

***To Kill a Mockingbird* as an Introduction to Faulkner**

Matthew J. Bolton

A reader who plans on tackling William Faulkner's novels might first want to reread Harper Lee's classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for its depiction of family life and race relations in the American south can serve as an introduction to the setting and themes that are central to Faulkner's body of work. Lee's novel was published in 1960, two years before Faulkner's death and a generation after he had published his most important novels (he would publish only one more, the light-hearted and picaresque *The Reivers*). While Lee's novel is rooted in her own childhood in Alabama, it is also in dialogue with Faulkner's vision of life in the deep south. This sort of implicit comparison may be inevitable when an author writes about a milieu that a predecessor has so thoroughly and successfully mined. Lee's childhood memories are her own, and the town in which she grew up would have been much the same whether or not Faulkner had ever picked up his pen. Yet once those memories of childhood in a small town are rendered objective in the form of a novel, they enter into the sphere of the literary and will be measured against other representations of similar experiences. Faulkner's depiction of life in the American south is powerful enough that it draws *To Kill a Mockingbird* into its orbit. This is particularly true for a modern reader who is not from the south, and who therefore knows the mores of that place and time through literature rather than through first-hand experience. Readers of Faulkner who revisit *To Kill a Mockingbird* may find themselves trying to locate Harper Lee's town of Maycomb on Faulkner's map of Yoknapatawpha county. None of this is to suggest that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is derivative. Rather, the book stakes its own claim, and in several important ways challenges Faulkner's depiction of life in the American south. It is a testament to the novel's lasting power that it can address settings and themes that were central to Faulkner's novels without being subsumed by those novels.

Yet to talk of one writer following another in orderly progression may be to place too much weight on the historical and the chronological. Readers themselves often encounter works in a very different order from the one in which they were written; after all, few toddlers choose as a bedtime story *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, or *Beowulf*! Historically, Lee may have written after Faulkner, but in the reading history of most modern Americans, *To Kill a Mockingbird* comes before *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. Because of its long-established place on middle school required reading lists, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is often one of the first “serious” novels that an adolescent encounters. A teacher, professor, or lay reader may want to take advantage of the novel’s canonical status (both in the school and in the intellectual development of many readers) by treating it as an initial foray into the territory that Faulkner will explore more fully. Lee’s novel can serve as a guide that allows one to access the more densely constructed work of Faulkner. Connecting the two authors may help the reader who finds Faulkner’s Latinate prose and fragmented narration a challenge. A great novel in its own right, *To Kill a Mockingbird* can also be a key to understanding several of Faulkner’s great novels, particularly *The Sound and the Fury*.

To Kill a Mockingbird deftly intertwines two narratives: the story of Scout and Jem’s fascination with the reclusive Boo Radley and the story of their father Atticus’s defense of Tom Robinson, an African American accused of raping a white woman. Whereas the children, aided by their summer visitor Dill, are active participants in their campaign to draw Boo Radley out of his house, they are essentially witnesses to Atticus’s legal battle and to the ire that he draws on himself from the town and the county. But a witness need not be passive, and the trial of Tom Robinson calls on Scout and Jem to actively reconsider their relationship to the society in which they have grown up. Jem, older than his sister by four years, is able more fully to articulate an understanding of Maycomb’s divisions and hierarchies. He says: