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## **“Whose Side Are You On?” Moral Consequences of Young Readers’ Responses to *To Kill a Mockingbird***

**Autumn A. Allen**

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Harper Lee's 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is used in many middle school curricula and is considered a standard of great literature, in large part due to the impact it has had on readers' understandings of morality and justice. The paperback cover of the 1982 Warner Books edition calls it "The timeless classic of growing up and the human dignity that unites us all." The dominant interpretation of the novel is that it advocates racial equality, with lawyer Atticus Finch as a White anti-racist hero, and "the moral lesson of empathy as the cardinal virtue" (Jay 488). This interpretation has come under scrutiny in more recent years. Some concerned Black parents and scholars have argued that the book is outdated and offensive to Black people (Asim; Saney). Other critics have argued that the imperfect, racist Atticus depicted in *Go Set a Watchman* (Lee 2015) is the same Atticus whose moral contradictions many refused to see in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Mendenhall).

In this article, I interrogate the book's relevance to today's youth, using data from a small sample of young readers in Massachusetts who read and discussed the book together in a peer-led discussion group in the fall of 2016. The children's questions and discussions reveal several important points about how children read, and about how this particular text demands to be read. After presenting the context and content of the children's discussions, I use cognitive criticism and reader response theories (Nikolajeva 2013; Rosenblatt) to analyze their interactions with the text. I then consider the role of race in Lee's text, using Toni Morrison's concept of Africanism (*Playing in the Dark*, 1992), and the role of race in the young reader's life. Since, as Rosenblatt writes, "Literature equals book plus reader" (1960, 305), lessons from the "transaction" (Rosenblatt, "The Literary Transaction") between these children and this text should influence the decision to include *To Kill a Mockingbird* (or any other book) in middle school curricula.

## The Child Readers and Their Book Group

The children who read *To Kill a Mockingbird* together met through their parents, who came together to form a homeschool cooperative. The cooperative's founder and organizer is a White woman parenting three adopted Black children in addition to three biological White children. She introduced the co-op as a space "intended to be a sanctuary from the weight of an education system that often fails non-White children," and reached out "specifically to families of color looking for places for their children to not be 'the only ones'" (Beckwith). Thus, families entering the co-op were either actively seeking, or comfortable with, a racially diverse group of families where classes and discussions would not shy away from issues of race and social justice.

The children in the cooperative were divided into two groups based on age: 6- to 10-year-olds, and 11- to 14-year-olds. All of the teachers in the cooperative were parents, and are referred to henceforth as "parent-teachers." The co-op day was divided into three subjects, one of which was a literature circle for the older group.

At the first meeting, the organizer of the cooperative introduced the students to the literature circle model, explaining that the students would take turns leading the discussion. They were asked to bring two to three books to the second meeting that they wanted to read and discuss together. At the second meeting, the children presented those books to each other and then voted on which books to read together. The first book they decided to read was *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Other books they voted to read included *A Long Walk to Water* (Linda Sue Park, 2010), *Number the Stars* (Lois Lowry, 1989), and *A Wrinkle in Time* (Madeleine L'Engle, 1962).

## Methodology

The children received some coaching in how to lead the discussions. They were encouraged to bring questions to ask the group about the chapters they had read that week. The co-op founder and organizer also gave the students lists of questions they could use as discussion prompts if their conversation stalled. In most sessions, the students did not use these questions.

The literature circle began with six children. At the last two meetings, which are the focus of this analysis, four children were present: two White girls, age 11 and 12, named Katie and Morgan, a Black boy, age 12, named Khalil, and a Black girl, age 12, named Saleemah. The first few sessions included a 14-year-old White boy named Mark, who had suggested this book, and his older sister, Liz, age 19, who helped lead the discussion during the second and third sessions. I was present during the discussions from week two, and I am a Black woman. Although I was a parent-teacher in the cooperative (teaching history), I told the students that during their book group I was there only to observe. During the book discussions, I spoke only to redirect conversations toward the novel when the students veered into unrelated topics, to remind the students that they had a list of questions they could use, to encourage them to dig deeper into questions they posed of one another, and to suggest that they could look at the text to answer their questions.

The parent-teachers chose the student-led structure in order to generate a sense of responsibility and independence in the students, and to encourage them to engage with literature for literature's sake rather than to please adults. The effect the student-led structure had on the group, as they got to know each other better and became comfortable in the environment, was to create a space where they could voice their true feelings about the books they were reading, and where they discussed what they really cared about as they read. The feelings and reactions they

expressed in this environment reveal much about the possibilities of the “reading transaction” between young people and this particular text.

