RECOGNITION: ETHICS AND CULTURAL WORK IN HARPER LEE'S "TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD"

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ABSTRACT

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Through this project, I argue that it is time to take Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* to a more complex level based on ethics and recognition. I first discuss ways in which the text has already been studied, such as in terms of tolerance or empathy, and then discuss how and why it should be taken further. Throughout my argument, I use Emmanuel Levinas’ theory of ethics to demonstrate ways in which characters in Lee’s text moved beyond mere tolerance or ethics. By using Erving Goffman’s *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* as well as Emmanuel Levinas’ theory of ethics, scholars can begin to look at this book in new ways. For example, teachers may be able to present the book as a model of human behavior that asks students to see progress and growth among humans. Educators may be able to use this book as a catalyst to discuss how people treat one another and how one can change his/her perceptions of others. To aid in this process, Goffman provides a model of how social “other”ing works while Levinas provides a way by which this process may be overcome. For my purposes, understanding this novel based on a theory of ethics can be done through a critical examination of three important characters in the novel. At a time when our culture seems to be on the verge of ethical bankruptcy, finding new ways to teach about ethics is vital. It seems as though each day, people have less and less regard for one another. Educators need new ways to inform students of how to live a life that involves ethics. To this end, this novel merits an updated reading. When read through a new lens, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* has the potential to contribute more to literary study than simply a lesson of tolerance; instead, it can be interpreted as having new implications for the study of ethics and recognition.
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SECTION I. INTRODUCTION

Harper Lee’s classic novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is studied annually across the nation. Each year, high school teachers work with this text, teaching it, for instance, as an example of southern writing, as an example of writing about race, or as an example of a “coming of age” story. At the college level, it is frequently taught as a model for young lawyers. According to Monroe Freedman, author of “Atticus Finch, ESQ., R.I.P.: A Gentleman but No Model for Lawyers,” Atticus Finch is being promoted as a role model for lawyers in “scholarly books, law reviews and bar journals” (189). Recently, the novel has been looked to as a model for empathy, as argued in “Being Atticus Finch: The Professional Role of Empathy in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.” According to the author, Atticus demonstrates that he has the ability to understand others’ positions in life and be compassionate toward those positions. More often, however, it is taught to provide students with an example of tolerance toward people different than themselves.

While all of these are valuable readings, we are at a moment during which this book deserves to be critically reexamined. With an updated reading, students, teachers, and scholars alike can move beyond seeing the novel as a lesson of mere tolerance or empathy to one of ethics and recognition, which asks the reader to see and understand how relationships occur “between” people. This is not merely standing alongside another person, noticing that he/she is different than you. This is noticing the differences, yet taking the other’s hand and standing up for that person. Ethics and recognition require a person to accept responsibility for someone other than oneself, even if that means rearranging one’s own life to accommodate the needs of the other. While tolerance simply asks people to accept the views of others when different from their own, ethics and recognition goes further by encouraging readers to not only accept the views of others, but to truly stand next to a person and take on responsibility for that person. Similarly, empathy
only asks the reader to be compassionate. While compassion is certainly welcomed, it is not all that is needed to bring about an updated meaning for this novel. True recognition requires people to be both tolerant and empathetic, while at the same time, it requires people to take on responsibility for one another. When looked at in this way, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is revealed to be much more complex; as such, a reading of tolerance or empathy simply does not do it justice.

By using Erving Goffman’s *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* as well as Emmanuel Levinas’ theory of ethics, scholars can begin to look at this book in new ways. For example, teachers may be able to present the book as a model of human behavior that asks students to see progress and growth among humans. Educators may be able to use this book as a catalyst to discuss how people treat one another and how one can change his/her perceptions of others. To aid in this process, Goffman provides a model of how social “other”ing works while Levinas provides a way by which this process may be overcome. For my purposes, understanding this novel based on a theory of ethics can be done through a critical examination of three important characters in the novel. The first is an elderly woman named Mrs. Dubose. Because she is addicted to morphine, she can be considered stigmatized based on Goffman’s theory. Mrs. Dubose’s morphine addiction only adds to her sour disposition about life; as a result, her negative viewpoints are loudly displayed within the novel. In addition to Mrs. Dubose, due to both his blackness and his physical disability, Tom Robinson, another character, serves as a model by which readers can not only understand how one becomes “other,” but also how one has the potential to defeat that label. Unfairly accused of a crime, Tom Robinson serves as a way by which scholars can see how basic information is never enough for true judgment or for true recognition. Last, Boo Radley, the character on whom the novel largely centers, can also be considered stigmatized. A recluse, Radley is a mystery throughout most of the text.
However, he too provides a model which demonstrates that people can overcome their labels when recognition occurs. At a time when our culture seems to be on the verge of ethical bankruptcy, finding new ways to teach about ethics is vital. It seems as though each day, people have less and less regard for one another. Educators need new ways to inform students of how to live a life that involves ethics. To this end, this novel merits an updated reading. When read through a new lens, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* has the potential to contribute more to literary study than simply a lesson of tolerance; instead, it can be interpreted as having new implications for the study of ethics and recognition.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is a coming of age story about a little girl named Scout Finch growing up in a small southern town in the 1930’s. Throughout the text, Scout makes revelations about the townspeople as she begins to experience life as more than just a child. Throughout the course of the novel, Scout’s father, an attorney named Atticus Finch, takes on a rape case involving a black man and a white woman. This case has many implications for the Finch family, and, as the novel progresses, Scout and her bother Jem come to realize that life is not as simple as it may look. As the trial continues, Scout is faced with cruel criticism from many of her peers as well as older members of Maycomb county. As Scout faces this indifference, she begins to realize that one should not judge another without really knowing all the information. Furthermore, over the course of the novel, readers learn of Scout’s obsession with a neighborhood legend. Boo Radley, a recluse residing just down the street from Scout’s family, provides hours of thought and entertainment for Scout, her brother Jem, and a neighborhood pal, Dill. Once again, however, Scout realizes through a series of events that people are not always who they seem to be. Thus, through many complex relationships, Scout
learns to see others in an altered light and accept differences. By the end of the text, Scout has grown into a multifaceted character who begins to understand life in new terms.
Erving Goffman’s study on stigma and social identity provides a way “in” to Lee’s novel. Goffman’s text is certainly relevant to the understanding of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Important to note is the time at which Goffman is writing: 1963. Lee’s novel was first published in 1960, which makes her and Goffman contemporaries of one another. Goffman’s work was responding to the very same society about which Lee wrote. Because both writers were working within the same cultural situations, the work produced by these authors can easily be used in conjunction with one another.

Specifically, as noted above, Goffman’s text can be used to understand how social “other”ing takes place. It is crucial for one to understand how and why one is othered, or stigmatized, in the first place. Goffman points out that the word stigma, according to his definition, “refer[s] to an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (3). Goffman notes that there are several ways in which one can become stigmatized. First, one may have an “abomination of the body” which could include any number of physical deformities. Having a physical deformity would certainly constitute what Goffman calls an “undesired differentness” (5). In addition to physical differences, one may possess “blemishes of individual character.” Goffman mentions “weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous or rigid beliefs, and dishonesty” which often times result from “mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behavior” as examples of this particular type of stigma. These traits, too, count as undesirable. Last, he argues that “there are the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion” (4). Thus, people of color or those who are marked based on religion are automatically classifiable as “other” based on Goffman’s theory.
As such, an individual can be stigmatized by possessing any or all of these particular characteristics, all of which Goffman concludes are not only undesirable, but prevent an individual from being “received easily” into the social world. (5). Based on Goffman’s definitions, readers can understand how and why certain characters in the novel are considered “other.” Furthermore, some readers may be able to apply this theory to their own lives to understand how social othering can occur in modern society.
SECTION III. EMMANUEL LEVINAS’ THEORY OF ETHICS

In addition to an understanding of how social othering takes place, an overview of Levinas’ theory of ethics is also vital to this reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. A French philosopher writing in both the thirties (when the novel was set) and the fifties (when the novel was written), Levinas’ writing lends itself well to this time period. Just like Goffman, Levinas himself is a contemporary to Lee, though they were not necessarily writing in the same cultural context. Regardless, there are many ways in which the works of Levinas speak to Lee’s novel. As a result, applying this theory is both valid and vital to a new understanding of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

In his book *Outside the Subject*, Levinas presents a number of articles that give the reader an understanding of how a truly ethical relationship functions. In the article “The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other,” Levinas explains how this type of relationship begins: “In humanity, from one individual to another, there is established a *proximity* that does not take its meaning from the spatial metaphor of the extension of a concept. Immediately, one and the other is one *facing* the other. It is myself *for* the other” (124). Thus, with this initial facing of one and the other, a relationship is established. While this facing is often metaphorical, it is crucial to the relationship. It may not happen “in person,” yet the relationship is still established when one recognizes the position of the other. Taking this further, Levinas contends that not only has a relationship been formed, it is a relationship that involves true recognition of the other. He notes that:

Difference—a non-in-difference in which the other—though absolutely other, ‘more other,’ so to speak, than are the individuals with respect to one another within the ‘same species’ from which the *I* has freed itself—in which the other
‘regards’ me, not in order to ‘perceive’ me, but in ‘concerning me,’ in ‘mattering to me as someone for whom I am answerable.’ (124)

Therefore, the relationship between the subject and the other is not based on mere perception of difference, but on responsibility and recognition. As Levinas puts it “The other, who-in this sense-‘regards’ me, is the face” (124). Establishing the face of the other—this original mise-en-scene—is crucial to an ethical relationship. According to Adriaan Peperzak in his critical text To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, “‘Face’ is the word Levinas chooses to indicate the alterity of the Other forbidding me to exercise my narcissistic violence . . . The Other regards me and speaks to me; you are my interlocutor; ‘the face speaks’”(64).

