

The World According to Scout

Point of view is crucial in any story. The voice of the narrator Scout Finch is one of the keys to the success of To Kill a Mockingbird.

Author Harper Lee has written and published just one novel. But that work has opened the minds and hearts of millions. "To Kill a Mockingbird touched my life in a very big way," says Suzi, a Massachusetts student. "It re-taught me lessons that I had learned as a child but kind of forgot . . . like, you shouldn't judge people by their appearance, and you can't believe everything you hear."

"Scout's curiosity reminded me of my own when I was her age," comments Jill from Wyoming. "Like Scout, I wonder why people treat each other differently just because their skin is a different color."

Scout, otherwise known as Jean Louise Finch, is the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Set in a small town in Alabama in the 1930s, the novel tells the story of a lawyer—Scout's father—who defends a black man falsely accused of rape. Lee could have chosen to tell the story from the point of view of the lawyer, Atticus Finch. She could have told it from the third-person ("he" or "she") perspective. Instead, in a brilliant writing decision, she tells the story from the first-person ("I") viewpoint of an eight-year-old girl. Scout's innocence exposes adult hypocrisy. Through Scout, Lee can criticize the behavior of the adult characters.

But telling a mature story—a story of injustice and prejudice—through a child's eyes also

presented a challenge for Lee. As intelligent as Scout is, she does not understand everything she sees and describes. Therefore, she cannot convey all Lee has to say about the novel's themes of discrimination, revenge, and conscience. Lee solved this challenge by using a literary technique called *flashback*. When the novel begins, an older Scout is looking back at events that happened when she was a child.

The novel's first paragraph introduces the flashback:

When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow. When it healed, and Jem's fears of never being able to play football were assuaged, he was seldom self-conscious about his injury.

Words like *assuaged* and *self-conscious* are not in the vocabulary of most eight-year-olds. This is the adult-Scout speaking. She continues:

When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading to his accident. I maintain that the Ewells started it all, but Jem, who was four years my senior, said it started long before that. He said it began the summer Dill came to us, when Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out.

The rest of the story is a flashback, retelling the events that led to Jem's injury. The reader will discover who the Ewells are, who Dill and Boo Radley are, and much more. The reader's guide on the journey back in time will be the older Scout.

Lee's flashback strategy gives the novel a double point of view that allows her to present the events of the story with great power. The reader sees the child-Scout in action as the story unfolds, while the adult-Scout looks back and interprets its events.

Let's look more closely at both perspectives. ➡



The Child-Scout's Perspective

Eight-year-old Scout is curious. She has never seen her reclusive neighbor Boo Radley, but longs to. Like most children, she is self-centered. Her world revolves around games and fights with Jem; fear of nasty old Mrs. Dubose; problems at school; a dramatic fire; the time a rabid dog threatens the neighborhood.

Scout's childish point of view plays a key role in one very serious and adult scene, however. A mob has assembled outside the jail cell of Tom Robinson, the innocent man Atticus is defending. Atticus stands in front of the cell, trying to hold off the mob, which seeks to seize Tom and lynch him. Atticus is unaware that Scout, Jem, and their friend Dill are spying from across the street. Scout misunderstands. She thinks the mob is a group of friends, and rushes into it.

"Hey, Atticus!"

I thought he would have a fine surprise, but his face killed my joy.... There was a smell of stale whiskey and pigpen about, and when I glanced around I discovered that these men were strangers. They were not the people I saw last night. Hot

embarrassment shot through me: I had leaped triumphantly into a ring of people I had never seen before.

Atticus asks the children to go home. Jem refuses because, unlike Scout, he realizes his father is in danger. But it is Scout who, through her innocence, saves the day. She recognizes someone in the crowd.

"Don't you remember me, Mr. Cunningham? I'm Jean Louise Finch. You brought us some hickory nuts one time, remember?"...

"I go to school with Walter," I began again. "He's your boy, ain't he? Ain't he, sir?"

Mr. Cunningham was moved to a faint nod. He did know me, after all.

Mr. Cunningham and the others stare at Scout, astonished. Her friendliness and innocence make the men ashamed of their intentions. They disperse.

The child-Scout doesn't realize—and won't until she's older—that she has just saved Tom Robinson's life.

The Adult-Scout's Perspective

In this passage, Scout, as narrator, comments on her hometown and its people. This is not a child speaking, but a more mature voice.

Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather the streets turned to red slop; grass grew on the sidewalks, the courthouse sagged in the square. Somehow, it was hotter then: a black dog suffered on a summer's day; bony mules hitched to Hoover carts flicked flies in the sweltering shade of the live oaks on the square. Men's stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning. Ladies bathed before noon, after their three o'clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum.

Scout continues, saying that Maycomb's people "moved slowly then." Elsewhere, she notes they were "determined to preserve every physical scrap of the past." The adult-Scout is making a point the child-Scout couldn't: that these tired, slow-moving people, clinging to the past, were not prepared to deal with a controversy like the Robinson case.

In another scene, Scout is hiding on the staircase of her home. She overhears Atticus discussing the case with his brother, saying he hopes his kids don't become bitter about the controversy. Suddenly, he orders Scout to bed. "I never figured out how Atticus knew I was listening," Scout says, "and it was not until many years later that I realized he wanted me to hear every word he said."

In this passage, the narrator—the adult-Scout—interrupts the action to comment on Atticus's character. Lee is drawing readers' attention to his honesty and integrity. The child-Scout could not have truly appreciated her father and so could not express it. The adult-Scout could and does.

For the reader, however, the lessons learned are more immediate.

"It's all about the power of a child's words," says Jill. "The book made me think that curiosity is strong when we are children, but starts to die when we grow older." That's just one lesson that Scout—both as a child and an adult—teaches in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

—Alan Lenhoff