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Panopticism and the Use of "the Other" in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

"By not being others we define ourselves"

—Elazar Barkan (180)

ONE OF THE CENTRAL THEMES IN HARPER LEE'S *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* is the quest to understand the relationships among people and groups of people. This paper examines the search for identity and the obstacles to it through the framework of the Panopticon and the Other that Michel Foucault sets forth in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. In *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries*, Claudia Durst Johnson explores the "Other" in Lee's novel: the work "invites the conclusion that we reach some sense of self-identity by our encounters with other forces, that is, with forces alien to our commonplace lives. As a result of these encounters, we break the cultural and psychological barriers that imprison us and come to embrace a larger world" (72). The children, still learning the rules of society and their own places in it, find their alien forces in social outcasts and people of other classes. The sense of the Other is apparent in the social development of Scout and Jem, in class, race, and gender prejudices and even in the children's fascination with Arthur "Boo" Radley. Z. D. Gurevitch argues that the awareness of others and their differences from us awakens our realization of our own uniqueness (1180). *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a coming-of-age novel in which Jem and Scout Finch begin to understand themselves. To gain this self-awareness, however, Scout and Jem must first understand the community around them and the Others within it. But Lee's novel might be read not only as a coming-of-age tale but also as an illustration of Foucault's Panopticon as a model for today's society. Such a reading ultimately challenges the concept that the Panopticon is an infallible design of repression from which no one can escape, at least not without severe repercussions.

The Other is that with which one contrasts oneself. Children like Scout and Jem develop their own personalities and find their places in society by copying the behavior of people in similar social positions, by learning social norms associated with particular socioeconomic classes,

and by learning to identify the Other. Scout and Jem learn the behavior society expects of them through the behavior both of those who are of their own class—such as Miss Maudie, Atticus, Uncle Jack, and even Aunt Alexandra—and of those Others, like Tom Robinson, the Cunninghams, Calpurnia, “Boo” Radley, and the Ewells. The interplay among various Others establishes for the children the rules of acceptable behavior and interaction with Others and demonstrates the consequences of not adhering to the guidelines of their own group (or “section” in the Panopticon).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault elaborates Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the Panopticon, applying this design to all aspects of social life. Bentham designed a circular prison comprised of two main structures: a central watchtower encircled by a building “divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows light to cross the cell from one end to the other” (Foucault 200). The prisoners would thus be separated from each other and prevented from communicating among themselves; their movements would be always entirely exposed to the guards (200-01), however. Foucault notes that this design “assures the automatic functioning of power” by arranging for the visibility of the vestiges of power (the inmates can see the watchtower even if not the watchman) and the unverifiability of that power: the inmates are never certain whether they are being watched, only that they *may* be watched (201). Foucault envisions an extension of the Panopticon into the daily lives of ordinary people (205) by which “the vigilance of intersecting gazes” replaces the guard in her watchtower (217). Panopticism, according to Foucault, can be imposed on the basic workings of society to create “a society penetrated through and through with disciplinary mechanisms” (208). While Maycomb is not as totalitarian as Foucault’s society under the Panopticon, the rural Alabama town is nevertheless marked by strict class and race boundaries, and social position mandates proper behavior. The “disciplinary mechanisms” penetrating Maycomb’s society include both the devices of physical torture—lynch mobs and stacked juries for blacks particularly—and of social ostracism for both black and white. Johnson calls the novel “a tale about a variety of boundaries—those of race, region, time, class, sex, tradition, and code” (31).

Through the Panopticon, the Other is identified and separated from the self, and social mores and the perception of constant judgment reinforce stratifications in society. By applying the Panopticon to the whole of society, one might understand each of the cells within the Panopticon to contain a single social group. This arrangement would prevent social groups from mingling with or understanding each other. Such divisions would be maintained by social mores; by the prisoners themselves, who would not encourage intermingling for fear of changing the status quo or of being observed in socially unacceptable behavior; and by the perception that one is always being watched by the other members of one's group and by the other groups. In such an application, the watchtower of Bentham's design would be merely an illusion. In reality, the functioning of the Panopticon within society does not require the presence of an observer, only the perception of that presence. As Foucault writes, "A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation" (202).