Peperzak adds to this understanding of the face when he notes that “The Other’s face is the revelation not of the arbitrariness of the will but its injustice . . . in his face, the Other appears to me not as an obstacle, nor as a menace I evaluate, but as what measures me”(116).

Understanding Levinas’ meaning of the face is crucial to understanding his philosophy of ethics. To this end, it needs to be clear that the face, while largely metaphorical, represents both the other and what one must do for the other. What’s more, the face is what one must measure his/herself upon. If one never accomplishes a true ethical relationship with an other, one does not succeed in moving beyond one’s own ego. Peperzak says “The word ‘face’ can be replaced by ‘expression’ or ‘word’ or ‘speech.’ Face, speech, and expression are the concrete manners by which the irreducibility of the Other comes to the fore and surprises me, disrupts my world, accuses, and refuses my egoism”(142). Based on these ideas, it is clear that facing the other is central to the Levinas’ philosophy of ethics.

After this original encounter takes place, responsibility for the other ensues. According to Levinas, “non-indifference and goodness of responsibility . . . must be conceived on the basis
of the meeting” (125). This type of relationship is one, then, that is non-transferable. Once the relationship is established, one is always responsible for the other. Peperzak adds that “the face claims the responsibility of one to whom it ‘appears’ or to whom it speaks” (164). As Levinas attests, this is “an inexhaustible responsibility: for with the other our accounts are never settled” (125). At this point in the relationship, one sees the other, notices that the other is different, yet still takes responsibility for the other. In fact, difference is vital when facing the other, according to Levinas. As he puts it, the individual might be “more other,” but it is this difference that makes the relationship matter. As Levinas puts it, it is going outside of the “same species” that makes this relationship distinguishable from other relationships (124). What Levinas means by this is that one must step out of one’s comfort zone to truly face the other. It is not enough to recognize only those who are similar to oneself or within the same social tier. Instead, one must look beyond these groups to truly recognize an other.

Levinas further elaborates on his theory in an article titled “Apropos of Buber: Some Notes.” In this critical article, Levinas compares his theory to that of Michael Buber. Levinas differentiates his theory by discussing the “original ethical encounter” which comes not from simply “speaking out to the other” but from truly facing the other, as described above. Again, Levinas stresses the importance of responsibility for the other. To do so, he gives this example: “[it’s] as if my neighbor called me urgently and called none other than myself, as if I were the only one concerned . . . it is ethically impossible to transfer my responsibility to a third party”(44). Levinas further contends that it is this responsibility, this ethical responsibility, that makes one unique. What’s more, this uniqueness is what determines one’s own freedom.

Levinas argues “My freedom and my rights, before manifesting themselves in my opposition to the freedom and rights of the other person, will manifest themselves precisely in the form of
responsibility, in human fraternity” (125). In other words, one’s rights and freedoms come about only when one becomes responsible for another.

Levinas’ theory is complicated by the fact that there is “no initial equality” (44). Therefore, one individual may be subordinate to another. However, ethical equality can take place. Based on this theory, equality “comes from the political order of citizens in a state” (45). Levinas contends that “The birth of the state from the ethical order is intelligible to the extent that I have also to answer for the third party ‘next to’ my neighbor” (45). To take this argument further, Levinas claims that “Citizenship does not put an end to the centrality of the I” (45). The “I” is still essential, but according to this theory, rather than working toward an end to the “I”, citizenship “invests it with . . . an irrevocable meaning” (45). The state, then, functions “according to the laws of being” (45). As a result, “it is the responsibility for the other that determines the legitimacy of the state, that is, its justice” (45). In short, Levinas’ theory requires one to first face the other. Following, one must establish responsibility for the other. Last, one must come to an equal ethical relationship to the other through recognition and the responsibility that has already emerged. When this happens, one gains rights and freedom; furthermore, the state, if organized according to these principles, becomes legitimate as well.

Clearly, Levinas’ idea of ethics and recognition differ from tolerance and empathy in many ways. As noted above, there are demands that the other makes upon a man/woman. These demands ask that person to reach further beyond a merely tolerant relationship. Instead, the other asks one to “face” him/her and when this occurs, one must take on responsibility for that other, even when it disrupts one’s life. One way to characterize tolerance is to “live and let live.” Rather than just allowing others to “be”, Levinas’ philosophy requires people to “do”. According to Levinas, this “doing” is what a person can be measured upon; when one reaches an
ethical relationship, one moves beyond egoism and into true being, being that requires one to take on responsibility for an other and, at times, have that responsibility reciprocated.
SECTION IV. CASE ONE—MRS. DUBOSE

Applying the ideas of both Goffman and Levinas can aid a reader in taking To Kill a Mockingbird to a more complex level. Mrs. Dubose, an elderly neighbor of the Finch family, is one character that can be examined in terms of ethics and recognition. First of all, it is important to establish why it is that Mrs. Dubose could be seen as stigmatized. As noted earlier, according to Goffman, one may become stigmatized based on “mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behavior” (4). Though not immediately disclosed to the reader, Mrs. Dubose is addicted to morphine. What is disclosed, however, is the wretched nature of the character:

Jem and I hated her. If she was on the porch when we passed, we would be raked by her wrathful gaze, subjected to ruthless interrogation regarding our behavior, and given a melancholy prediction on what we would amount to when we grew up, which was always nothing. . . she was vicious. (99-100)

Regardless of their disposition toward this woman, their father continually tells them to treat her with kindness and respect. Speaking to Jem, Atticus says “‘She’s an old lady and she’s ill. You just hold your head high and be a gentleman. Whatever she says to you, it’s your job not to let her make you mad’” (100). Not only does Atticus tell his children to behave when dealing with Mrs. Dubose, he demonstrates the behavior himself. Each day, when passing her house, Atticus kindly greets the old woman and fills her in on the news of the town.

Despite Atticus’ positive example, Jem has another run-in with Mrs. Dubose. On their way into town to spend Jem’s birthday money, Mrs. Dubose makes a comment about Atticus’ trial, a sensitive subject for both Jem and Scout: “‘Yes indeed, what has this world come to when
a Finch goes against his raising? I’ll tell you! Your father’s no better than the niggers and trash he works for!”(102). Though Jem keeps his composure at the time, on the way home, he snaps. We had just come to her gate when Jem snatched my baton and ran flailing wildly up the step into Mrs. Dubose’s front yard, forgetting everything Atticus had said, forgetting that she packed a pistol under her shawl, forgetting that if Mrs. Dubose missed, her girl Jessie probably wouldn’t. He did not calm down until he had cut the tops off every camellia bush Mrs. Dubose owned, until the ground was littered with green buds and leaves. (102-3)

When Atticus discovers what Jem has done, punishment ensues. Jem explains to Atticus why he vandalized Mrs. Dubose’s yard, but Atticus does not find it excusable, even though his son was defending him. Atticus sends Jem to have a talk with Mrs. Dubose. Resulting from their discussion, it is decided that Jem will read to her every afternoon and on Saturdays for a two hours a day. His punishment will last a month (105). Though he begs to not have to go, Atticus insists that Jem follow through with the agreement.

The following week, Jem and Scout make their way to Mrs. Dubose’s house. Though Scout is not required to go, she tags along anyway. Scout looks around Mrs. Dubose’s house, where the old lady lay in bed. As Jem begins to read, Scout notes:

She was horrible. Her face was the color of a dirty pillowcase, and the corners of her mouth glistened with wet, which inched like a glacier down the deep grooves enclosing her chin. Old-age liver spots dotted her cheeks, and her pale eyes had black pinpoint pupils. Her hands were knobby, and the cuticles were grown up over her fingernails. (106)
Though distracted by Mrs. Dubose’s physical state, Scout also notices that the old woman is not
listening to her brother read. “I looked toward the bed. Something had happened to her”(107). Mrs. Dubose was no longer awake; instead, her head bobbed from side to side as she slobbered. Soon enough, an alarm went off, indicating that it was time for Mrs. Dubose’s medication. When her maid appeared to administer the medication, Jem and Scout were asked to leave, which they gladly did.

Each day, Jem and Scout continue to go to Mrs. Dubose’s for an afternoon of reading. Each day, the end of their duty is indicated by a ringing alarm clock that marked medication time for Mrs. Dubose. Soon enough, Jem has completed his punishment: “It was over. We bounded down the sidewalk on a spree of sheer relief, leaping and howling”(110). After a few weeks of freedom, Atticus makes a visit to Mrs. Dubose’s house. Upon his return, Jem asked “‘What’d she want?’” (110). Atticus then tells Jem that Mrs. Dubose had died.

After her death, Atticus explains to Jem and Scout why Mrs. Dubose behaved in the way that she did. “Mrs. Dubose was a morphine addict . . . she took it as a pain killer for years. The doctor put her on it. She’d have spent the rest of her life on it and died without so much agony, but she was too contrary . . .”(111). Atticus tells his children that over the last months of her life, Mrs. Dubose had worked to overcome the addiction, which often added to her bad moods. Atticus explains that by the time of her death, Mrs. Dubose had completely freed herself of the addiction. He also adds that had Jem not been required to go read to Mrs. Dubose based on a punishment, Atticus would have made him go anyway. The reading distracted her from her fixation on the alarm clock which indicated she could have her medication. Atticus sees Mrs. Dubose’s situation as an opportunity to teach his children about recognizing the lives of others and respecting those lives:
She had her own views about things, a lot different from mine, maybe . . . son, I told you that if you hadn’t lost your head I’d have made you go read to her. I wanted you to see something about her—I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It’s when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. Mrs. Dubose won, all ninety-eight pounds of her. According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody. She was the bravest person I ever knew. (112)

Atticus’ speech demonstrates how Levinas’ theory can be put into action. Atticus, in this instance, asks his children to see Mrs. Dubose not as an old, mean woman, but as a brave woman who should be recognized as such. He asks his children to face Mrs. Dubose and take responsibility for her. Though Jem took on the responsibility of reading to Mrs. Dubose every day, he did so without knowing her true condition. When he learns more about her, he must face her in a different way and come to terms with who she was. As Levinas suggests, one must recognize the difference in another and still take on that other in order for recognition to occur (124). For Atticus, this had already happened. He noticed the differences between himself and Mrs. Dubose, but he placed those differences aside, instead taking her on as a responsibility. Atticus understood that the differences themselves don’t matter, but how people treat one another does matter. Though Jem and Scout may not fully understand this way of being, Atticus asks them to look beyond what they can see from a decrepit, crabby old lady to see what this woman was really struggling with. Not only that, he asks them to go beyond recognizing the difference; he asks them to try to understand the difference and not turn their backs on it.
In this case, Mrs. Dubose serves as a model for readers to aid in understanding why mere tolerance is not enough. Had Atticus or his children merely tolerated Mrs. Dubose, they would not have had the experience of recognizing true bravery. If this were a case of tolerance, Atticus might have just told Jem and Scout from the start with what Mrs. Dubose was afflicted. The children, then, could have simply excused the old woman’s behavior because they knew she was ill. However, this is not the direction in which the novel takes it readers. Instead, the children are asked by their father to do more than just empathize with Mrs. Dubose; they are asked to take action to aid in the relief of her pain. This is an instance when it is certainly not enough to just let Mrs. Dubose be. It is a case which requires the children to do something.

Furthermore, from a pedagogical standpoint, this turn in the text could easily be presented as way to teach readers to understand difference and to not be sidetracked by first impressions. What’s more, the lesson can go beyond those terms when discussed in conjunction with Levinas. Levinas notes that people must take on the responsibility of others when one is faced with the other (124). Again, this requires people to actually do something more than just notice or acknowledge difference. Often times, the lesson stops with acknowledgement, but when thought of in terms of Levinas’ theory of ethics, this is just not enough. One must look into the face of the other and see the responsibility that must then ensue. When put in these terms, readers can be asked to see parallels in their own lives, which often come as a valuable lesson. There is power in fiction, and this is a powerful example of how relationships take place “between” people. Surely, Jem and Scout would have rather continued on with their everyday, leisurely lives. However, their ethical responsibility required more of them, even though it disrupted their lives. Even when it is not convenient, one must still follow through with responsibility for the other. This greatly differs from being compassionate toward a person or
from tolerating someone’s difference. In those cases, no real action is required; in this case, action is crucial. This is just one place in *To Kill a Mockingbird* that readers could move past simple tolerance or empathy and put these ideas into practice.
SECTION V. CASE TWO—TOM ROBINSON

Another character in the novel, Tom Robinson, also serves a model for ethics and recognition. Accused of raping Mayella Ewell, Tom is central to the novel’s plot. Based on Goffman’s definition and understanding of “stigma,” there are two categories in which Tom Robinson could be placed. First, he could be stigmatized based solely on his race. Tom is an African-American man, which, according to Goffman, is enough to classify him as stigmatized. As Goffman noted, the stigma of blackness is equal to, or constitutes, a disability for which one can be discriminated against (6). In this particular example, Tom’s race is an especially important factor. Lee’s novel was written in 1960; Goffman published his study in 1963. Ideas about race were significantly different at that time than they are now. America was on the verge of the Civil Rights Movement, yet radical changes in the treatment of African-Americans had not yet occurred. As noted in the book Race and Racism in Literature by Charles E. Wilson, Jr., “Published in 1960 in the throes of the Civil Rights Movement, To Kill a Mockingbird is directly influenced by the social tensions of that era”(28). Furthermore, Lee’s novel is set in an even earlier time: the 1930’s. Because of this, race is a prominent factor in the othering of Tom Robinson. Wilson notes that “while the novel is set in the mid-1930’s, it is affected by the mid to late 1950s era of its actual composition” (29). While this is true, it has also been noted by a number of scholars that Lee was responding directly to the Scottsboro trials of the 1930s at which nine black males were found guilty for the rape of two white women based on little to no evidence. Wilson further points out that in 1955, another black male, Emmitt Till, was lynched in Mississippi for flirting with a white woman (28). Thus, Lee provides a model that replicates this type of Jim Crow society (i.e., theoretically separate but equal but almost always favoring whites) that was the south at this time.
However, not only is Robinson black, he also has a physical deformity. A description of Robinson is provided in the novel: “His left arm was fully twelve inches shorter than his right, and hung dead at his side. It ended in a small, shriveled hand” (Lee 186). According to Goffman, visibility is a key factor in the stigmatization of an “other” (48). It is easy to notice Tom’s physical differences; as a result, he is easily stigmatized. Lennard Davis, in his book *Enforcing Normalcy*, furthers Goffman’s views on visibility by stating “The body of the disabled person is seen as marked by the disability” (12). Additionally, according to Davis, a non-disabled person may have a number of “powerful emotional responses” when faced with a disabled person: “These responses can include horror, fear, pity, compassion, and avoidance” (12). Some of these reactions are inevitably invoked when one sees Tom Robinson, though some disability studies scholars might argue that this response is not inevitable, but learned. Either way, both his blackness and his physical difference make Tom Robinson a visible target for stigmatization. Throughout the text, Tom is called “nigger” repeatedly, and though times were different in the 1930’s, this word was certainly being used in a derogatory manner. Not only that, Tom is convicted of the crime before the trial can even begin. Moreover, Atticus’ defense of Tom puts Maycomb county in an uproar; clearly, people in this small southern town are unable to see beyond Tom’s differences at this point in the text.

According to Goffman, “an attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another” (3). In line with Goffman, then, in many cases a person is stigmatized in order to make another person feel “normal.” Davis, too, contends that “the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” (24). Hence, one can feel “normal” in the face of another who is not. Aspects of this idea appear in Lee’s text. When Mayella Ewell, a poor white girl in Maycomb County, gets caught coming on to a black man, she
must create a story in order to condemn him rather than taking the blame herself. Because he is a
stigmatized individual, she cannot admit fault for the interaction. Thus, Tom Robinson gets
blamed for the “rape” of Mayella Ewell. When pointing him out as the aggressor, Mayella can
point directly to his stigmatizing attributes as evidence of her normalecy; as a result, she can not
possibly be seen as the provoker of this interaction. Despite her status as “white trash,” the fact
that she is both white and able bodied are enough to dispel any contentions that she might, in
fact, be at fault. In many ways, Tom Robinson is not seen as worthy of what Judith Butler calls
“human status.” In her book *Undoing Gender*, Butler notes that “there are norms of recognition
by which the ‘human’ is constituted, and these norms encode operations of power” (13). Based
on Butler’s theory, Robinson is of non-human status; thus, he has no agency. When looked at in
this way, Mayella’s position can be seen as one of power. As a result, Tom’s non-human status
implicates him for this crime regardless of evidence to the contrary.

