

The Reflection of Humanity in Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*: From the Perspective of New Historicism

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Abstract—This study aimed to describe the reflection of humanity amidst the racist behaviour in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. This study employed a qualitative method using Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism approach. The data of this study was collected from the descriptions and utterances of the characters and narrator in the novel. The result of this study shows how discrimination was treated at that time, how a sense of humanity existed to defend black people from racial discrimination by white people, and also how this discriminatory treatment influenced social conditions in that era, where white people who supported black people would receive the same treatment as black people.

Index Terms—humanity, discrimination, New Historicism, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

I. INTRODUCTION

Before delving into the paper's topic, exploring the foundational principles of literary works and considering diverse expert opinions on literature is essential. Life, perceived as a collection of stories, may appear meaningless until expressed in writing, linking recent and past events into an artistic narrative (Yudith et al., 2023). In recent times, most have defined literature as a written work created by an author characterized by its aesthetic excellence (Arafah et al., 2021). Literature, according to Wellek and Warren (1956) in Nurcahyadi (2024) serves life, and life consists of social reality. Literary works inherently possess a social function, as the life of a human being, inherently intertwined with social constructs, consistently grapples with issues inseparable from this social fabric (Wellek & Warren, 1956, p. 204; Yudith et al., 2024). Additionally, literary creations reflect societal dynamics and encapsulate the author's opinions, serving as a medium through which an individual's perspectives are expressed and conveyed within the work (Hasanah et al., 2021).

Literary work and human life are difficult to separate because literary work is generally created by expressing someone's feelings, thoughts, experiences, ideas, and beliefs. It demonstrates how literary work is a person's expression through words, deeds, and writings (Sunyoto et al., 2022). Literature can often be considered a reflection or mirror of society (Marliana et al., 2018). Almost all the current issues about humans' relationship with the environment can be

depicted in literary works (Siwi et al., 2022). Analyzing a literary work within its contextual framework, particularly by delving into the cultural discourse, enhances its meaning and fosters a more comprehensive understanding (Arafah et al., 2020; Takwa et al., 2024; Mofu et al., 2024). Literary work is one of the most outstanding achievements of human beings, and it expresses life as seen in real life. Literature might be considered a piece of textual art produced by a particular author (Arafah & Kaharuddin, 2019). The aesthetic prowess of authors is exemplified through the quality of their literary creations, providing readers with an enjoyable and immersive experience. These literary works are perceived as valuable reading resources, allowing readers to savour the intricacies of scenes, plots, and characters, making them an appealing choice for leisurely engagement (Sunardi et al., 2018). In addition, literary work is a social institution, and it covers more aspects of human life, including social, cultural, religious, economic, and political (Nurcahyadi, 2024; Jusdalyana et al., 2024). The expansion of technology plays an essential part in changing the way of thinking (Arafah & Hasyim, 2019). Furthermore, a literary work manifests an author's creativity, acting as a medium to convey ideas and experiences about social realities embedded in human existence (Arafah et al., 2024). Within this social reality, an author's imaginative prowess emerges, shaping a comprehensive expression within the literary work, thus making it intriguing and worthy of scrutiny.

Humanity describes a caring attitude towards fellow humans regardless of ethnicity, race, and culture. The concept of the value of people pertains to their inherent worth, serving as a benchmark for guiding behavioural standards in their everyday lives (Afiah et al., 2022). Racist and unfair attitudes and behaviour towards black people do not reflect a caring attitude towards fellow human beings (Nurcahyadi, 2024). Cultural value initiates the shaping of behavioural patterns that, over time, can evolve into ingrained habits, ultimately defining the character of an individual (Mokoginta & Arafah, 2022). Literary work can be used to teach character education values (Arafah et al., 2024). Character education is obtained from explicit depictions of characters, their life journeys, struggles, and actions, depicted through character descriptions and conversations or implicitly told throughout the narrative (Hasanah et al., 2021). The author believes this issue is important because everyone, especially black people, has the right to receive equal treatment.

