THE LAWYER THAT MATTERED, THE GIRL THAT DID NOT COMPLY – ASPECTS OF THE PLIGHT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER ISSUES IN HARPER LEE´S NOVELS TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD AND GO SET A WATCHMAN

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ABSTRACT
This article aims at shedding some light and at provoking some discussion and reflection on the questions of race, racism (whiteness and blackness), on the defense of civil rights, on justice and in its intricacies, on the bringing up of children through experience, guidance and advice, and on gender issues, based on the novels To Kill a Mockingbird and Go Set a Watchman by acclaimed American writer Harper Lee.

KEYWORDS
Race-civil rights; coming of age-gender; justice

To Kill a Mockingbird is a novel published in 1960. Since then it has achieved the status of a classic of American literature and practically since its publication it is mandatory reading in high schools´ curricula and it is the second most read book in the United States next to the Bible. Dean Esmay referred the following words by the author, Harper Lee, who loathes and usually refuses interviews and conversations about her work, to the Birmingham Post-Herald, in 1962:

My book has a universal theme, it´s not a “racial” novel. It portrays an aspect of civilization. I tried to show the conflict of the human soul reduced to its simplest terms. It´s a novel of man´s conscience...universal in the sense that it could happen to anybody, anywhere where people live together... (Esmay, 2015)

In fact, both To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) and Go Set a Watchman (2015) have such a palette of issues within the generality of human and civil rights, justice, and gender that it is difficult for the reader/observer to focus on a single question - both books are overwhelming in that they entangle subject with subject. Therefore To Kill a Mocking Bird is such an acclaimed novel; this article is a very small contribution to all the criticism it has arisen and still arises nowadays. The leit motif, the aim of this work is an attempt of mine to provoke some reflection and, eventually, some discussion on the questions of race, defence of civil rights and, at a lesser extent, on the coming of age and gender questions of the younger characters in this book, which makes it a work about learning things in life, of the perception of one´s self, and not necessarily with the help of the school system. From July 2015 to this date, this novel has a companion, provided by writer Harper Lee, the author, Go Set a Watchman, which according to recent criticism is either a follow-up of To Kill a Mockingbird or its draft version.

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After reading the novel one discovers that the author, through use of history, moral instruction and character development, has presented a strong moral message to her readers. The title suggests that a sin occurs when one kills a mockingbird and Scout Finch’s (a female child character) recounting the central summer of her life reflects the integrity of her moral and gender development, greatly under the influence of her father, the lawyer Atticus Finch. With the historical context of the Scottsboro Trials and character representation, the author’s moral message finds weight. She begins by setting her story in the town of Maycomb, in the state of Alabama, in the final years of the Great Depression, exploiting her reader’s familiarity with the financial position of most Southerners, especially the poor white farmers and the somewhat Victorian mentality that reigns in this microcosm. She then establishes the mind set and attitude of the Southern whites toward other races and cultures, which might well represent the feelings of many Americans.

According to a review of *The Guardian*, from October 17th, 2013, in the section Culture & Books, the novel, (... focuses on that gut instinct of right and wrong, and distinguishes it from just following the law. Even the titular quote: “Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit ‘em, but remember it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird” is in itself an allegory for this message. Being in itself a generic message, the idea of ‘doing what’s right’ obviously has a different meaning depending on when and where you’re reading the book. If you take 1960, when the book was written, America was in a state of ethical development as social inequality was very gradually being overcome. Women’s rights and black rights movements were beginning to emerge and some campaigned through violence.

Taking into account that Atticus Finch (lawyer character), though being white, defends an African-American against all odds and, by all odds, I mean the white American society, he has his white values and status. His own daughter questions him often across the book: “Atticus, are we poor?” to which he invariably answers: “No, not that poor!” His status is a standard of humanness to which some aspired to and in relation to which they were judged. According to Eric Lott, in *Simon During* (2000):

(...) whiteness is a constructed and imagined identity which, especially in the US, requires continual efforts to sustain. The effort is made by whites performing whiteness in all kinds of ways- performances which are addressed, not necessarily explicitly, to blacks. The construction and performance of whiteness is best unpicked through an analysis of white impersonations of blackness, so called “blackface”, a term which Lott extends beyond the familiar theatrical genre to a quite widely dispersed white desire to be black, or at least to seem blackness.( Lott, 2000:241)