### **Responses to the Novel**

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is set in the small, fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, in the 1930s, and is narrated retrospectively by a girl named Scout, who is a child at the time of the story. Scout watches her father, lawyer Atticus Finch, defend a Black man, Tom Robinson, who is accused of raping a White woman, Mayella Ewell. There is evidence that Mayella was hit, but Tom’s physical disability essentially clears him as a suspect. He is convicted anyway, and when he tries to escape from prison, a guard fatally shoots him.

In one early session, Liz asked the students what “truth” the book was trying to show. The children agreed that the book was “trying to tell that Black people and White people are equal” and “trying to show ... the way that different people treat Black people, and it’s trying to say that there’s no difference between them, and they’re the same” (Book group, 3 Oct). As evidence, they cited the White townspeople’s harassment of Atticus and his children because of Atticus’s defense of Tom Robinson, as well as the fact that “[t]he sheriff hadn’t the heart to put [“Boo” Radley, a White man accused of stabbing his father] in jail alongside Negroes” (Lee 12).

Without exception, the children appraised Atticus’s character as positive and nearly ideal. When Liz said that during the trial, Atticus is trying to get people to “think it through themselves,” Mark said, “Cause Atticus is everyone’s favorite character, obviously.”

Katie: No—

Liz: No, he doesn’t have to be your favorite, but Atticus is the morality of it, right? He’s the guy who’s good. He’s trying to do good, right?

Katie: If someone talked to you the way Mr. Ewell and Mayella spoke to Atticus (rude), would you be able to be as polite and kind as he was?

Others: No, probably not.

Katie: He's just very patient.

(Book Group, 13 Oct.)

When discussing why Atticus took the case, the students reviewed Atticus's statement that if he didn't take the case, he couldn't tell Scout and Jem what to do (Lee 86). Morgan said, "He seems perfect." Katie said that he reminds her of Jesus. When asked to elaborate, she said, "he acts like Mr. Perfect," and then, "no one is that patient!" (Book Group, 27 Oct.) Saleemah attributed qualities of objectivity and reason to Atticus. When the students discussed the trial, she said, "I'm on the truth's side," and then, "I believe Atticus." When I asked, "Do you agree that Atticus is a good example" to Scout and Jem, the group responded that he is.

Khalil: He's teaching them what they should do ... and how to act.

Saleemah: Atticus is a good example because he's a good guy.

Me: What makes you say he's a good guy?

Saleemah: Because he's—in the book he's meant to be.

(Book Group, 3 Nov.)

Here, the reader attributed her interpretation of Atticus's character to the author's intention rather than to her own feelings about the character.

One student asked whether people in the town respect or believe Bob Ewell, who is Mayella's father, likely the character who beat up Mayella, and the only character in the book about whom Atticus speaks harshly. The others responded:

Katie: I don't think that people really respect him or believe him....

Khalil: People like—kind of, but like not? They don't want to. The judge ... doesn't want to believe that he did it, but at the same time is believing that he did it. ... It's weird.

(Book Group, 13 Oct.)

The most animated discussions happened when they had finished the book and were discussing the trial and “who did it?” The children wavered in their allegiances to characters based on their affective responses while they were reading. They sought answers within the text to questions about who was telling the truth. Katie said that she did not like hearing Tom's and Mayella's stories. Khalil said, “it's hard to decide which one's real. Cause when you hear each one ... her story was at least a page and a half or so, and his story was not even a full page” (Book Group, 27 Oct.). Significantly, the amount of space a character is given on the page influenced his understanding of whose point of view was valid and important. In spite of this, Khalil said, “You could tell that she was lying in a way, 'cause ... she'd be like crying and like, she wasn't answering all of [Atticus's] questions” (Book Group, 27 Oct.). Morgan agreed with his assessment, and a few minutes later she asked the group, “Whose side are you on? ... Mayella, or Tom?” The group responded rapidly, mostly on Tom's side, but with a major exception.

Khalil: Tom!

Katie: I don't know.

Saleemah: I'm on the truth's side. (laughs)

Khalil: I like Tom better.

Morgan: Yeah.

Katie: I don't know if Tom could be lying.



Morgan: Yeah.

Khalil: I like Tom better!

Morgan: Yeah.

Saleemah: Yeah, I like Tom.

Katie: I mean I like how he's defending Tom, but I don't think— [pause] He could be lying.