Work does not spontaneously emerge; instead, it evolves through a process, reflecting an author's thoughts, manners, behaviour, and attitudes across their body of work, discernible through an analysis of the author's stylistic choices (Fadillah et al., 2022). The language style aims to describe some expressions that refer to the social condition (Asri et al., 2023; Lestari et al., 2024; Radjaban et al., 2025). Through language, the readers can interpret and affect their awareness of the world (Arafah et al., 2023). The lives of the characters the author describes in his works cannot be separated from the activities of the subjects, and these activities are the facts that the author processes in his imagination (Nurcahyadi, 2024). This stylistic dimension encompasses the language employed in portraying characters' everyday communication, as literature serves as a medium to introduce and depict aspects of culture, social life, and the realities of human existence (Mutmainnah et al., 2022; Arifuddin et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2025). Authors are expected to use figurative language, such as metaphor or symbol, to portray social conditions beautifully (Baa et al., 2023; Hasyim et al., 2023; Takwa et al., 2024). Moreover, figurative language must still be adequate to ensure that the context of literary work is understood (Yulianti et al., 2022; Iksora et al., 2022). This fact is formed apart from the author's imaginative activity and is also influenced by the author's social activity as a member of society (Nurcahyadi, 2024).

Science and technological development significantly impact society by drastically changing people's lives (Manugeran et al., 2023; Suhadi et al., 2022; Jaelani et al., 2024). We live in a digital age where people can easily connect using the internet (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023a; Arafah et al., 2023). Our young generation tends to prioritize social media in everyday life, proliferating internet users (Hasyim & Arafah, 2023a; Arafah & Hasyim, 2023b). Consequently, the activities and traditions of good deeds are replaced by electronic devices (Lebba et al., 2023). Electronic devices were intended to facilitate writing skills supported by good grammar and vocabulary mastery, which can be developed through reading activities (Kaharuddin et al., 2024). In contrast, through digital literacy, users can be educated on improving their skills (Arafah & Hasyim, 2023a). In line with this development, literature has also been involved occasionally, and it is now growing in academic spaces (Arafah et al., 2023; Arafah et al., 2025). Online media make learning virtually easier (Anggrawan et al., 2019; Arafah et al., 2023; Arafah et al., 2025). Therefore, teachers and students must adapt quickly (Kuswanty et al., 2023). The quality of literary work is enhanced by utilizing the wealth of technical breakthroughs (Asriyanti et al., 2022). Presenting literary work in the learning process will increase students' concern about cultural values (Arifin et al., 2022; Arnawa & Arafah, 2023). The reason is that cultural values are guidelines for forming good attitudes and behaviours (Takwa et al., 2022). Therefore, it is essential to avoid the shift from traditional to modern lifestyle because it can affect how people behave (Takwa et al., 2022). To achieve a goal in learning literary work needs a high motivation to seriously learn so that it will always result in high achievement and students can pass a test to measure their competency (Arafah et al., 2020; Kaharuddin et al., 2023; Mardiana et al., 2023; Karamoy et al., 2024).

According to Pictet, the term "humanity" embodies a sentiment or moral value so impeccably aligned with the identity of the Red Cross that it was preserved, ultimately symbolizing its inaugural Fundamental Principle. However, in a more precisely articulated rationale, Pictet suggests that the term 'humanitarianism' serves as a more accurate descriptor, characterized by an objective to promote the happiness of the human species and an attitude grounded in universality, representing humanity's disposition towards humanity (Pictet, 1979, p. 13).

Indeed, the Principle of Humanity strives for a heightened and rational manifestation of modern humanitarianism, with various catalysts propelling its evolution, among which psychology plays a significant role (Purwaningsih et al., 2020;

Yudith et al., 2024). Its objective extends beyond addressing immediate human suffering through humanitarian efforts; it also aims to proactively prevent such suffering in the long term, maximizing happiness and well-being for a broad spectrum of individuals (Pictet, 1979, p. 13). This explains why the Principle of Humanity is often viewed as 'humanity in action'. Unstable emotions also affect people's behaviour and cause them to forget specific values (Mokoginta & Arafah, 2022). The aspirations of the Movement concentrated on the well-being of humankind and encapsulated within this Principle over a specific historical time frame have proven to be pioneering, noble, and exceptionally pertinent.