From their own experiences with Calpurnia and from the way their neighbors treat black servants and respond to Bob Ewell's accusation of Tom Robinson the Finch children learn that black people are of a different and lower class from themselves—that they are Other. From Atticus, who tells her that the Ewells "were people, but, they lived like animals" (37) and from her first grade teacher, who expresses "sheer horror" at finding lice on Burris Ewell (32), Scout learns that the Ewells are dirty and trashy and are therefore also to be looked down upon. Aunt Alexandra tells Scout that she is not to be friends with Walter Cunningham because "they're not our kind of folks" (236). Similarly, she urges Scout and Jem to remember that they "are not from run-of-the-mill people, that [they] are the product of several generations' gentle-breeding" (143). To understand what makes the other people different from themselves, Jem and Scout try to work out a definition for the "background" that the Others around them lack. In defining this background the children are attempting to figure out what about their own ancestors is distinctive from the ancestors of their neighbors. The children try to define themselves through an understanding of that which they are not, the ways in which they and their family are different.

Jem divides his neighbors into four categories to better understand and explain their behavior and his own. Jem's and Scout's categorization

of themselves helps the reader apply the basis of the Panopticon to the social workings of the children's hometown. Jem and Scout find themselves in a "wing" of the Panopticon with Atticus, Aunt Alexandra, Miss Maudie, Mrs. Dubose, and their other close neighbors. This wing is further divided into subsections by age and gender. Tom Robinson, Calpurnia, Reverend Sykes, Lula, and the rest of the black community compose a second wing, similarly subdivided. A third wing consists of people of the Cunninghams' class, honest and hard-working, but poor and possibly ignorant country folk. The final wing in Jem's division of Maycomb's society is populated by the Ewells—poor white trash. Jem's account of the groups of Maycomb's society does not provide for Boo Radley or Mr. Dolphus Raymond. Both men are outcasts in their society, and both rebel in small ways against their society. Boo and Mr. Dolphus Raymond have both struggled against and left the cells into which they were born only to find themselves in a new cell: that of the outcast; the Other. The two men demonstrate the nature of the Panopticon's reaction against those who reject it—there seems to be no escape from the prison of society. Because he sees the Panopticon, Boo avoids society; in this way he allows society and the Panopticon to influence his behavior. Dolphus Raymond understands that he has committed a grave social sin in leaving his natural place in the Panopticon, and to mitigate his sin, he feigns drunkenness, "to give 'em a reason," because he knows that the people of Maycomb "could never, never understand that I live like I do because that's the way I want to live" (213). Raymond can evade the control of society in one area of his life, but to do so he must conform to the altered expectations of the society. Because Raymond knows that Maycomb could not accept the love of a black woman as his preference, to achieve this end without arousing hostility he affects an inability to rationally rank and pursue preferences. Thus Raymond, like Boo Radley, allows society and the Panopticon some limited control over his behavior.

In this arrangement the members of a group are held in their own wing and subsection by the perception that they are being watched and judged by others and by the fear of becoming an outsider. Members of one group who reach out to members of another group will be pushed out of the system altogether or dealt with harshly within the system. Not only Boo and Dolphus Raymond but also Atticus, Scout, Calpurnia, and Tom Robinson demonstrate this.

The community tolerates Atticus's compassionate treatment of the Cunninghams because the social mores between their two classes are not so prohibitive for men conducting business. When Scout wants to be friends with Walter Cunningham and invite him to dinner, however, Aunt Alexandra immediately interferes. Aunt Alexandra does not protest her brother's professional kindness toward the Cunninghams, but she does not allow her niece's relationship with Walter Cunningham to develop beyond politeness. Scout's attempt to befriend Walter Cunningham is only one of several small ways in which she tries to resist her place in the Panopticon; her attempts to defy the sub-division of "lady" also elicit frequent rebukes and chastisements from Aunt Alexandra, Calpurnia, and Mrs. Dubose.

Atticus reaches out to the black community by actually defending Tom Robinson; for this he must accept the censure of his neighbors, allowing his children to be ridiculed and harassed by their peers and by adults. Mrs. Dubose taunts the children by telling them their father is "no better than the niggers and trash he works for" (110). Miss Stephanie Crawford delights in telling Scout and Jem when Bob Ewell spits in Atticus's face (230). Yet, while his neighbors might disapprove of Atticus's willingness to represent Tom Robinson, few of them are openly hostile towards the Finch family. They realize that while Atticus wants to provide Tom with fair representation, he will not violate the cultural norms against discussing relevant issues of incest and a white woman's sexual desires. Had Atticus questioned Mayella's story more thoroughly in his defense of Tom, he might have faced more repercussions than the public outcry he did experience. Johnson notes Notre Dame law professor Thomas Shaffer's contention that