On the other hand, lawyer Atticus Finch affords Tom human status by not only taking on
his case, but by truly taking a stake in the case. Atticus, arguably the moral center of the novel,
does not judge Tom based on his stigmatizations; rather, he recognizes Tom as an individual for
whom he is responsible. When Atticus recognizes Tom in this way, he provides a model for
Emmanuel Levinas’ theory of ethics. As noted above, in order for an ethical relationship to
come to the fore, one must first “face” the other. Atticus does this by taking on the case. Then,
an individual must not only speak out to the other, but take on responsibility for that other
(Levinas 43-44). Based on this theory, Atticus is responsible for Tom Robinson; moreover, this
is a non-transferable responsibility that Atticus cannot simply push to the side, even when the
trial is concluded. At the same time, Tom Robinson must become equal to Atticus despite his
position as a physically limited African American man. As Levinas points out, not all ethical
relationships begin with mutual equality. Instead, this equality is built, in Levinas’ words “according to the laws of being” (45). Levinas elaborates on this idea by noting that “[There is] a freedom in fraternity, in which the responsibility of the one-for-the-other is affirmed, and through which the rights of man manifest themselves concretely to consciousness as the rights of the other, for which I am responsible” (125). Thus, it is not just Atticus participating in the relationship or pitying or merely being tolerant of Robinson; Robinson, too, is a necessary and valuable part of the relationship. Atticus’ own rights and freedom are compromised when he lets the other down. While Levinas does not contend that the ethical relationship is *required* to be reciprocal, he alludes to the idea that no one is off the hook when it comes to responsibility for the other (44-46).

Even when faced with such a great responsibility, Atticus does not back down. First of all, Atticus establishes an understanding about the case with his children. According to “Being Atticus Finch”:

> In explaining Tom Robinson’s case to his children, especially Scout, Atticus repeatedly emphasizes three points; first, the case is a personal one that he feels an almost religious call to take; second, whatever derogatory comments they hear, his children should hold their heads high and keep their tempers in check; and third, no matter what happens, the people in the community are still ‘our friends.’
>
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However, when Atticus constructs these boundaries for his children, he does not ask his children to “face” Tom Robinson in the same way that he has. Instead, Atticus asks his children to recognize the position that he has taken on. In this way, Scout and Jem are not “off the hook” when it comes to responsibility and recognition. Though they are not forced to face the other,
they are asked to respect their father for taking on this case. They can show their respect by maintaining their dignity and not resorting to fist fights when dealing with this matter. Furthermore, while they may not have reached true recognition for Tom Robinson at this point, the children have begun to understand their own ethical responsibility.

Atticus, on the other hand, immediately demonstrates his responsibility for Tom Robinson. On the night before the trial, Tom is to be moved into the county jail for the night. In a conversation with Mr. Heck Tate, Link Deas, and other members of the community, it becomes evident that trouble might come about for Tom in the process of this move (Lee 145). One of the townspeople mumbles: “. . . know how they do when they get shinnied up” (145). The men of the community warn Atticus of the impending trouble, trying to persuade him to stay out of it. However, that night, Atticus heads downtown to guard the Maycomb County jail and ensure Tom’s safety. When Jem and Scout realize he has gone, they too proceed downtown. When they arrive in town, they see Atticus sitting guard at the door of the jail.

As expected, “four dusty cars came in from the Meridian highway, moving slowly in a line. They went around the square, passed the bank building, and stopped in front of the jail” (151). Scout, watching from a distance, narrates the scene in this way: “In ones and twos, men got out of the cars. Shadows became substance as lights revealed solid shapes moving toward the jail door. Atticus remained where he was” (151). The men, Bob Ewell and his friends, have come to defend the Ewell name by inflicting violence on Tom, Atticus or both. However, they are soon put off task when Scout decides to step in at a crucial moment of the confrontation. As she looks around the group of people, she notices “when I glanced around I noticed that these men were strangers: I had leaped triumphantly into a ring of people I had never seen before” (152). After another minor scuffle, Scout does recognize one man, the father of a child in her
class at school. “Don’t you remember me, Mr. Cunningham? I’m Jean Louise Finch . . . I go to
school with Walter. . . He’s your boy, ain’t he? Ain’t he, sir?"(153). Soon enough, Scout wins
over Mr. Cunningham, and the men leave the scene.

While this instance doesn’t conclusively indicate that Scout has faced the other, she has,
at least, taken a step toward ethical responsibility. In this case, she feels responsible for her
father; she does what she thinks is right based on this responsibility. Moreover, she does face the
other in a sense when she confronts Mr. Cunningham. He, too, gains recognition through the
course of this facing. As Atticus puts it “it took an eight-year-old child to bring ’em to their
senses, didn’t it? That proves something—that a gang of wild animals can be stopped, simply
because they’re still human”(157). Recognition of another’s human status is vital for an ethical
relationship to emerge. When Walter Cunningham backed away, he showed that he had taken
notice of the position of the other as well. While this may not indicate full recognition, it does
indicate a step toward ethical relations. At this moment in the text, Lee uses her characters to
demonstrate human relationships and the ways in which they can be compromised based on a
situation of difference or stigmatization. What this scene proves is that when one truly faces the
other, no longer is simple tolerance enough. In this particular case, when Scout and Mr.
Cunningham actually saw one another, both had to take action. Scout had to speak with respect
to a man who was threatening her father’s well being. Action was required of Walter
Cunningham as well. When he truly sees Scout, he realizes that he must stop what he is doing.
Both parties took part in an ethical exchange; both noticed the “humanness” of the other.

Furthermore, Atticus zealously defends Tom, even when confronted with physical
violence. Scout also provides a model for human behavior by taking part in the confrontation.
According to Levinas, in order for ethical relationships to succeed, one is not only responsible
for the other, but for “the ‘third party’” (45). When she steps forward, Scout is not only protecting her father, but Tom Robinson as well. In addition, Levinas discusses the idea of “non-indifference” to the other. Scout evokes this idea when she faces Walter Cunningham. At this juncture in the text, despite his position and threat he poses to her father, Scout treats Cunningham in a way that indicates respect for him, not indifference. This is one instance in *To Kill a Mockingbird* that the lesson moves beyond mere tolerance to a more complex level of ethics and understanding.

Throughout the text, Atticus continues to demonstrate his responsibility for Tom Robinson. Importantly, he fervently defends Tom Robinson’s innocence at the trial. As the novel progresses, Atticus presents a rather convincing case for Tom’s innocence. He points out that Mayella’s face is bruised on the right side, indicating a punch from a left handed person. Based on his aforementioned physical disability, it would have been next to impossible for Tom to injure her in this way. Atticus’ children, Jem and Scout, see Tom’s physical difference as a good thing in this light. “‘Scout,’ breathed Jem. ‘Scout look! Reverend, he’s crippled!’”(186). When used in this way, Tom’s disability is commodified; it has the potential to prove Tom’s innocence and is marketed to the jury in this way. On the other hand, it could be argued that by focusing on his physical disability, the members of the jury might, perhaps, focus less on his “racial disability”. Neither way seems like a tactic that can be seen conclusively as taking responsibility for the other. Yet, presenting the case in this way is one of the few chances Tom might have. In the South at this time, a black man has virtually no case when accused by a white woman. When Atticus commodifies Tom’s physical disability, though it might be a small one, he gives Tom a chance. The chance that he provides for Tom once again solidifies his responsibility for the other. In her book *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler discusses Levinas’ theory
of ethics. She first notices: “the ‘Other’ makes an ethical demand on me” (131). To take this even further, Butler quotes Levinas himself. He says “‘In ethics, the other’s right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other’”(132). For Tom, a guilty verdict most certainly would result in death. For that reason, when Atticus defends Tom in this way, he is doing so to provide him with the only chance he may have, even if it does result in the commodification of Tom’s disability. Atticus recognizes this use of Tom’s physical limitation as the one thing that might prove his innocence; as a result, he has to use it to live up to his ethical obligation.

Through the proceedings of the trial as well as through their father’s unwavering dedication to him, the children have also begun to recognize Tom as a true human; as a result, they are yearning for his acquittal. On the other hand, many other Maycomb county residents see Tom’s deformity as a visible indicator of Tom’s difference and subsequent guilt. His blackness adds to this suspicion of guilt. In fact, even Jem and Scout didn’t know how to perceive Tom until their father demonstrates his innocence throughout the trial. In addition, Atticus’ conviction to defend Tom proves to his children that there was more to the case than what can be seen. While Jem and Scout reach the verge of ethical identification, the members of the jury do not; after several hours of deliberation, the jury finds Tom Robinson guilty of the crime (210-211).