Morgan: That's true. I want to believe him though, but—

Katie: I want to believe him, but I don't know if he is telling the truth. Because he ends up dying and trying to escape, so—

Khalil: I mean that's because—

Katie: Who would escape from jail?

(Book Group, 27 Oct.)

Khalil responded to her question: "You have to remember—he felt like he was forced because Ewell—he had to force them to put him in jail. Like, he forced them to believe him." When she remained undecided, he asked, exasperated, "Did you read chapter 29? Who hurt Jem? ... You get it now?" (He was referring to Bob Ewell's attack on Atticus's children, Jem and Scout.)

Morgan said, "I believe Tom ... is right. I dunno, there's something about [Mayella] that makes me feel off—about her."

After a discussion about Atticus's motivations and reviewing both sides of the story, Katie insisted that Atticus "defended the wrong person" because she "believe[s]" Mayella's story "before the raping happened." Morgan and Khalil were incredulous. The group returned to the passages where Tom and Mayella tell their versions of what happened. They compared the two versions of the stories and tried to come to an understanding of what really happened. At the end

of this meeting, Morgan says she believes Tom because “he seems like a real stand-up guy.” Khalil believes Tom because “he's that person that's like underestimated? And ... no one believes him, but they really haven't listened to him—but they already don't want to believe him.” Saleemah says she believes Atticus, because “he doesn't believe anyone,” he only “knows that Tom didn't do it.” Here again, she sides with Atticus intellectually, without committing emotionally or morally to any character. Katie remained confused, not believing either Tom or Mayella completely, but reluctantly accepting an answer she found on the internet to her burning question of “who did it?”—Mayella's father, Bob Ewell (Book Group, 27 Oct.).

In the group's final meeting about this book, the children asked each other more about their affective responses to events in the story, such as “who was scared when” Scout and Jem were attacked on their way home, and “Was anyone sad when Bob Ewell died?” Their final assessments of the book's quality centered on its ability to make them feel as if they were there. Khalil said that Lee was a good writer because she could “make you feel like you were in it” (Book Group, 3 Nov.). Saleemah remained unimpressed, saying, “The writing didn't transfer me into a different world” (Book Group, 3 Nov.). Her lack of feeling like she was in the world of the story may have determined her relatively objective stance when she said “I'm on the truth's side” and that Atticus is “meant to be” a good guy. Interestingly, Saleemah laughed when Khalil said that Lee made Maycomb sound like a nice place. She responded that it wouldn't be a nice place for him to live (because he is Black.) As Saleemah is also Black, this comment may explain her hesitation to feel “transported” into the world of the novel; she seemed aware that that world was a dangerous place for her.

## Cognitive Criticism and Reader Response

While traditional reader response theory “deals with *how* readers interact or transact with fiction,” cognitive criticism “also encompasses the question of *why* this interaction/transaction is possible” (Nikolajeva 96, emphasis mine). When we apply both lenses to these children’s interactions with the novel, some limitations of this novel’s usefulness for today’s youth become apparent.

In general, “[w]e care about literary characters because we are curious about ourselves and other human beings; and because we want to understand our own and other people’s ways of feeling and thinking, views, beliefs, motivations, and decisions” (Nikolajeva 97). The young readers’ discussions displayed their desire to understand the literary characters’ motivations and beliefs. That desire can help readers understand themselves and others in the real world: “the brain, through the recently discovered mirror neurons, reacts to fictional worlds (settings, events, characters) as if they were real. In other words, reading fiction makes the brain simulate cognitive and affective responses to the actual world” (Nikolajeva 96). When the children asked each other if they felt sad or scared while reading, they demonstrated these responses.

The more closely fiction brings readers to simulating responses to the actual world, the more helpful it is in developing their capacities to understand and empathize with other human beings. For young people, the opportunity to “infer fictional characters’ emotions from their behavior and direct speech, and to understand their understanding of each other’s emotions, provides excellent training for real-life social engagement” (Nikolajeva 107). Since “empathy does not fully emerge until adolescence” (Nikolajeva 96), these pre-adolescents used the book group to explore decisions about who deserves empathy.

While fiction offers this opportunity, the reader's ability to infer characters' emotions depends to some extent upon the reader's real-life experiences. As early reader-response theorist Louise Rosenblatt wrote, a literary work of art is evoked from a text as the reader transacts with it; the literary work does not reside independently in the text.

[T]he reader and the text are more analogous to a pianist and a musical score. But the instrument that the reader plays upon is—himself. His keyboard is the range of his own past experiences with life and literature, his own present concerns, anxieties, and aspirations. (Rosenblatt, "Reader's Role" 304-5)

In this way, a reader and a text together conjure a meaning that is specific to the reader.