By defending the black Tom Robinson, accused of having raped a white woman, Atticus Finch impersonates the blackness Lott refers to. He would probably prefer to be black so that

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3 The Scottsboro Trials involved nine African-American young men accused in Alabama of raping two white American women on a train in 1931. The landmark set of legal cases from this incident dealt with racism and the right to a fair trial. The cases included a lynch mob before the suspects had been indicted, a frame up, all-white juries, rushed trials, and disruptive mobs. It is frequently cited as an example of an overall miscarriage of justice in the United States legal system.
his struggle to defend Robinson would prove more effective. On the other hand, his whiteness contributes to his statute of heroism. It is Alabama, in the 1930’s, after the 1929 Crash, the country is going through a tough Depression, so it might be unlikely that anyone white, also suffering the consequences of the Depression, would accept to defend anyone for free, just for the sake of the truth and of humanistic principles. However, and by analyzing both novels, one notices a change in Atticus´ view or humanistic principles. There is a difficulty in Atticus to keep on defending his principles abstractly - he fights for justice but he clings to the white side. It is his whiteness that speaks louder than his own words, it imposes itself in a higher status. And as Rob Atkinson claims,

(...) the greater appeal of To Kill a Mockingbird may tell us something else than wholly laudable about ourselves, those to whom it appeals. It suggests, in the shadow of Nietzche, that we who would be liberators prefer (Harper) Lee’s liberal-democratic vision, at least in part because, in insisting that our job is to lift others up, we implicitly place ourselves always above them. Before we liberate them, they need us; afterwards, they should be thankful to us. Abstractly and formally, we are never more than equal to them; practically and historically, they are always beholden to us. We have both ways, at their expense, all the time (Atkinson, 1999: 608)

In my opinion the above quote applies more to Go Set a Watchman where, for instance, Atticus Finch appears as a not so generous character. However, in both books, a look at the Finch family - the children and their father and their community - reveals a deep moral message. In this book there is a house attached to a lot of spooky rumors about the man who lives there. He never leaves the house, so that many of the children, including the Finch children, make up stories about him and even fear him for being different. While making fun of this man, the Finch children, Jem and Scout, are reprimanded by their father and he teaches them to think about how they would feel if the roles were reversed. Atticus also spends his time defending the black man accused of raping the white woman. He is innocent yet despite a great defense by Atticus, the jury convicts him and he is shot trying to escape the fate in store for him. Despite the fact that he was innocent, racism allowed the jury to convict him simply because he was black. Depicting fatherly instruction and neighborly advice, Harper Lee in some way educates her readers on the moral responsibility of how to treat and deal with others. As the children search for clues to their mysterious neighbor’s existence, for example, and face the consequences of racism in their small Southern town, they receive lessons in how to live in society with respect and kindness regardless of whom the people are or from where they come. Lee’s characters demonstrate how often and abusively people suffer misjudgment and mistreatment because of fear and prejudice. It is an assertion of Lee’s that one can live among all cultures and races without fear and prejudice. Readers are thus encouraged to consider and ponder their judgments and subsequent treatment of others. According to Maureen E. Markey,

To Kill a Mockingbird reflects the natural law belief that human beings are sustained and improved by good positive law. Civilization rests on respect for law because good civil law brings with it the moral virtues that reflect the natural law. Individuals are capable of good and evil, and the only real safeguard against the vagaries of human nature is the rule of the law. But to be effective, the civil law must conform to the higher moral law (Markey, 2009:4)
Higher moral law here may imply tolerance regardless of social class or racial differences. A strong code of conduct that individuals and communities should practice is presented throughout the book, the reader is practically forced to accept a moral standard. However, one might perhaps remotely consider that what has been referred to in these pages and in the above quote is a simplistic view of a traditional conservative status quo that should be followed and that does not allow deviations or faults that belong to human nature. To reinforce this reflection, there is criticism on *Mockingbird* that claims that the work is nothing more than a children’s or a juvenile novel, intended to inculcate traditional moral values in which the good triumphs over evil, in which racism can be overcome and that equality among races is not utopic. Similar criticism surrounds the recent publishing of *Go Set a Watchman*, thus making Harper Lee a third-class author. All this is arguable. Editors and bookselling figures tell the opposite. The overwhelming success of the 3 Oscar-winning 1962 motion picture, starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch and the London 2014 theatre adaptation of the novel, starring Robert Sean Leonard, favor the work and its author. Also and during the month of November 2015, there was notice that many theatres in the United States are putting the book on stage, with children and adolescent from schools playing the roles of the children in the novel. Newspaper criticism attributes this boom to the July 2015 publication of *Go Set a Watchman*.