Atticus's devotion to the truth and gentleness got in the way of his defense of Tom Robinson. Had he been less of a gentleman, his cross-examination of Mayella Ewell may well have been more effective in revealing, for example, the father-daughter incest. Had he been less devoted to the truth, Atticus might have left unsaid or unexplored truths that were guaranteed to enrage the jury against Robinson, such as the sexual nature of Mayella's advances. (26)

Atticus's "devotion to the truth and his gentleness," therefore, according to Shaffer, prevent him from fighting harder to save the life of the innocent Tom Robinson. But this perspective on Atticus's reasons for not challenging Mayella's story or revealing her incestuous relationship with

her father ignores the intense prejudices of the time and place of the novel.

The people of 1930s Maycomb, like those of Scottsboro, Alabama, where occurred the case on which many readers have suggested Lee based her novel, would not have tolerated a challenge to the reputation of a white woman accusing a black man of rape.¹ The attorney in the second Scottsboro trial (both a New Yorker and a Jew) was clearly an Other to the Alabama people, but although Atticus was one of their own, the white society of Maycomb was nonetheless angered by his defense of Tom. Had Atticus defied the basic tenet of white Southern society that demanded the maintenance at all costs of the myth of the purity of Southern womanhood his fellow townspeople would doubtless have turned entirely against him and his client. Thus, it is not so much Atticus's "devotion to the truth and gentleness" that inhibits his defense of Tom as it is his understanding of his own society. Later, when he learns that Boo Radley is responsible for the death of Bob Ewell, Atticus *is* able to set his ethical code aside to spare Boo the publicity that would come with being at the center of an inquiry into the killing. When he sees that a higher good will be served by his actions, Atticus is willing to set aside his ethical code and his love of the truth. Thus it is not for ethical reasons that Atticus does not call Mayella's reputation and sexual desires into question during Tom Robinson's trial, but because he fears that to do so would challenge the cherished misconception of Southern white womanhood and enrage the all-white jury. Atticus knows that angering the jury could cause Tom more harm than good.

As Atticus can set aside his ethical code to spare Boo but cannot ignore the code to free Tom Robinson, so Calpurnia can circumvent certain rules governing interactions between the races for the sake of the

¹Charles J. Shields acknowledges that many readers have assumed that Tom Robinson's case was based on that of the "Scottsboro boys," but he cites a letter Lee wrote in 1999 rejecting this suggestion. Shields argues persuasively that Lee's novel more closely reflected the less infamous 1933 case of Walter Lett, a black man accused of raping a white woman (118). The Lett case would have hit close to home for Lee as it was tried in Monroeville, Alabama. Lett was convicted and sentenced to death. He went insane before Alabama Governor Miller commuted his sentence to life in prison in 1934 (120). While Lee's primary influence may not have been the Scottsboro case, she did write of the case in a 1999 letter to Hazel Rowley: "it will more than do as an example (albeit a lurid one) of deep-South attitudes on race vs. justice that prevailed at the time" (Shields 118).

white children she has raised but cannot bypass these rules for any lesser cause. Lula, a member of Calpurnia's church, sharply criticizes Calpurnia for ignoring caste boundaries by bringing white children to her black church and by referring to them as her "comp'ny" (129). But in bringing to her church the two children to whom she is all but a mother, Calpurnia defies the boundaries of her section within the Panopticon even as she refuses to violate other norms such as language: on their visit to the black church Scout and Jem notice that Calpurnia "was talking like the rest of them" (129). When they ask Calpurnia why she speaks differently at church than she does with them she explains that if she spoke at church and at home the way she speaks at the Finches' her neighbors "would think I was puttin' on airs to beat Moses" (136). Calpurnia knows that her neighbors would resent and reject a black woman who spoke "white-folks' talk" (136). She knows exactly which social norms of her class she can cross and which she must respect.