On the surface, then, it might seem as though it is only Atticus who has recognized an “other” within this novel. Jem’s reaction to the verdict proves otherwise. Crying, he says: “‘It ain’t right, Atticus’” (212). He’s truly distressed by the outcome of the trial. Jem isn’t looking for the members of the jury to simply demonstrate tolerance toward Tom Robinson; he looking for them to recognize Tom as a human and act accordingly. In her book *Undoing Gender*, Judith
Butler points to the theories of Jessica Benjamin to discuss recognition. Applying Benjamin’s ideas clarifies Jem’s position and what he is asking of the members of the jury. In order for justice to take place in the way Jem would have liked it to, “subject and Other understand themselves to be reflected in one another but . . . this reflection does not result in a collapse of the one into the Other”(131). In other words, one recognizes the other, while still remaining separate from the other. Benjamin furthers her idea of recognition by noting that communication is the vehicle by which recognition can be expressed (132). Levinas supports this idea in his article “Everyday Language and Rhetoric without Eloquence.” In this text, he notes that “in everyday language we approach our fellow man instead of forgetting him”(142). Levinas goes on to point out that this exchange of sociality is “irreducible to knowledge of the other;” it is more than that. Levinas contends that this type of communication is “not reducible to the phenomenon of the truth that unites; it is a non-indifference to the other person, capable of ethical significance”(142). Thus, to communicate in this way would mean that the members of the jury or the town of Maycomb had, in fact, recognized Tom. It would mean that they were not simply aware of his existence, but had identified with his plight. Had the jury handed over a verdict of “not guilty” a moment of recognition would have been communicated. Unfortunately, this doesn’t happen.

Thus, while Jem approaches recognition, members of the jury do not. Seeing themselves in Tom Robinson’s position is impossible. In some ways, the “guilty” verdict could be seen as a letdown in the text or a failure of the characters’ ability to participate in ethical relationships. However, by presenting the novel in this way, Lee replicates the reality of the “Jim Crow” south. In doing so, she brings to light ways in which one needs to move beyond simple tolerance to a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. It is not enough that the “other”ed members
of Maycomb are permitted to live and work in the community; their rights and freedoms as humans must be recognized. They need to be afforded human status through recognition. Had the verdict been “not guilty,” readers of the text could leave the lesson at tolerance; instead, the issue is complicated by the “guilty” verdict, taking the reader to a more complex understanding of ethics. Lee’s characters, then, serve as models for how society functioned in the climate of the time; what's more, these characters can be applicable even now to provide examples of the movement to ethics.

Pedagogically, this point in the text is an ideal time to ask readers to explore ethics and ethical relationships. In this case, Atticus and his children demonstrate how it is possible to include ethics in everyday life. When faced with an “other,” rather than backing away, one must come forward and face that other. Even though society has progressed significantly since the setting of this novel, social othering still occurs on a day to day basis. Moreover, many people are still subjected to violent and unjust treatment based on their difference, such as their race, religion, gender, disability, or sexual orientation. When dealing with student readers of the high school age, an educator can use this example of Tom Robinson to show how to practice ethics, even when it requires one to move beyond the comfort zone. Teaching the text in this way has the potential to create a change in attitude about difference. If teaching the text in this way only inspires change in behavior in one student, it can still be considered progression toward a more ethical society. Even if the text doesn’t directly change the behavior of students, it may change their thinking. When teaching this text to higher education learners, there is even more potential for change. When released from the peer-pressure filled halls of a high school, students might be able to practice this ethical way of living freely. In this way, students might be able to take note of certain relationships in order to take true responsibility for those relationships. When Lee
presents the “guilty” verdict, she complicates the idea of tolerance. If this were a case of tolerance, it would enough to have felt sorry for Tom or to have just stayed out of it. Instead, Lee urges her readers to take relationships to the next level, to become invested in their relationships, as Jem, Scout and Atticus do. In doing so, she potentially asks her readers to take a look around at all of the unjust happenings and to stand up and do something about it. Once again, the power of this fictive work is at play when the reader and the text become parallel.

To take this idea even further, in addition to Jem’s reaction to the case, Atticus finds that other black residents of Maycomb County have recognized him as an actual “self.” They communicate their recognition through the offering of food: “The kitchen table was loaded with enough food to bury the family . . . Atticus’s eyes filled with tears” (213). Through this offering of food, the black community provided Atticus with a reciprocation of the recognition that he had given Tom. While they may not have entered into a personal ethical relationship with Atticus, they indicate that they do have this type of relationship with Tom. Based on these actions, they invoke the idea of the “third party” that Levinas discusses. Even when one is for the other, there is still a third party out there as well that needs to be afforded responsibility (Levinas 45). When Tom Robinson is unable to reciprocate the relationship with Atticus himself, other members of his community do so. At noted above, no one is really off the hook in the case of ethics. By offering food in this way, Tom’s friends and family prove that they are a part of an ethical relationship. This relationship has moved beyond tolerance to a higher level of understanding.

Moreover, other members of the community also shows signs of change in attitude toward the stigmatized man. On one hand, Jem feels as though he has just awakened into a world where he knows nothing about the people around him. He says: “I always thought
Maycomb county folks were the best folks in the world, least that’s what they always seemed like” (Lee 215). On the other hand, despite Jem’s misgivings about the standpoints of the county people, the Finch’s neighbor, Miss Maudie, points out several people in the county that helped Tom Robinson:

‘His colored friends for one thing, and people like us. People like Judge Taylor. People like Mr. Heck Tate. Stop eating and start thinking, Jem. Did it ever strike you that Judge Taylor naming Atticus to defend that boy was no accident? That Judge Taylor might have had his reasons for naming him?’ (215)

While not all members of Maycomb County reached true recognition in the Levinasian sense, true progress was achieved. Levinas says “responsibility is elicited, brought about by the face of the other person” (44). Atticus fully took on this responsibility, brought about by the “face” of Tom Robinson. His children also approached responsibility for this man, or at least for their father’s defense of Tom. Members of Tom’s community acknowledged what Atticus was doing for Tom, and reciprocated that relationship. Finally, other members of the community realized that Tom needed their help; though not all of them were able to put themselves out for him as Atticus did, they certainly understood that Atticus was the man for the job. As such, in these terms, many people in the community approached recognition.

One other aspect of this case that is important to note is that during the proceedings of the case, Jem and Scout themselves became “other.” Their father was willingly defending a black man at a time when interracial relationships were simply not acceptable. To this end, both of the children experience first hand what it is like to be on the outside and to be in constant defense of oneself. Many of the school children comment on Atticus’ defense of Tom Robinson as does Mrs. Dubose. While these comments certainly affected both of the children, Scout is even more
affected when her own cousin makes a comment about her father: “‘I guess it ain’t your fault if Uncle Atticus is a niggerlover besides, but I’m here to tell you it certainly does mortify the rest of the family’”(83). At this comment, Scout shuts her cousin into the outside kitchen. When her aunt comes to retrieve them, Scout has to face her cousin once again and explain her behavior to the adults. By doing this, she gets the experience of what it is like to be the “other.” This heightens her understanding of the existence of others, even it does not immediately have an affect on her. By placing the children in these situations, Lee provides a model which proves that any person can become other. Not only that, she provides ways by which this can be overcome.
SECTION VI. CASE THREE—BOO RADLEY

Finally, another way by which ethics and recognition are demonstrated throughout Lee’s novel is through the character of Boo Radley. Throughout the text, he is a mystery and a point of intrigue for Scout, Jem, and their neighborhood friend Dill. Early in the text, Scout describes the Radley house: “The house was low, was once white with a deep front porch and green shutters, but had long ago darkened to the color of the slate-gray yard around it” (8). Though the house’s condition was enough to get the children in a frenzy, what is inside the house is even more fascinating. “Inside the house was malevolent phantom. People said he existed, but Jem and I had never seen him” (8-9). Scout goes on to narrate the story of Boo Radley. According to Maycomb county legend, Boo had gotten involved with some troublemakers about town and had been caught taking part in a number of criminal activities. Though they only involved disturbing the peace, disorderly conduct, and the like, Boo and his friends were charged by the judge. Instead of sending him to the state industrial school, Boo was released on his father’s word that he would be no more trouble. Many years later, another incident occurred: “Boo was sitting in the livingroom cutting some items from The Maycomb Tribune to paste in his scrapbook. His father entered the room. As Mr. Radley passed by, Boo drove the scissors into his parent’s leg, pulled them out, wiped them on his pants, resumed his activities”(11). After that incident, Boo was sent to live in the courthouse basement until he was released back to his home (8-11).

