird was published in 1960, during a time of moral awakening in our country. We needed a book of this nature to introduce the developing views we had towards humanity; reinforcing the concepts that every life has a “God-given” right to equality in the pursuit of happiness and health. Civil rights were being finely tuned, America needed a novel to demonstrate the tolerance a privilege, white folk was capable of. *To Kill a Mockingbird* appealed to the changing times, and reflected the moral revolution our country was developing towards people with dark skin pigment, immigrants, and those lower in social class. It’s now fifty- five years later and politicians are still incorporating this novel into a teacher’s curriculum, regardless of the affect and impact it has on the new generation. We are in an era when continuing to teach old literature like *To Kill a Mockingbird* no longer serves its purpose. The message has been outplayed, the text outdated. Of course it is important to teach children about slavery, Jim Crow Laws that gave Black Americans different rights than the white citizens, and the perseverance Black Americans faced through history, but at some point we must realize the story of Atticus Finch no longer serves its purpose as being the founding literature to teach modern day Standard English. We are creating an uncomfortable space for those who were not born into the white upper class, and it’s time we brought this educational injustice to an end.

In a three part series released by the New Republic, Laura Walsh expresses the frustrations many scholars have about Atticus, Scout’s father, and the lawyer of the accused Tom Robinson. He seems noble, on the surface, in the mind of the readers; but in actuality, he is only doing what his job has assigned him to do, by representing Tom Robinson in a rape case involving a white girl. This does not make him an advocate of equality but rather tolerant when

in the presence of black people, and genuine to the morals, and integrity of his profession (Walsh). Atticus chooses not to be a bigot because it is the simple minded way, but that is not to say he isn't racist. This concept is presented when Atticus tells Scout not to use the "N" word. He tells her not to use it because it is simple, not that it's wrong, immoral, cruel, and downright ugly. A child raised to view black people as equals, knows from the beginning the "N" word is not acceptable. Scout had a black nanny, I find it hard to believe a family who felt their nanny was equal, and considered family, would not have been taught to refrain from using that word up until the point he began defending Tom Robinson.

The second part of The New Republic series on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, written by William Giraldi, discusses the interesting fact that those who are qualified to address these concerns about *To Kill a Mockingbird* chose not to do so. Why, after all this controversy, would those with the education, experience, and knowledge to address the issues of this novel not comment on it? This alone is enough to raise speculation about the true rhetorical nature of this novel. Perhaps Harper Lee has cracked open an unobtainable literary talent. Perhaps they all knew Atticus was no hero, but rather a great lawyer, who did his job, regardless of his beliefs, however, Lee has mastered the skill of dictating her reader's point of view on Atticus. Giraldi quote's Mark Twain in his article, "Nothing but the martyr spirit can brave the lynching mob, and cow it and scatter it." to describe Atticus' role in *To Kill a Mockingbird*; finishing with "If there's such a thing as a passive martyr, Atticus is it" (Giraldi). Giraldi hits the nail on the head with that last statement. Yes, Atticus' is a good man, he's a better man than most because he stood up for the Tom Robinson, the black man accused of raping a white woman; however, that line of thinking is so warped. Atticus should do his job regardless, the fact that we white folk celebrate Atticus for representing Tom Robinson even though he was black says a lot about the

way we still think today. I find it even more disturbing when minorities in a class full of white people don't see the bigotry behind the message against bigotry. They've grown so accustomed to not having a voice, they aren't upset there is zero representation for them in this novel intended to teach their own ancestral history.

It is my belief this novel should be shelved and no longer pushed on to our youth. We are in the year 2015; Black History should be taught from the eyes and voice of Black Americans. Our curriculums need to reflect the principles of a multicultural society, free from teaching methods and literature designed undeniably for "white-suburban" children. I feel it is necessary teachers and parents understand the cost teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* in classrooms has on our youth. Perhaps Atticus was a righteous man we learned about tolerance from, as a white, privileged society of kids, but this is no longer the case. It is essential American children learn about bigotry and racism but give them truth. Provide them literature that embraces the voices of those who have lived the tragedy. Implement a curriculum designed for various ethnicities; teach from an omniscient point of view. Most importantly, encourage multicultural students to become teachers, further breaking through the barriers a white education has created in our nation. Our goals for education should be inclusive for all children in America, including those with temporary residency.

Carl A. Grant discusses the impact ethnic teachers would have on creating a well racially balanced environment for students. It is Grants position that the school system is designed to sustain racism; the teaching faculty, school curriculum, and its material needs to be scrutinized in order to further eliminate racism from the education system. In his article "A Carrot in a Pot of Water is Not Vegetable Soup," he discusses these ideas with the final statement that, "The diversity in ethnic group representation must be visible at all levels of policy and decision

making. Historically that has not been so and even presently this is not so” (Grant). Grant presents statistics from coast to coast showing minority students are more than a quarter of the student body, while minority teachers do not surpass the tenth percentile. How can we expect children of minority to relate to their education when it is clear they are a “fly in a glass of milk?” We can’t, and we down-right shouldn’t.

Growing up in North Las Vegas, I was the minority. My peers were prominently Black and/or Hispanic. I understood the pigment of our skin separated us, but I also understood I was the outcast color. It was a culture shock to encounter this book in my first year attending a Utah school. I felt uncomfortable in a room full of white kids that I resembled, but would never truly relate to; we saw the world through different eyes. Feelings of guilt and betrayal lingered in my heart, knowing I was reciting a word I grew up viewing as an unforgivable curse if spoken from the lips of a stupid, white girl. I do believe *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a great book, beautifully written, but I would not say it was one the best from the 20th century. Black Americans lived and *mattered* during the 20th century, and this book was not written for them. It was written for white upper class students. And most importantly, it’s a children’s book. You swear in front of your teacher, and you’re going to be sent to the office. You say “Nigger” in literary context, and it’s educational. How is this acceptable? I do not feel Harper Lee’s intent when writing this novel was to teach middle school children. I think she intended to tell her childhood story, in an attempt to portray the ideologies of the time period it was written. In 2015, Atticus is no hero to me, but for those Black Americans he represented in his story, he made a difference. He gave them hope, and he gave them a fighting chance. He stood for change in a time we needed it most. For that, I applaud Harper Lee, as for *To Kill a Mockingbird* being required reading in classes across the nation, it’s time we allow multicultural enthusiasts to teach the trials and tribulations

of minorities in our nation's history, and in doing so, maybe we can begin to eliminate the social
injustice racial diversity creates in our education system

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