The racial concerns that Harper Lee addresses in *To Kill a Mockingbird* began long before her story starts and continued long after. In order to sift through the many layers of prejudice that Lee exposes in her novel, the reader needs to understand the complex history of race relations in the South. Many states — particularly in the South — passed “Jim Crow” laws (named after a black, minstrel show character), which severely limited how African Americans could participate in society. The U.S. Supreme Court paved the ways for these laws in 1883 when the court ruled that it couldn’t enforce the 14th Amendment at the individual level. The first Jim Crow law appeared in 1890; the laws increased from there and lasted until the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Many whites at the time believed that instead of progressing as a race, blacks were regressing with the abolition of slavery. Southern churches frequently upheld this racist thinking, which also helped give the Jim Crow laws some of their power. Ironically, African American churches were as likely to uphold the Jim Crow laws as white churches were. The continued oppression of one group over another is largely psychological. The dominant group first uses force to obtain their power. Slowly, the group being oppressed begins to feel hopeless that the situation can change and begins to unwittingly buy into the oppression as the norm. Before the civil rights movement gained momentum, many African American churches concentrated on helping their congregations deal with the oppression rather than trying to end it. The fear of interracial unions reached its apex in a widely held, unrealistic fear that African American men would rape and impregnate white

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4 Jim Crow laws extended into almost every facet of public life. The laws stipulated that blacks use separate entrances into public buildings, have separate restrooms and drinking fountains, and sit in the back of trains and buses. Blacks and whites were not allowed to be served food in the same room in a restaurant, play pool together, share the same prisons, or be buried in the same cemeteries. African Americans could not play professional sports with white teammates or serve in the armed forces with white soldiers. Black children were educated in separate schools. Black barbers could not wait on white female clients, and white female nurses couldn’t attend to black male patients. Not every law applied in every state, but the Jim Crow laws were demoralizing and far reaching, all in the name of protecting white culture and power. (Source: A Brief History of Jim Crow, Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2002)
women as a means of penetrating white society and, worse, white power. Stuart Hall reflected on race and multiculturalism. In the following excerpt he refers the problematic of governing and ruling multicultural societies:

Multicultural is the qualifying term. It describes the social characteristics and the questions of governing present in any society where different cultural communities coexist and try to build a common life, but at the same time, try to retain something of their “original” identity. On the contrary, multiculturalism is substantive. It refers to the strategies and adopted policies to rule or administrate issues of diversity generated by multicultural societies (Hall, 2003:52)

Lee may have got the inspiration for Tom Robinson’s case from the Scottsboro Trials of 1931. The black community had shown spurts of enthusiasm in pursuing civil rights since the end of slavery. By the 1950s, however, the latest interest in the civil rights movement had lost a good deal of steam. Many African Americans seemed resigned to accepting the Jim Crow laws and living within the existing system. Educated blacks in Alabama were looking for something to rekindle the interest in civil rights amongst the black community. When the Supreme Court overturned Alabama’s segregation laws regarding public transportation, the civil rights movement gained momentum. Martin Luther King, Jr., a minister from Montgomery, Alabama, rose as the recognized leader of the movement. Several women worked behind the scenes organizing the boycott and keeping the movement alive.

Harper Lee wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the midst of these developments. Her story was informed not only by the laws and attitudes that were part of her youth and her culture, but also by the civil rights movement. The civil rights struggle continues today at various levels, and in this sense it makes *Mockingbird* a timeless novel.