Frequently, a white male is not thought of as a stigmatized individual. However, in this case, Boo Radley is certainly a stigmatized member of Maycomb County. First, he might be considered mentally ill by some members of the community. Though he was released to his home after the incident with his father, there was discussion about sending him to an insane asylum. However, “old Mr. Radley said no Radley was going to any asylum” (11). Thus, Boo
was returned home. Regardless, the townspeople were certainly aware of Boo’s activities. According to Goffman, “a discrepancy may exist between an individual’s virtual and actual identity. This discrepancy . . . spoils his social identity” (19). Based on what Goffman claims, Boo’s social identity would be spoiled regardless of whether or not he is what the townspeople think he is. Because there is so much speculation about Boo’s identity, it makes him a stigmatized individual. As Goffman puts it “it has the effect of cutting him off from society and from himself so that he stands a discredited person facing an unaccepting world” (19). Proving this situation to be true, Boo rarely leaves his home; instead, he stays inside, a recluse in his own town.

Scout and Jem’s fixation on Boo Radley lasts throughout the novel. Their curiosity about Boo frequently gets the best of them, and often they come up with schemes to try to get Boo to come out of his house. In fact, their summer friend Dill is also fascinated by Boo. “‘Let’s try to make him come out,’ said Dill. “‘I’d like to see what he looks like’” (13). To this end, Dill challenges Jem to go up and knock on the front door of Boo Radley. Because Jem refuses to turn down a dare, he accepts the challenge, and after three days, musters up the courage to knock on the front door. Though nothing significant truly happens, the children notice something: “The old house was the same, droopy and sick, but as we stared down the street we though we saw an inside shutter move. Flick. A tiny, almost invisible movement, and the house was still” (15). Though this might be a minor incident, it is clear through their actions that the children do not think of Boo as a respectable human being. According to Levinas, they have not “faced” Boo Radley at this point. To them, he is simply a mysterious stranger, someone who they can toy with when they are bored.
Despite their fear of Boo Radley, the children continue to be captivated by him. However, once school begins, they run into many new things that pull their interest in different directions. Each day, though, Scout runs as fast she can past the Radley house, so as not to put herself in danger. Yet, “one afternoon as I raced by, something caught my eye and caught it in such a way that I took a deep breath, a long look around, and went back”(33). What she finds when she returns is two pieces of chewing gum stuck into a knot hole in a large tree. Upon her return home, Jem orders her to spit out the gum, as it might be poisoned or something worse. Soon enough, though, the children find two Indian-head pennies in the hole in the tree. Perplexed, the children are unsure what to do with the pennies. But, since it seems unreasonable that they belong to anyone, they decide to keep them. As Scout puts it: “Finders were keepers unless title was proven”(35). While they could not conclusively explain where the pennies came from, “before Jem went to his room, he looked for a long time at the Radley Place. He seemed to be thinking again”(35). Neither child makes a revelation at this point about who might be stuffing the tree, but both seem to be thinking about it, wondering if it was possible that someone inside the Radley house is responsible. With these thoughts, the children are asked to approach recognition of Boo Radley.

Their efforts at recognition are halted when Dill shows up once again to spend the summer in Maycomb County. Before long, all three children are back to making fun of the Radley’s. Each day, they act out their parts: Scout as Mrs. Radley, Dill as Mr. Radley, and Jem as Boo. One day, as they are playing in the tire, Scout inadvertently lands in the Radley yard. Scared, she scrambles back to Jem and Dill. Not long after, Atticus discovers their game and makes them stop playing it. Scout is relieved, because “through all the head-shaking, quelling of nausea, and Jem-yelling, I had heard another sound, so low I could not have heard from the
sidewalk. Someone inside the house was laughing”(41). Her recognition of this laughter both
scares and confuses her and shortly after, she stops playing the game altogether. Once again,
something has sparked in Scout’s brain, though it can not be identified as recognition or facing
the other. However slowly, Scout is beginning to realize that there might be more to Boo Radley
than what she originally thought.

As the summer continues, the three children continue to act mischievously. One night,
Dill and Jem decide that they “were simply going to peep in the window with the loose shutter to
see if they could see Boo Radley”(51). Scout certainly has her doubts, and the boys tell her if
she “didn’t want to go with them [she] could go straight home and keep [her] fat flopping mouth
shut”(51). When Jem tells her that she is acting too much like a girl, Scout feels compelled to
join the adventure. Immediately, things go wrong. Jem steps onto the porch and it creeks,
waking someone inside the Radley house. Soon, a shadow can be seen and the kids bolt across
the yard. During the scramble, Jem’s pants get caught on the fence, halting his progression off
the Radley property. In a panic, Jem leaves his pants on the fence and runs. Once they have
catched their breath, the children notice that the people of the neighborhood have gathered in the
front yard. Asking about the commotion, the children are told “ ‘Mr. Radley shot at a Negro in
his collard patch’”(54). Tired and scared, they retreat to their homes, but thoughts of the
Radley’s haunt Scout. “Every night-sound I heard from my cot on the back porch was magnified
three-fold; every scratch of feet on gravel was Boo Radley seeking revenge . . .”(55). Despite
Scout’s fear, Jem feels compelled to go back to retrieve his pants; if he doesn’t have them in the
morning, he will certainly be in some trouble. While Scout holds her breath, Jem sneaks out of
the house and successfully recovers his pants. Days later, however, Jem makes a confession.
“ ‘When I went back for my breeches—they were all in a tangle when I gettin’ out of ‘em, I
couldn’t get ‘em loose. When I went back—when I went back, they were folded across the fence . . . like they were expectin’ me . . . they’d been sewed up’” (58). On the same day, when the Jem and Scout pass by the old tree, a ball of twine lay inside.

Once again, the children have been confronted with the fact that Boo Radley might be an actual person for whom they should have respect. Neither of them can conclude that Boo fixed Jem’s pants or that Boo is responsible for putting those items in the tree, but both children seem to have an inkling that that is the case. As a result, they begin to approach recognition. On the other hand, according to Levinas in his article “The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other,” an original encounter must take place, at which “there is also the affirmation, as a manifestation of freedom, of the rights of the obligated person, not only as the result of a simple transference and thanks to a generalization of the rights of man as they appear in others to the obligated person”(125). Thus, in order for Scout or Jem to have “faced” Boo Radley, they would have had to be aware that they were participating in an original ethical encounter that asked them to take responsibility of the other. Furthermore, they would have had to approach Boo with “non-indifference and peace.” Levinas puts it like this: “Non-indifference and goodness of responsibility: these are not neutral, midway between love and hostility. They must be conceived on the basis of the meeting, in which the wish for peace—or goodness—is the first language”(125). At this point in the novel, Jem and Scout have not reached this level of recognition, though changes in their behavior are emerging. On the other hand, Atticus certainly reaches this point regarding Boo Radley and his family. Throughout the course of the novel, Atticus constantly reminds his children that judging the Radley’s is not appropriate, nor do they know what they should in order to make a judgment about the Radley family. Because Atticus urges his children to “recognize” Boo Radley, he is, in a sense, taking responsibility for him. In
some ways, this responsibility is similar to the responsibility he takes on regarding Tom Robinson. In both cases, Atticus defends the positions of the men in question. Though he does it in different ways, the outcome is comparable: his children begin to see beyond the stories or the skin color in order to approach recognition.

Soon enough, another event occurs that gets the children to consider Boo Radley as a person of human status. On a cold winter’s night, a neighbor’s house catches fire. While everyone in the neighborhood gathers, Scout shivers in the cold. Through the course of the fire, a lot of commotion takes place. “‘Looks like all of Maycomb county was out tonight’” (72). Without her noticing, someone places a blanket around Scout. In the commotion, she has no idea where it came from. Atticus, on the other hand, knows exactly who had placed it there:

“‘Someday, maybe, Scout can thank him for covering her up.’”

“‘Thank who?’ I asked.

‘Boo Radley. You were so busy looking at the fire that you didn’t know it when he put the blanket around you.’”

After Atticus discloses this information, Scout describes her reaction. “My stomach turned to water and I nearly threw up . . .”(72). Clearly, Scout has not yet reached the point at which she sees Boo Radley as an equal human being. Yet, his actions do require Scout to think of him in a new light, which is a step in the direction of ethics.

As Scout continues to grow up, her fixation on the Radley house lets up. With her father’s trial and a new year of school, Scout has less time to concern herself with the goings on of the Radley house. “The Radley Place had ceased to terrify me, but it was no less gloomy, no less chilly under its great oak, and no less uninviting . . .and yet I remembered. Two Indian-head pennies, chewing gum, soap dolls, a rusty medal, a broken watch and chain”(242). As she
remembers these items in the tree, she expresses a wish to “have one good look at Boo Radley before I died”(242). Atticus immediately tells her not to bother the Radley house, but Scout notes that “so many things had happened to us, Boo Radley was the least of our fears”(243). At this juncture in the novel, Scout is almost indifferent to Boo, though he can still spark her curiosity. As a result of her indifference, it is clear that she has not progressed to recognition of this “other” individual.