In contrast to the breaches of social ethics discussed thus far, Tom Robinson's challenge to the Panopticon is ultimately dangerous. Tom, convicted of rape, locked in the (de facto) segregated Maycomb jail, and killed by prison guards for his attempt to escape, is the only character who manages to overcome entirely the boundaries and restrictions of the Panopticon. Tom's claim that he felt sorry for Mayella elicited the contempt and rage of the white prosecutor and jurors and his assertion that Mayella instigated the intercourse between the two challenged the most cherished beliefs of the white population of Maycomb. In feeling pity for Mayella Ewell, a white woman (though the daughter of an abusive and alcoholic father), Tom abandons the social mores that dictate that by virtue of her race Mayella should never be an object of pity by a black man. By these rules, Mayella's race should have made Tom see her social position as superior to his own. By admitting that he does not, Tom challenges the idea of racial superiority that the prosecutor and jurors hold dear.

Tom treats Mayella with both kindness and respect but his sympathy for her enables her to coerce him into a compromising situation while the color of her skin allows her to make him a scapegoat for her own sexual transgressions. Tom's pity and the racial hierarchy of the 1930s South enable Mayella to scapegoat Tom with impunity. Mayella cannot safely admit the nature, or even existence, of her attraction to Tom. And the society in which the two live will not acknowledge the possibility of

a black man's pity for the plight of a poor, lonely, abused white woman any more than it will acknowledge the possibility that a white woman might actually seek out a black man to satisfy her sexual or emotional needs. Acquitting Tom would undermine the myth of the purity of Southern white womanhood and the idea that the (light) color of a person's skin makes her an object of envy in the eyes of another person.

Because by admitting the pity he felt for Mayella Tom has presented such a strong challenge to their position in society, the white jury feels compelled to convict Tom even though the evidence does not support his guilt. To preserve a social structure that places whites in a position where they are, if not on top, at least not on the bottom of society, the jury composed solely of white males must convict Tom—not because he is guilty of rape but because he is guilty of breaking free of the Panopticon and others may follow his example if he is not harshly punished.

Atticus, Scout, Calpurnia, and Tom Robinson all challenge the status quo and the rules that divide classes, and consequently they all face the criticism of their peers and friends. Lula, Aunt Alexandra, Mrs. Dubose, Miss Stephanie Crawford, the ladies' Missionary Society, and the mob that attempts to lynch Tom Robinson represent the social watchdogs who reinforce those restrictions by identifying and censuring those who violate the social system that, for all its abuses, is valuable to them. Mrs. Dubose may merely be a cross old woman, Miss Crawford may only be a busybody, and Lula is justifiably outraged at the prejudice and discrimination her race faces at the hands of its white oppressors, but all of these women are strict enforcers of the Panopticon in which they live. Mrs. Dubose is appalled that an upper class white man like Atticus would be willing to defend a black man on a rape charge even if that black man is innocent. Miss Crawford delights in spreading gossip of any violation of the social mores. Lula is outraged at the idea of the black church's sanctity being invaded and jeopardized by white children, and Aunt Alexandra is inflexible in her insistence that Scout and Jem act according to their class and social position. The ladies of the Missionary Society meeting at the Finch home claim to believe that Eleanor Roosevelt has "lost her mind—just plain lost her mind coming down to Birmingham and tryin' to sit with 'em" (247) and, in his own home, they disparage Atticus's decision to defend a black man against trumped-up charges; they call him "good, but misguided" (245). The lynch mob tries

to kill Tom to send a message to other black men (or women) who might try to change the social order that sets whites above and out of reach of blacks. These defenders of the Panopticon all recognize the social structure in which they live and they all do their part, whether intentionally or not, to perpetuate that structure.

Although Aunt Alexandra's beliefs differ from those of her brother, she is bound by family ties, which convention tells her are supreme. While many of the same mores, or Panopticon divisions, that confine the other ladies of the Missionary Society also confine Aunt Alexandra, her respect for her brother Atticus also binds her. This respect for Atticus allows her to share a bond with Miss Maudie during the Missionary Society social hour even though the two women are ordinarily separated by their different beliefs on issues of propriety. The "look of pure gratitude" that her aunt gives Miss Maudie to thank her for standing up to the ladies of the Society when they criticize Atticus for defending Tom and thereby encouraging the town's black population to resist white domination confuses Scout (246). Aunt Alexandra respects her brother and Miss Maudie and she recognizes their goodness, but she cannot understand them or her niece and nephew.