When putting adult books into the hands of youth, we must keep in mind that young readers "not only lack real-life experience of a full range of emotions, but ... have not yet fully developed their theory of mind" (Nikolajeva 96). Despite these limitations, while reading, they "are living through aesthetic experiences, their attention focused on what, in their transaction with the words, they can see and hear and feel" (Rosenblatt, "Literary Transaction" 272).

The children's discussions show how the experiences offered in the text combine with their limited life experiences to limit the value of their reading experiences, as when Katie, a White girl, could not fathom why Tom would try to escape from jail if he were innocent. If this book is truly a timeless classic about human dignity, then White students inexperienced with the impact of racism should stand to learn the most from reading it. However, as we explore in the next section, the text depicts Black characters without allowing readers to "share their conflicts and their feelings" (Rosenblatt, "Literary Transaction" 270), so its usefulness in helping young readers develop their theory of mind regarding the impact of racism is limited. This renders the

text less helpful in engendering empathy toward Black people than it is commonly assumed to be.

Since race and racism affect readers' life experiences to different degrees, the race of the reader must be considered as a factor in reader response as well—one which may circumscribe or extend the text-to-life and life-to-text strategies available to young readers attempting to understand fictional characters' emotions.

### **Race in the Text, Race in Life, Race in Reader Response**

Nikolajeva writes, "[a]ll character/reader relationships can be problematic, especially for young readers whose life experience is inevitably limited and who may not be able to transfer their previous reading experience onto the current text" (101). This "problematic" relationship can be further complicated by racial differences between characters and readers. Since race is a salient organizing factor in our society, people of color tend to be conscious of experiencing life as a person of color. White people have the privilege of being able to choose whether or not to "see" or experience race as a factor in their lives (McIntosh 1990). It takes learning and conscious effort for a White person to see how race affects lives and organizes our society. Young people often lack such learning and effort, due to their limited life experience.

A novel that offers the internal experience of a person of another race can help White readers begin to understand lived experiences of people of different races. Such reading "extends the scope of [the reader's] environment and feeds the growth of the individual" (Rosenblatt, "Literary Transaction" 274). Atticus's oft-quoted advice that "'You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it'" (Lee 33) is commonly taken as evidence that *To Kill A Mockingbird* advocates,

and perhaps offers, just such a reading experience. However, to what extent is this perception accurate, especially where young readers are concerned?

Atticus's advice to consider things from another person's point of view does not refer to understanding Black characters, but to understanding the White recluse, Boo Radley, who is ostracized but not persecuted like Tom. Throughout the text, readers are only given access to White characters' points of view. The readers in this book group, like most readers, lived through the experiences of Scout and, to some degree, Atticus. If we examine "how readers employ life-to-text and text-to-life strategies in understanding fictional emotions, and how texts encourage or discourage these strategies" (Nikolajeva 96), we find that where the children's capacities in employing life-to-text strategies were limited, these limitations were compounded by the text's limited characterization of Black characters. The text does not depict Tom's emotions so that readers can live through them; it centers the emotions of White characters toward Tom. The students in the literature circle pointed out that Mayella's story took up more space than Tom's on the page. (In my edition, her examination covered 11 pages, 204-214, and Tom's covered 6 pages, 217-223.) This silencing, and the objectifying gaze of the White narrator ("Tom was a black-velvet Negro ... The whites of his eyes shone in his face, and when he spoke we saw flashes of his teeth" (Lee 220)) combine to make it difficult for readers to share Tom's feelings.

Readers do not share Tom's perspective when he is inside the jail and the mob is outside trying to get him; readers share Scout's perspective as she worries for Atticus, who stands guard, and as she innocently confronts the mob. Toward the end of the novel, readers find out about Tom's death through Atticus (269). Atticus's sister, Alexandra, directs readers to empathize with Atticus rather than directly with Tom or Tom's family. Alexandra says that when Atticus does this work, "it tears him to pieces" (270), and that the people of the town are "perfectly willing to

let him wreck his health doing what they're afraid to do" (270). Most readers can infer Tom's hopelessness, but it is merely a plot point; the focus of their empathy is the White savior, who tires himself defending the downtrodden.