Though Scout has managed to leave Boo Radley in the past, one more encounter with him takes place in the novel. On the night of the school pageant, Jem and Scout (in full costume) are walking through the field on their way home. It is dark, but they can hear that they are being followed. At first, they think it is a friend playing a prank, but it soon becomes clear that it is not. “He was running, running toward us with no child’s steps”(261). An attack ensues: “Something crushed the chicken wire around me. Metal ripped on metal and I fell to the ground and rolled as far as I could, floundering to escape my wire prison. From somewhere near by came scuffling, kicking sounds, sounds of shoes and flesh scraping dirt and roots”(262). Finally, they break free and head for home. Scout can see Jem being carried home, his arm clearly broken. In the aftermath of the attack, it is discovered that the man responsible for the attack was Bob Ewell, father of Mayella Ewell. Because Atticus had damaged his reputation in court with his defense of Tom Robinson, Ewell attempted to settle the score by assaulting Atticus’ children. In the midst of the attack, however, an unidentified man comes to Jem and Scout’s rescue; as a consequence, Ewell was stabbed, which resulted in his death. The unidentified man sat in the corner of the Finch house; when Scout realized who it was, she greeted him: “‘Hey, Boo,’ I said.”(270).
It is at this moment that Scout reaches true recognition. She fully faces Boo Radley, and her responsibility for him ensues. Clearly, he has already acted upon his responsibility for her by rescuing her from the attack. Finally, this responsibility is reciprocated. Later that night, Scout takes it upon herself to lead Boo to the bed where Jem lay, and then to lead him home. After doing these tasks, Scout takes a moment to fully realize what has occurred that night. “Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough” (271). At last Scout takes that step toward recognition. As such, ethics follow. No longer can she poke fun at Boo or torment him. Their relationship is one of responsibility for one another. Levinas notes that “One’s duty regarding the other who makes appeal to one’s responsibility is an investing of one’s own freedom” (125). In this case, though Scout has taken on responsibility for Boo, she has freed herself from the fear she once had for him. In doing so, Scout has grown into a respectable young woman.

Certainly, Scout has found a way to recognize the “other.” While she initially struggles with understanding the need to see eye to eye with those different than her, by the end of the novel, she realizes that differences are not that important at all. In fact, she finds that people who one might stigmatize at the outset are actually quite good people in many cases. When she recounts this idea to Atticus, he responds by saying “‘Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them’” (Lee 281). In the theory of ethics, understanding that the self is different from the other is imperative; the self does not become the other when recognition takes place (Levinas 125). Instead, one notices that the other is different, but still treats the other as having human status; one who, according to Butler, deserves to have a livable life (13). Scout’s emergence into ethical relations is the culmination of the novel. In fact, the novel is concluded as soon as Scout
takes this step. Scout’s move in this direction is the final way by which Lee provides a model for an ethical society in which people move beyond simple tolerance. It here that Lee seems to suggest that true change will have to wait for the next generation—Scout and Jem’s—to grow up.
SECTION VII. OPPOSING POSITIONS

My argument is complicated by the fact that Levinas’ theory of ethics is idealistic in a number of ways. It asks people to actually take responsibility for those other than themselves. This is not an easy task; in fact, it is quite complicated. However, according to Levinas in his article “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” “The ethical relationship is not grafted on to an antecedent relationship of cognition; it is a foundation and a superstructure” (56). Based on this idea, what Levinas is saying is that ethical relationships do not necessarily begin with both parties being aware of the relationship. In one case at hand, the relationship between Atticus and Tom Robinson, Levinas might posit that Tom need not be aware that Atticus has “faced” him. At the initial ethical encounter, which ensued when Atticus took on the case, Tom may not have been aware of the transaction. Eventually, however, the relationship builds. As Levinas notes: “it is a foundation.” As the relationship continues, Tom can approach the understanding that Atticus sees him as an equal. When he does reach this understanding, he himself can begin the process of recognizing and thus becoming responsible for an “other,” one who may not be Atticus. Furthermore, the same is true regarding the relationship of Scout and Boo. Though Scout is not aware of it, Boo had already taken responsibility for her before she truly faced him.

Certainly, this is an idealistic theory that asks people to actually do something, but that does not mean that it is not valuable as a way to read literature. In fact, Butler argues in Precarious Life that a Levinasian viewpoint is valid and vital to contemporary society, even when the ethical responsibility that comes about “ruin[s] my plans”(130). In fact, Butler claims that the initial encounter occurs “in ways we cannot avert or avoid”(130). When understood in this way, the original ethical encounter is inevitable in many ways. In this light, then, this theory can be said to always already be in practice, though perhaps it is not foregrounded. Thus,
reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* in this sense asks readers to undertake a new way of thinking that takes notice of the preconditions for recognition. Furthermore, reading Lee’s novel through this lens has the power to open up the discussion about ethics in new ways that reach past the level of tolerance for those who are different.

Another opposing argument comes from those who believe that literature should not be taught in certain ways. Johnson points out that there is “an ongoing debate about how this type of literature should be studied”(xii). Some scholars wish to study it only as a “self contained unit.” These scholars might find it unnecessary to go beyond the text itself or the author herself. In addition to not going beyond the text or the author, some scholars may feel that studying the text in terms of tolerance or empathy is enough. They may not believe that the novel merits an updated reading. However, there are valid reasons as to why this text deserves further study.

First, when looking at the novel as a singular piece of writing, some of the social and historical context is lost. Furthermore, as Johnson notes, studying other themes brought forth in the novel is “a means of deepening our understanding of the novel”(xiv). Certainly there are a number of ways to approach this text; regardless, when refusing to look at this novel through an interdisciplinary lens, one loses the power that fiction can hold. Finally, reading this novel in the same ways that it has been read and studied over the last forty years does the novel and its author a disservice. This novel can easily translate into our lives as they are today; thus, scholars should bring to the fore the power that a book like *To Kill a Mockingbird* holds. This novel has a lot to offer to contemporary society. Scholars and educators should always be searching for new ways to approach a text. Literary analysis can take on many forms, but this novel reaches beyond the confines of many approaches. Thus, it should be looked at in a number of ways, including from
the perspective of a theory of ethics. Only progress can be made by critically examining the text in this way.
SECTION VIII. CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE TEXT

Throughout this text, then, Lee successfully provides models who demonstrate the ideas of both Goffman and Levinas. Goffman pointed out that “the normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives” (138). In this way, otherness is based on standpoint. He states that “the lifelong attributes of a particular individual may cause him to be type-cast” (138). This is certainly the case for Mrs. Dubose, Tom Robinson, and Boo Radley. Nevertheless, the stigmatized person does not always have to play the role set up for him/her by stigmatizing attributes (138). When people are actually able to see these characters as equal human beings, they are no longer type-cast into the role of the stigmatized. Evidence of this comes from Tom Robinson’s trial. Though Tom was not acquitted, the jury took several hours to reach a verdict. This proved to Atticus that the people of Maycomb County are on the brink of change: “that was the one thing that made me think, well, this may be the shadow of a beginning. That jury took a few hours” (Lee 222). Though not everyone in Maycomb made a miraculous change, Lee demonstrated through her characters that change, and in turn, recognition of others, is in fact possible. Even in a small southern town, a change is viable. Undoubtedly, Levinas’ theory of ethics provides a way by which the initial stigmatization or “othering” can be overcome. Hence, through the lens of both Goffman and Levinas, one can see the de-othering of these characters through Lee’s story of recognition.

There are particular characters in the text that progress toward ethical relationships more so than others. Boo Radley is one of these characters. Though he is one who has a limited amount of power in Maycomb county, his progression is immense. At the beginning of the text, readers are informed that Boo Radley has not left the house in years. Throughout the text, however, Boo takes great strides to form real relationships with both Jem and Scout, which is
evidenced by leaving items in the tree for them, mending Jem’s pants, and, of course, saving their lives. In Boo’s case, he had to move far beyond his comfort zone in order to put someone else before himself. Boo is certainly a character that demonstrates progression toward ethics. Furthermore, the members of the black community take great strides as well. The black community, like Boo, has a minimal amount of power, yet they reach beyond the confines of the situation in order to exhibit their understanding of the recognition that took place between Tom and Atticus. Scout is another character with only nominal power in the text, and she too, made huge leaps toward ethical relationships. By the end of the text, she truly realizes that it is not acceptable to base one’s opinion of someone on what can be seen on the outside. She proves that she has grown through the text when she takes Boo by the hand and leads him back to his home.