In analyzing this paper titled Reflection of Humanity in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the author uses the approach of *New Historicism* by Stephen Greenblatt's, who understands intellectual history through literature and its cultural context to identify reflections of humanity in the novel and explain how social conditions during the 20th century—using the characters in the novel and drawing up several conclusions regarding the analysis results. This study is essential to conduct because the writer believes that exposing a sense of humanity in that era will provide readers a greater understanding of how to be kind to others in the appropriate way. This is also an attempt to encourage people's awareness of the issue (Arafah et al., 2021; Arafah et al., 2024). The oppression of others, particularly black people, will continue indefinitely if this study is not done. It is hoped this research will serve as a source of humanity, inspiring individuals to choose humanity above everything else.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

New Historicism, as a literary theory, seeks to comprehend intellectual history by examining literature within its cultural context. According to Bressler (1999, p. 182), new historians seek to understand literature from a historical perspective, which they feel the New Criticism should have provided. New Historicism encompasses a broad application to historical methods, yet it also denotes a distinctive form of historiography that thrived in the nineteenth century, notably in Germany, where it was recognized as Histories. According to Veenstra (1995, p. 174), Greenblatt is definitely one of the leading critics in the literary and historical studies known as New Historicism.

Furthermore, in his article, Maza (2004, p. 249) stated that there is a differentiation from Greenblatt about New Criticism and New Historicism. He asserted that the text possessed self-containment, distinguishing it from the earlier Historicism, which was nomological and aimed at uncovering a singular political vision. In contrast to these previous analytical approaches, New Historicism perceives the resultant totality or unity as a historical reality rather than being construed as a product of interpretation or influenced by the ideological inclinations of specific groups. Greenblatt assumes the trend of formalist textual study in the tradition of new criticism, which he considered a historical Brannigan (1999, p. 421). Greenblatt also explains literature as an instinctive aesthetic space distinct from things other than the work.

According to Nasution and Arianto (2021, p. 105), New Historicism is insufficiently theorized because, in the first place, it was just an interpretation practice. However, later, many critics and researchers demand theorizing the practice for the result of viewing better history. New Historicism applies the intertext work method by parallel reading because all texts are products of the times and are interconnected (Nurcahyadi, 2024). According to Artika (2015, p. 52), New Historicism offers a multifaceted approach encompassing various methods of application; these include selecting literary works for research, delving into the historical context of the community during the publication of the literary work, scrutinizing the text to identify fundamental issues it articulates, studying non-literary texts from the same historical periods to discern parallel relationships between literature and non-literary sources, and analyzing the interconnections between literary works and non-literary texts. Ultimately, the outcomes of these analyses are systematically organized to unveil the nuanced meanings embedded within the literary works.

New Historicism applies the method of intertextual work by reading several texts in parallel because all texts are interrelated products (Nurcahyadi, 2024). Employing the New Historicism method entails systematically exploring literature within archival contexts. This approach interprets literature by emphasizing its connections with non-literary texts, as arguments concerning the meaning of literary works are frequently illuminated by historical considerations. The robust history analysis is a sturdy foundation, offering a solid basis for articulating statements about the meaning embedded within literary texts (Rodiah, 2020, p. 130).

In line with Greenblatt's idea, which shattered the study of New Historicism as a historical study, Colebrook (1997, p. 1) argued that a new historicism represented something like a return to history. After the supposed formalism relativism of the 1980s, Brannigan indirectly shows his agreement with New Historicism. New Historicism dedicates a significant portion of its focus to discerning and revealing diverse historical epistemologies, particularly tracing the evolution of notions regarding the state, individual culture, and the family, marking a noteworthy historical shift as acknowledged by numerous commentators. According to Brannigan (1998, p. 8), New Historicism is a method rooted in simultaneously examining literary and non-literary texts, typically from the same historical era. It notably rejects the notion of privileging literary texts, advocating for an approach where both literary and non-literary texts carry equal significance. It creates a mode of study in which they are mutually influential and in constant dialogue rather than adhering to a traditional academic distinction of foreground and background.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted within the framework of qualitative methodology; this study systematically applied its procedures and principles. The data collection involved examining the literary work, where specific words and sentences were meticulously noted. Employing the New Historicism approach, the analysis aimed at uncovering a discernible sense of humanity within the novel, particularly its impact on the treatment of black people, ultimately yielding several significant conclusions.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