Adult readers can be expected to infer the essential facts about the truth of the trial, especially adults who grew up before the Civil Rights era, since they bring their own lived experiences with overt racism to their reading. However, young people in the fall of 2016, when this book group was held, grew up in a society that liked to think of itself as color-blind. With a Black president of the United States, many believed we had reached a post-racial era. The racialized rhetoric of the 2016 election, the publicized police killings of unarmed Black people, and the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrated otherwise. Still, unless young people were directly affected by those events or discussed them regularly, their ability to apply real-life knowledge of racism to their reading of this novel could remain limited.

When reading a novel, readers take on what Rosenblatt calls "the aesthetic stance," which, "in shaping what is understood, produces a meaning in which cognitive and affective, referential and emotive, denotational and connotational, are intermingled" (273). We saw the young readers intermingling their cognitive and affective responses to their reading to decide what was true when they said things like, "I believe Tom because he seems like a real stand-up guy" or, conversely, "I want to believe him, but I don't know if he is telling the truth."

When Katie struggled with not believing Tom, her lack of life experience related to systemic racism became apparent. Her theory of mind was not developed to the point where she could imagine the desperation of a Black man in 1930s America imprisoned for raping a White woman, and the text does not help her to develop it by portraying Tom as a human with emotions. Khalil, as a Black boy, might be expected to have more life experience and racial

socialization (Gaskin 2015), and to be better able to understand Tom's despair. However, Khalil did not use life-to-text strategies to explain Tom's situation; he drew on evidence from within the text to help Katie understand how the plot's "mystery" seemed to resolve itself with Bob Ewell as the villain. (It is possible that he felt more comfortable talking about the text than about real life.)

Both Khalil and Morgan said that they "like" Tom better than Mayella. Why do they "like" Tom, when the description of Tom in the text is shallow, highlighting his physical appearance, his meekness, and his vulnerability? Perhaps they meant that they felt sympathy for him, like Atticus does, because they understand that he is being blamed and punished for a crime he did not commit. Morgan and Khalil were surprised that Katie "liked" Miss Mayella better than Tom. When looking at the text, however, Miss Mayella, like the other White characters, is humanized in a way that Tom and other Black characters are not.

As shown above, Tom is described as an object from Scout's perspective. When Dill cries because of the way the prosecutor treats Tom on the stand, Scout responds, "'Well, Dill, after all, he's just a Negro'" (227). Scout, through whose perspective readers experience the story, sees Blacks as less than Whites. She does not attempt to understand or empathize with Tom's experience in the courtroom, but she pays close attention to Mayella's emotional display—her tears (205, 214), her anger, and her hatred of Atticus (211).

Similarly, Calpurnia, the family's beloved Black maid, is no more than a one-dimensional prop in Scout's growth. Scout's realization that Calpurnia has a community and a life outside of caring for Scout's family does not come with an understanding that Calpurnia's life and culture are equal to her own. She asks Cal, "'why do you talk nigger-talk to the—your folks when you know it's not right?'" (143) Calpurnia does not respond that there is nothing



wrong with the speech of her community; rather, she confirms the idea that the speech of White people is superior, explaining, ““You’re not gonna change any of them by talkin’ right, they’ve got to want to learn themselves, and when they don’t want to learn there’s nothing you can do but keep your mouth shut or talk their language”” (143).

In her book *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison describes the role Blackness has played in mainstream American literature as a point of reference for Whiteness. Black characters are often described as objects, and are used in the plot to “ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis” (Morrison viii) for White characters. Black characters, rather than being full individuals, provide “a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom” (Morrison 7) for the White characters. This is very much the case in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Throughout the book, the White characters’ morality is measured by their treatment of Tom, the Black scapegoat, not because he is a human being with feelings and rights, but because he is helpless, at their mercy. Tom serves only to represent how principled White people will be when they are not held accountable. Isaac Saney writes about this relationship between the White characters’ morality and the Black characters’ abject state when he explains the symbolic meaning of the book’s title:

What these lines *say* is that Black people are useful and harmless creatures—akin to decorous pets—that should not be treated brutally. This is reminiscent of the thinking that pervaded certain sectors of the abolition movement against slavery which did not extol the equality of Africans, but paralleled the propaganda of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, arguing that just as one should

not treat one's horse, ox or dog cruelly, one should not treat one's Black cruelly.

(102)

This describes the stance taken by Atticus, and this is why his character, arguably the most principled White character in the book, only embodies a different kind of racism than the actively harmful racism of the bigots in his town. Atticus objects to Tom's persecution not because Tom is a full and equal human being, but because as he states, "There's nothing more sickening to me than a low-grade white man who'll take advantage of a Negro's ignorance" (Lee 253). Tom is the test of Atticus's commitment to justice, and Atticus's commitment to justice is based on the kind of person he strives to be, not based on his belief in the equality of Black people.