In terms of societal structure, these characters are the least powerful, yet all moved leaps and bounds in the text. On the other hand, other members of the community, such as Mr. Ewell, were not able to progress at all, despite being in a position of at least somewhat more power. The same can be said of the members of the jury who were not able to make the move into believing that a black man might be innocent. What this might indicate is that in order to truly place someone else before oneself, one must give over that power. Perhaps one must be able to place oneself in a less powerful position in order to see the injustices of the world. Though Atticus had a lot in terms of power in the novel, that was not something that prevented him from participating in ethical relationships. Atticus, however, never took his position or the position of others for granted. He recognized his own position while also understanding the position of others.

Levinas points out that all ethical relationships are not necessarily indicative of equality (44). In some cases, there is no initial equality at the start of the relationship. There are times at
which one individual is subordinate to the other. However, this can be overcome. Ethical equality is certainly possible, according to Levinas, when one is able to recognize the position of “I” as being central, yet still function “according to the laws of being” (45). For this to happen, one must place the other before oneself, taking on responsibility for the other despite other circumstances. When this occurs, ethical equality is found. In many ways, Levinas’ theories are just that: theories. It seems both impossible and impractical to truly place all others before oneself. Yet, even when someone practices Levinas’ principles to a lesser degree, ultimately, more ethical relationships emerge. In many cases, in order for this to happen, one must put power to the side, as Atticus did. In other cases, one must move forward from a position of limited power, like Scout, Boo, and the members of the black community. In either case, progression toward an ethical society is the outcome and members of society formerly ignored become recognizable.

The type of recognition seen in Lee’s novel needs to be translated into contemporary society. In a world where people are being inflicted with violence every day of the week, this is especially important. In his article “Freedom and Command,” Levinas makes a crucial point:

Violence is a way of acting on every being and every freedom by approaching it from an indirect angle. Violence is a way of taking hold of a being by surprise, of taking hold of it in its absence, in what is not properly speaking it. The relationship with things, the domination of things, this way of being over them, consists in fact in *never approaching them in their individuality*. [italics added] (19).

In the violent world we inhabit, it is vital that ethics and recognition for the individual take place. While it is a small step, teaching or reading Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* in this way is a step in
the right direction. Reading this text in Levinasian terms has the power to open up the discussion of ethics; when offered this model, readers can be asked to think beyond tolerance. Moving beyond tolerance is crucial to a contemporary reading of this novel.
SECTION IX. PEDAGOGY/LEARNING FROM ETHICS

There are several reasons why taking this text to a new level is important and valid. First of all, as Claudia Durst Johnson puts it in her book *Understanding ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’*, “Frequent exposure to literature and studies of literature can cause one’s initial impression to change”(xiv). Literature is a powerful force, and it should be used to its fullest potential. Currently, we are living in a world where it is unsafe to carry lipstick onto a plane. When our safety and our dignity as humans has become compromised, it is vital that we take steps to change the way we live. Teaching literature in terms of ethics is one small way to do so. Accordingly, *To Kill a Mockingbird* lends itself well to teaching in this way. The novel deals with complex issues such as racism and life roles. As Johnson notes, “The novel challenges our stereotypes—of the Southerner, the African-American, the eccentric, the child, the young lady”(xi). Beyond challenging the reader, it asks the reader to consider “social situations in different ways”(xii). When readers do this, new understandings of life can be formulated. What’s more, when read in conjunction with Levinas, the reader can take his/her understanding of ethics to new heights. For instance, one can begin to recognize what a truly ethical relationship looks like. In addition, the novel provides several ways in which this type of relationship can emerge among people. By critically examining the ways by which these types of relationships can come about, readers can begin to understand how to apply these theories to their own lives.

Johnson emphasizes that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is “unquestionably one of the most widely read, best-selling, and influential books in American literature”(xi). What’s more, the novel “had gone through 500,000 copies and had been translated into ten languages” just one year after its initial publication. For a book having this widespread of an influence, the
opportunities for learning and growth are endless. Each year, thousands of students read this book. They often read it at a time in their lives when their values are being challenged by peer pressure and outside influences. When faced with this text, they have the potential to find ways to solidify their current values or reestablish ones they may have lost or never even had in the first place. Students might be able to use this book to reexamine what really happens between people. Human relationships matter in this world. Working with this text in terms of ethics might bring that fact to light for students.

Currently, people of difference are being subjected to physical harm and violence based on their difference. While teaching this book in a new way may not stop all violence, it could be just the thing to make a person think twice about his/her actions. Literature is powerful. It serves as an escape from our everyday lives, but it also serves as mirror to them. Harper Lee, certainly ahead of her time, used her powerful voice to demonstrate how human relationships function and how they can grow and change. A powerful encounter can occur between a reader and a text; this power should not be ignored, but used to better the lives of humans. Levinas’ philosophies perfectly align themselves with this text. It is vital that readers of this novel understand how an original ethical encounter takes place. When faced with an “other,” one must not turn one’s back, but look forward and accept responsibility for that other. As Levinas claims, it is crucial “to be non-indifferent to the other. Non-indifference, or original sociality-goodness; peace, or the wish for peace, benediction; ‘shalom’—the initial event of meeting”(125). These are qualities that should apply not only to literature, but to every day life. Lee provides a model which demonstrates how this can occur, but readers of this text can translate this to their own lives as well. Johnson points out that this novel was “one of the three books ‘most often cited as making a difference’ in people’s lives”(xi). Yet, work with this book has certainly not been
exhausted. By applying new theories to this text, new meaning can be brought forth, and readers serve to prosper. There is a universal quality to *To Kill a Mockingbird* that allows all types of readers to identify with its story; it is a must that educators use this quality to educate readers about the importance of ethical relationships. No longer should people turn their backs on one another; instead, they should face one another with courage and conviction.

When working with students on these complex ideas of ethics and recognition, it would be useful to examine current events in order to find parallels to the text. For instance, students might be able to research cases at which a person places the other before oneself. Certainly, this has happened many times throughout history, and some of these cases are very well documented. Currently, actress Mia Farrow is offering her own freedom in exchange for that of a Darfur rebel leader who is in need of critical medical care. According to USA Today, in a letter Ms. Farrow wrote to the president of the country, she wrote “I am . . . offering to take Mr. Jamous's place, to exchange my freedom for his in the knowledge of his importance to the civilians of Darfur and in the conviction that he will apply his energies toward creating the just and lasting peace that the Sudanese people deserve and hope for”(1). This is one case that certainly demonstrates the type of relationship that Levinas wrote about in his philosophies. However, this is also an extreme case. Not often does one give up one’s own life completely in order to save another. When working with these theories, it is essential to inform students that truly embodying these principles is often times only something that can be approximated.

Despite knowing that this is something that is exceptionally hard to achieve, students should not be discouraged from working toward this type of an ethical society. After students have researched cases of recognition, it would be useful for them to then bring it down to a level that is practical for their own lives. It is not practical to think a young student could trade his/her
own freedom for that of an imprisoned citizen. However, even when the action is not as
grandiose as what Ms. Farrow has offered, that does not mean that students cannot be a part of
forming a more ethical society. For this purpose, educators could ask students to write an essay
about a time in their life when they had the opportunity to put another before oneself, yet did not
do so. The students could discuss the outcome of their actions and how it affected their lives.
To take this even further, students could then speculate about what may have happened had they
placed themselves behind the other. When comparing outcomes in this way, students might note
the rewards that come with being a part of an ethical society. Some of these rewards might
include knowing that they are part of changing the way the world functions in terms of
relationships or at least a part of making someone’s life a little easier. This may not matter to
some students, so taking the lesson even further may be necessary. In a journal exercise,
educators could ask students to reflect upon a time at which they were the one in need of being
recognized. Reflecting in this way might encourage students to consider how being in this lower
position affected them. Furthermore, this could also lead to a discussion of how it might feel to
be “other” and how it might feel if someone offered to place him/herself second in order to make
you first. Again, much of this might be hypothetical, yet it might still make a difference in the
way young people think about relationships. Asking students to reflect on their own positions in
life in comparison to the positions of others has the potential to bring to the fore ways in which
others are slighted every day. When students have to truly face this, it may lead to self discovery
and growth. As noted earlier, in many ways, this theory is practically impossible to put into
practice, but there are ways in which we can move toward an more ethical society. Considering
how doing so might change the society in which we live is one way to make these theories come
to fruition.
Emmanuel Levinas put forth a theory that asks one to put the other totally in front of oneself. His theory asks people to take on responsibility for an other, responsibility that cannot be put on the back burner or transferred to someone else. His theories are difficult to completely put it into practice, but forward change is certainly possible. One way to bring these theories into conversation is to use them in terms of reading Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This novel presents many instances that demonstrate human relationships in terms of ethics. The novel documents movement toward an ethical society while at the same time providing an outcome for those who are not recognized. Lee, a forward thinker herself, proves through her characters that change is, in fact, possible even though it is difficult. This text can be used as a catalyst for change toward an ethical society.
WORKS CITED