Beyond the issues of racial relations and the injustices that minority groups suffered during this time, Harper Lee’s novel is also a coming-of-age story, or a *Bildungsroman*. In this story the central character moves from a state of innocence to one of maturity as the result of suffering and surviving various misadventures. The children pass from innocence to knowledge. They begin to realize their own connection with the community’s outsiders, and they observe one man’s heroism in the face of community prejudice. In *Mockingbird*, Scout Finch, one of the central characters, and one of her biggest concerns throughout the book is coming to terms with the expectations her society has for women. In the 1930s, women in the South were pressured to conform to a widely held ideal of “Southern womanhood.” – The Southern Belle, term coined by Kathryn Lee Seidel (1985). About this concept, Seidel claims that:

The patriarchal South had made white men the dominant group (...) Women and blacks, on the other hand, were deemed subordinate in status, role, and temperament; a woman’s status depended upon her father or husband, her economic role was that of a marriage alliance-maker before marriage and a homemaker after marriage, her sexual role was that of a chaste maiden or a faithful wife (...) and her ideal temperament was passive, docile, ignorant, and virtuous (Seidel, 1985:147)

Women were treated as delicate, fragile creatures, and they were expected to act in accordance with that treatment. Scout (Jean Louise) is anything but delicate and fragile, and a
good deal of the story focuses on her attempts to fit into a world that expects tomboys like her to wear frilly dresses and maintain a dainty disposition. The tantrums she throws for having to wear a dress to go to school are an example of that. According to much criticism, Scout appears as a tomboy in the novel. The expression *tomboy* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as *a girl who enjoys rough, noisy activities traditionally associated with boys*. Gender scholar Judith ‘Jack’ Halberstam (1998) has noted that while tomboyism is often tolerated or even encouraged in young girls, older girls and adolescents who display masculine traits are often repressed and punished. Thus, youthful gender expressions are increasingly linked to sexuality and evaluated in relation to heterosexual norms. As a matter of fact, Scout does not correspond in any stance to anything feminine and is repressed by some characters in the novel. She plays boy’s games, she swears, calls her father by his first name as if she was not his daughter. She prefers reading to anything allegedly more feminine like sewing or knitting, for example, she does not help in the kitchen and, in some way, despises her real first name. As a female child she hides behind the neutral name Scout, almost despising her very feminine first names’ combination, Jean Louise. A matter of conflict with the Finch’s maid, Calpurnia, and Scout’s Aunt Alexandra is the question of her having to dress like a girl, according to the society that surrounds her, the Southern small town mentality and the typical image of a girl. Also her first grade teacher reprimands her about the way she dresses. In the following passage of the novel, Scout, as a grown up narrator, unburdens her dislike for feminine outfits:

Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of my attire. I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches; when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn’t supposed to be doing anything that required pants. Aunt Alexandra’s vision of my deportment involved playing with small stoves, tea sets, and wearing the Add-A-Pearl necklace she gave me when I was born; furthermore, I should be a ray of sunshine in my father’s lonely life. I suggested that one could be a ray of sunshine in pants just as well, but Aunty said that one had to behave like a sunbeam, that I was born good but had grown progressively worse every year. She hurt my feelings and set my teeth permanently on edge, but when I asked Atticus about it, he said there were already enough sunbeams in the family and to go about my business, he didn’t mind me much the way I was. (Chapt. 9, 90)

As is stated by Dean Shackelford in Harold Bloom (1999: 115), this passage reveals the importance of female voice and gender issues in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He goes on acknowledging that the issue of Scout’s gender is crucial to an understanding not only of the novel but also of Scout’s identification with her father. He, in turn, accepts her the way she is. However, Scout has to deal with her brother’s insults when playing outside and she is fearful and whines at the sight of a horrifying house. Her brother accuses her of getting more like a girl every day, the implication being that boys are courageous and non-fearful and girls are weak and afraid. Resented and feeling insulted for being called a girl and that being female is valued less than being male in her small town, she tries to become brave in order to remain acceptable to her brother and to another male companion. Scout has to face “attacks” both from the feminine side of her surroundings and from the masculine side and that surely creates a conflict in the formation of her personality and in the perception of who she is gender like. She prefers playing and going around roughly in her old and sometimes dirty overalls but she
is and feels constantly reprehended for not being like “soft teacakes with frostings”. Her journey is the one of a girl who has to challenge gender stereotypes in her determination to remain a tomboy. Laura Hakala (2010) argues that a few critics center their arguments on gender issues as far as this novel is concerned, the most extended of which include Dean Shackelford’s comparison between Scout’s narrative voice in the novel, Laura Fine’s discussion of the patriarchy in it and Gary Richards’s assertion that author Harper Lee destabilizes heterosexuality.