During the slavery era in America, black individuals were subjected to rampant racism, with the actions of white enslavers dehumanizing them. Even thirty years post the Civil War, which marked the end of slavery, places like Maycomb in the Southern United States, heavily reliant on farming, particularly cotton cultivation, maintained a social landscape marked by segregation between white and black communities. This setting perpetuated racial injustice, further emphasizing the prevailing racial disparities and discrimination against black individuals, a backdrop integral to the narrative of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The white population in the Southern United States contested the Reconstruction efforts by leveraging their influential positions within the central government in Washington. They developed strategies to control the nation, preventing whites from maintaining dominance. Then, social segregation spread throughout Southern life, such as restaurants, hotels, hospitals, schools, and others. This initiated the inception of racism, exemplified by cases such as black individuals being compelled to yield their seats to white people on buses.

Racism, as portrayed in the novel, involves a perilous racial bias directed towards individuals differing from the general public, particularly affecting the black community. Harper Lee depicted racial injustice in Maycomb, Alabama, through her book, making it a classic work that serves as a poignant tool for teaching and discussing the issue of racism.

Racism appears when Tom Robinson, an innocent African American man, is falsely accused of raping Mayella Ewell, the daughter of Mr Ewell. Despite the inherent injustice, Atticus Finch undertakes the challenging role of defending Tom as his lawyer, recognizing that he is entering a formidable legal battle. Despite being innocent, Tom Robinson loses his case and is unjustly sentenced to life in prison solely because of his race. The false accusation by Mr. Ewell, claiming to witness Tom raping his daughter, highlights the pervasive racial prejudice present in the courtroom.

Mr Ewell looks confusedly at the judge. "Well, Mayella was raisin this holy racket so I dropped m'load and run as fast as I could but one run into th fence, but when I got distangled I run up o the window and I seen" Mr Ewell's face grew scarlet. He stood up and pointed his finger at Tom Robinson "I seen that black Nigger yonder ruttin' on my Mayella!" (Lee, 1989, p. 231)

Scout, the narrator, establishes the context early on by describing the Maycomb town and explaining about her father, Atticus, Jem and Calpurnia.

Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it. In rainy weather, the street turned red slop; grass grew on the sidewalks, and the courthouse sagged in the square. Somehow, it was hotter then: a black dog suffered on the summer's day; bony mules hitched to Hoover carts and 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.

People move slowly, then. They ambled across the square, shuffled in and out of the stores around it, and took their time about everything. A day was twenty-four hours long but seemed longer. There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County. However, it was a time of vague optimism for some people: Maycomb County had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself.

We lived on the main residential street in town - Atticus, Jem and I, plus Calpurnia, our cook. Jem and I found our father satisfactory: he played with us, read to us, and treated us with courteous detachment. (Lee, 1989, p. 5)

The narrative begins with the establishment of the Finch family's position in Maycomb and the complexity of their views about the opinions held by their fellow townspeople, which eventually unravels and finds resolution through the unfolding plot.

Atticus Finch's decision to defend Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a white woman, resulted in a backlash from public opinion against him.

Atticus sighed 'I'm simply defending a negro - his name Tom Robinson. He lives in that little settlement beyond the town dump. He's a member of Calpurnia's church, and Cal knows his family well. She says they're clean-living folks. Scout, you aren't told enough to understand some things yet, but there's been some high talk around town that I shouldn't do much about defending this man. It's a peculiar case that won't come to trial until the summer session. John Taylor was kind enough to give us postponement....'

'If you shouldn't be defendin' him, then why are you doin' it?'

For several reasons, 'said Atticus.: The main one is, if I didn't, I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent this county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again'. (Lee, 1989, p. 83)

In court, Atticus clearly states that the Ewells are lying and that Tom is innocent.

Atticus was reaching into the inside pocket of his coat. He drew up an envelope, went into his vest pocket, and unclipped his fountain pen. He moved leisurely and had turned so that he was in full view of the jury. He unscrewed the fountain pen cap and placed it gently on his table. He shook the pen a little, then handed it with the envelope to the witness. 'Would you write your name for us?' he asked. 'Clearly now, so the jury can see you do it.'