Morrison could have been writing about *To Kill a Mockingbird* when she wrote, "[w]hat became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (17). Every time Atticus explains why he is defending Tom Robinson, he talks about himself, not about Tom. He says, "Scout, I couldn't go to church and worship God if I didn't try to help that man" (Lee 120); and "if I didn't I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent this county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again" (86). Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson is about Atticus, not about Tom. The book is about how White people constructed their own identities relative to Blackness in the early twentieth century.

This important distinction is evidenced throughout the book. While Atticus rejects the mistreatment of Blacks, the separation of Blacks and Whites does not bother him. Atticus considers Calpurnia a "member of this family" (137). However, when Scout wants to go see

Calpurnia's family, Atticus is willing to let her go, but does not insist when Aunt Alexandra forbids it simply because it is socially unacceptable (136). Family harmony is more important than impressing upon his children that their Black maid is a full, equal human being.

Racist language, too, is only mildly annoying to Atticus. When he corrects Scout's use of the word "nigger," he simply says that it is "common" (85) to use that word; it is no more offensive to him than when he corrects her use of the word "hell" (95).

The young readers in this group perceived Atticus's ambivalence toward Black people. Katie noted that Atticus "was not even that upset when [Tom] died and when he lost the trial" (Book Group, 3 Nov.). Atticus knew in advance he was fighting a losing battle, but readers, empathizing with Atticus rather than with Tom, are also directed to be disappointed that Atticus couldn't effect justice, rather than devastated that a life was tragically lost.

The humanity of the Black characters is not demonstrated as a fact in this book; it is open to the interpretation of the White characters, all of whom fall short. Scout's developing awareness of the ills of racism is limited, and Atticus is not the "perfect" man readers often accept him to be. When Saleemah said that "in the book he's meant to be" a good example to Scout and Jem, she highlighted the fact that the text directs the reader to admire Atticus. But if young readers admire Atticus's character as being progressive for his time, they must also challenge his views on racial justice.

The continued popularity of this book indicates that readers are satisfied with the example of Atticus's purported virtue as a White man who won't harm an "ignorant Negro" (253). What today's readers need is to understand that Black people are human beings whose dignity exists independently of White people's appraisal.

## Conclusion

Fiction offers the opportunity to develop empathy, but this opportunity is only realized when characters are fully humanized and/or readers can understand characters' emotions and motivations. Educators can take a valuable lesson from Rosenblatt's theory, first published in 1960, the same year as *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "Understanding the transactional nature of reading would correct the tendency of adults to look only at the text and the author's presumed intention, and to ignore as irrelevant what the child actually does make of it" (272). In fact, as shown in this study, what the child makes of the text provides major clues as to the work the text actually does. The young readers in this book group adopted various positions in relation to the text. They all aligned themselves with Atticus in order to adopt the moral stance designated in the text as heroic, which, as we have seen, falls short of full racial equality. At least one reader resisted emotionally engaging with the text at all; and one interpreted the plot in a way that renders obsolete the text's supposed lessons about the evils of racism. Each of these reactions disrupts the common assumption that this book remains useful as children's literature today. It is worth noting that in a conventional classroom, Katie may not have felt comfortable voicing her questions about the text, and therefore would not have had the opportunity to be challenged on her thought process. The book group was established as a safe space where every opinion was worth exploring, whereas in a typical classroom, the teacher's interpretation is paramount and students' success is measured based on their comprehension thereof.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* pushed several generations of White readers to examine racial injustice in American society. It is a moving novel, and there is a place for literature about what racism does to White people. However, if this book is to be used in middle school curricula today, it must not be accepted as supplying, in and of itself, a great example of "the human

dignity that unites us all." Rather, readers must bring to the reading event some knowledge of historical and current realities of Black people's lives and humanity. Such knowledge can be used to show how Atticus's views were progressive for his time and environment but fall short of advocating true equality. Young readers should not be directed to see the text itself as a "timeless" ideal of empathy, and they should interrogate the use of Black characters as props in the growth of White characters. Readers can evaluate their own responses to the text, acknowledging how their affective responses inform their cognitive understandings and how their life experiences with racism inform their interpretations of the text.

Ultimately, given the barriers the text poses to living through and developing empathy for Black characters (and, by extension, Black people), teachers could better harness the power of literature by assigning books that center the dilemmas, choices, feelings and concerns of Black people, either in place of or alongside books such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

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