Hakala argues that, though Shackelford, Fine and Richards all discuss Scout as an unconventional female, she would place Scout within the context of the tomboy’s multifaceted history, which emphasizes her gender-bending behaviors. In my opinion, Scout’s trying to live as a tomboy, makes her experience the opposition that arises when people cross the boundaries of gender stereotypes. Laura Hakala’s opinion meets mine when she suggests that “Scout’s struggle between tomboyism and ideals of femininity constitutes a central conflict in the novel but that, ultimately, her tomboyish tendencies are far more consistent than her feminine ones, even though her femininity may occasionally surface”. Gender theory authority Judith Butler (1999) claims that gender is a cultural construction, and that we create “gender” and its subcategories through repeated acts. Again Butler’s assertion that

“if there is something right in [Simone de] Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing, that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end” (Butler, 1999:33).

This becoming, this process can be seen in Scout, now Jean Louise in the novel Go Set a Watchman. With To Kill a Mockingbird in mind, Hakala (2010) claims that Scout and her parental figures demonstrate this flexible view of gender. Scout is not born with an innate predisposition to be a tomboy; rather her behaviors define her as a tomboy. One could establish a relationship of Scout’s behaviors with Judith Butler’s theory that gender is performative. According to the author, we assume a role, act in a certain way and there is a series of effects, as for instance, the way we act, walk and talk that takes us to the consolidation of the impression of being a man or a woman. Butler also considers that gender is a crucial role-play for our assumed gender, once, in her opinion, nobody is gender from the start. One should then understand, in the light of this theory, that Scout performs being a boy, enjoys it and lives in this stance throughout the novel. In Go Set a Watchman, the illusions of Jean Louise Finch (Scout) and several generations of idealists are shattered when, arranging her father’s pile of reading material on a visit home from New York, Jean Louise discovers a pamphlet called “The Black Plague.” She picks it up, reads it all the way through, then takes it “by one of its corners ... like she would hold a dead rat by the tail” and throws it away. “Jean Louise,” her aunt says, in response to her indignation. “I don’t think you fully realize what’s been going on down here”. It’s an awakening that’s not so much rude as cruel: Maycomb County, Alabama, is now a different world from the one she grew up in, and To Kill a Mockingbird’s Atticus Finch, a paragon of the legal profession, the father figure and steward of the nation’s conscience, is revealed to be frail and flawed. He is, at 72, a rheumatic and unrepentant segregationist who believes with complete conviction that the white race is supe-

Cf. Interview with Judith Butler “Gender is performative” in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo7o2LYATDc&list=PLudCuZLRsoFHAFSYXUE48IPOf4N9DQ4gq (accessed December 8th 2015)
rior. “Jean Louise, have you ever considered that you can’t have a set of backward people living among people advanced in one civilization and have a social Arcadia?” he asks late in the book, to her horror. “Do you want Negroes by the carload in our schools and churches and theaters? Do you want them in our world?” Sophie Gilbert claims that,

the publication of Watchman has been surrounded by controversy, and the knowledge that a much-beloved figure in an incomparable work of American literature was once portrayed by his author as an indefensible racist promises to be no less so. The not so clear origins of the book (it was reportedly found by Lee’s lawyer in a safe-deposit box last year, although that account has been disputed), the uncertain agency of Lee in its publication, and the squirminess with which the publisher, HarperCollins, has presented the novel as a newly discovered manuscript rather than a rejected first draft of Mockingbird or a failed sequel as every step of the book’s rollout has added to a sense of unease (Gilbert, 2015).