Mr. Ewell wrote on the back of the envelope and looked up complacently to see Judge Taylor staring at him as if he were some fragrant gardenias in full bloom on the witness stand, to see Mr. Gilmer half-sitting, half-standing at his table. The jury watched him; one man leaned forward with his hands over the railing.

Mr. Gilmer asked him one more question. 'About your writing with your left hand, are you ambidextrous, Mr Ewell?'

'I most positively am not; I can use one hand good as the other. One hand good as the other.' He added, glaring at the defence table. (Lee, 1989, pp. 195-196)

The trial makes it clear that Atticus is right and his opposition is wrong. Atticus uses a simple sentence that is easy to understand for people, including his children, who also attend the trial that day. He did this so that the jury and everyone who watched this trial knew that who hurt Mayella was her father.

The jury finds Tom Robinson guilty.

A jury never looks at a defendant it has convicted, and when the jury this jury came in, not one of them looked at Tom Robinson. The foreman handed a piece of paper to Mr Tate, who gave it to the clerk and the judge...

I shut my eyes. Judge Taylor was polling the jury: 'Guilty. guilty... guilty. . .' I peeked at Jem: his hands were white from gripping the balcony rail, and his shoulder jerked as if each 'guilty' was a separate stab between them. (Lee, 1989, p. 233)

Despite Atticus giving his best efforts and Jem, who watched the trial, believing that the people of Maycomb could not do something as they want to send an innocent man to jail, the jury convicts Tom.

Mr Ewell attacks Jem and Scout.

Aunt Alexandra was sitting in a rocking chair by the fireplace. The man who brought Jem in was standing in a corner, leaning against the wall. He was some countryman I did not know. He had probably been at the pageant and was nearby when it happened. He must have heard or screamed and come running.

Mr. Tate ran his hands down his thighs. He rubbed his left arm and investigated Jem's mantelpiece; then, he seemed interested in the fireplace. His fingers sought his long nose.

'What is it, Heck?' said Atticus.

Mr Tate found his neck and rubbed it. 'Bon Ewell's lyn' on the ground under that tree down yonder with a kitchen knife stuck up under his ribs. He's dead, Mr. Finch'. (Lee, 1989, pp. 293-294)

Mr Ewell eventually takes violent action to end the tension, but surprisingly, Atticus is not his target; instead, he goes after Jem and Scout, leading to his death.

In the resolution, Scout finally meets Boo Radley, a character who is frequently discussed throughout the story but not revealed until near the end of the book. This marks the culmination of Scout's journey as she moves beyond her childhood fears and fantasies, understanding Boo as a genuine and relatable individual.

I looked from his hands to his sand-stained khaki pants; my eyes travelled up his thin frame to his torn shirt. His face was as white as his hands but for a shadow on his jutting chin. His cheeks were thin to hollowness; his mouth was wide; there were shallow, almost delicate indentations at his temples, and his grey eyes were so colourless I thought he was blind. His hair was dead and thin, almost feathery, on his head.

When I pointed to him, his palms slipped slightly, leaving greasy sweat streaks on the wall, and he hooked his thumbs in his belt. A strange slight spasm shook him as if he heard fingernails scrape slate, but as I gazed at him in wonder, the tension slowly drained from his face. His lips parted into a timid smile, and our neighbour's image blurred with my sudden tears.

'Hey, Boo,' I said. (Lee, 1989, p. 298)

V. CONCLUSION

Harper Lee presents the readers with an image of the social life experienced in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This novel reflects the existence of humans with all their behaviours and habits commonly found in real life. *To Kill a Mockingbird* becomes a social condition of racism in Maycomb, Alabama, and there is segregation that Afro-American people experienced in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. They were separated from white people's place and facilities. In addition, racism can happen to anybody everywhere and every time. It can occur in society because most people cannot accept different things from others. In essence, the conclusions drawn from this research highlight how discrimination was treated at that time, how a sense of humanity existed to defend black people from racial discrimination by white people, and also how this discriminatory treatment influenced social conditions in that era, where white people who support black people will receive the same treatment as black people.

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