For all its flaws—a meandering, distinctly unfinished style; stilted dialogue; an unsatisfactory ending—Go Set a Watchman is worth welcoming. It’s not just that Jean Louise, now 26, is as wry and engaging and bold as she was at the age of 6. It is that through her eyes, and her imperfect but well-meaning attempts to interpret the fall of her hero father, the book offers what has become increasingly difficult and necessary in the five decades since Mockingbird was published: an attempt to wrestle with racial prejudice. In the opening chapter, Jean Louise, tomboyish and incisive as ever, is returning home to Alabama for a two-week vacation, immensely happy to be back, but with a sense of foreboding—“an ancient fear”—that something is wrong. Atticus, sketched only briefly in the first few chapters as a gruff but straight-talking figure who occasionally gets “an unmistakable profane glint” in his eyes, is happy to have her home, but soon raises an unexpected question. “Jean Louise,” he asks. “How much of what’s going on down here gets into the newspapers?” This query leads one to think that perhaps Atticus fears that the media may report the social situation in the US south.

To sum up, To Kill a Mockingbird powerfully analyzes the theme of isolation and its causes through the stories of several unusual characters. Harper Lee also explores the concept of moral courage, and in Atticus Finch she gives the reader the model of a perfect human being, a Christ-like man of courage, integrity and compassion. The general tone and moral of this book seems to be that you should always stand up for what is right, no matter the cost, as defending a black man cost Atticus and his children a lot of torment and lost them a lot of friends. To Atticus, the right is always the right thing no matter how hard it may be to do. Whether it be not making fun of people who are different or standing up for the little guy he believes it is worth doing because it is right. His children learn a lot from him about what is right, about prejudice, and about life. He shows them how not everything is what it seems and that no matter the circumstances, everyone deserves to be treated fairly. Prejudice in the novel, is described as the “simple hell people give other people without even thinking” and the novel powerfully portrays examples of racial, social and sexual prejudice. The most obvious form of discrimination in To Kill a Mockingbird is racism; however, there are other types of prejudice and discrimination that typify relationships among the novel’s characters. Scout, for example, is ridiculed in To Kill a Mockingbird for being a tomboy and not complying to what is expected of someone of her gender. Boo Radley, who lives in the
spooky house, is ostracized despite the fact that hardly anyone knows him. Reverse racism is also present in the novel, as evidenced by the threats against Atticus Finch and his family as he defends the black Tom Robinson. Harper Lee also skillfully paints a detailed picture of growing up in a small Southern town during the Depression and vividly illustrates the dark side of human nature, as well as it highlights all that is good and noble. *To Kill a Mockingbird* holds up a mirror to society and teaches valuable life-lessons about prejudice, injustice and moral courage. Harper Lee uses pathos, in the sense of excess, suffering and feeling, to create empathy and evoke powerful emotions. Again in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, inequities and injustices are depicted by Lee to point out the issues of power, voice, identity, gender performance, oppression and liberation. *To Kill a Mockingbird* depicts a segregated society marked by strict race boundaries and prejudice. Maycomb County offers a social structure that places whites at the top of the social hierarchy while putting blacks at the bottom. The time when the novel is set reflects the values that were challenged and presents the relationships between blacks and whites (May, 1987). According to Lochte,

the issues of power, voice, identity, oppression and liberation in relation to race could be discussed in several contexts in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lee develops several of the characters based around their attitudes on race. For example, the character of Bob Ewell is used by Lee to depict the kind of racism that white Southerners prefer to live by, which is one covered by much hypocrisy (Lochte, 2006).

The same can be said about justice, for hypocrisy also reigned during Tom Robinson’s trial, and, on the other hand, hypocrisy also affected and interfered with Scout’s gender issues.

All in all, the two novels make a difference, although I prefer to refer to *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It allows the readers, through the example of some characters, “to walk around in the shoes of others” as Atticus often says, who are different from ourselves. The novel challenges our stereotypes - the Southerner, the African-American, the eccentric, the child and the young lady. It also teaches the reader to respect and preserve those who are frail and do not do any harm to others, like the mockingbird which gets on well with all bird species.

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