The sense of the Other is apparent and relevant also in the children's fascination with Boo Radley. Boo—because he is so different from the children and their neighbors and because nothing they know of can explain his behavior—is fascinating to Jem and Scout. Z. D. Gurevitch explains that the Other "serves to demarcate, by his or her very strangeness, the boundaries of the familiar and (in that sense) of the real" (1180). The children want desperately to understand Boo and his reasons for staying inside long past his father's death. Through Boo and the contrast between his behavior and their own, the children learn to define themselves in contrast to his Otherness. Although Boo does leave his home occasionally, he does so only with the utmost secrecy. The children see Boo's isolation and, in the wake of Tom Robinson's trial and sentencing, begin to understand why Boo remains isolated from society. Jem realizes that Boo does not want to be associated with people and their misunderstandings, their social norms and rules, and their prejudices (240). At the trial's end Jem contemplates Boo's rejection of society and decides that such rejection is not for him. Jem understands Boo's behavior, but he also realizes that Boo is the Other to himself and his community. Through Boo and Dolphus Raymond, the children learn

that there is an alternative to their particular cells in the Panopticon, but that alternative comes at the price of social ostracization and is not available to everyone.

Jem understands that, as Scout puts it, "there's just one kind of folks," but he also understands that people set themselves apart for reasons that he recognizes to be petty and artificial (240). Jem does not want to be part of a society of people who, as he tells Scout, "go out of their way to despise each other" (240) but he seems, from Scout's reference in the novel's first pages to a recent conversation with the adult Jem (9), to remain in this society, perhaps because he does not want to be as isolated as Boo or Dolphus Raymond. Through Boo and their quest to understand him and why he stays shut up inside, the children come to understand more of their own society, the society that created Boo by ignoring the abuse to which his father subjected him.

Scout and Jem also see the farce Dolphus Raymond stages for the people of Maycomb and the ways he is cut off from much of society. Scout is intrigued by the idea that Raymond pretends to be drunk so that his decision to live in the black community instead of with those of his own race and class will not offend or confuse the white people of Maycomb, but she begins to comprehend that so long as the white community believes that he is an alcoholic troubled by the memory of his lost (white) fiancée, it will tolerate his living with the black family he loves. Scout observes further that the ability to separate one's self from society in the ways that Raymond and Boo do is restricted to certain people. At Tom Robinson's trial, Scout realizes that the option of changing one's status in society (or in the Panopticon) is not available to poor whites like Mayella Ewell and blacks like Robinson. Scout may also begin to understand—from what she sees of the way her neighbors and family react to Boo and Raymond—that to change one's place in the Panopticon is to appear less than sane and rational.

As Scout comes to understand that Mayella Ewell cannot cut herself off from society in the ways that Boo and Raymond have, she (like Robinson) comes to pity Mayella. Scout realizes how lonely Mayella's life is and that, unlike Raymond, Mayella does not have the resources for the sort of social mobility that is open to wealthier whites. Scout observes of Mayella, "She couldn't live like Mr. Dolphus Raymond, who preferred the company of Negroes, because she didn't own a riverbank and she wasn't from a fine old family. Nobody said, 'That's just their

way' about the Ewells" (204). Despite her young age, Scout is able to see that the boundaries of one's behavior are determined by one's class and resources.

The children long to understand Boo and the reasons for his seclusion because they recognize in him and his story something exciting, mysterious, romantic, even strange; they see in him the Other—that against which they are defined and that which they could become. They long to understand what social forces created Boo, and in discerning those forces the Finch children come to better understand their own society and to recognize in it the forces and mores that pushed Boo into isolation. In the opening passages of the novel, Scout relates a debate between herself and Jem over where this story began. According to Scout, Jem believes the events of the novel began when Dill came in to their lives and incited their curiosity about Boo. Scout counters that the story could just as easily have begun when their ancestors chose to settle in Maycomb (9). Both are correct. Maycomb is essential to the development of events in the story because of its position as a small and isolated town in southern Alabama. Situated in the heart of the segregation-era South, Maycomb is a prime location for the unfolding of the stories of Tom Robinson, Boo Radley, and Dolphus Raymond. In rebelling against the society of Maycomb all three men, like the children, are shaped by that society, its mores and prejudices. Jem is correct in his assessment that Dill's fascination with Boo set the story in motion as it was through their eventual understanding of him that the children reached a higher level of emotional maturity and a deeper understanding of their society and their places in that society. In Jem's view, Boo serves as the catalyst for understanding and challenging the Panopticon. Through Boo, Scout and Jem are able to see flaws in society that run deeper than the simple problems they face as children, social ills that allow a community to witness passively and thus allow the abuse that Boo faced and that Mayella still faces, that allow a society to, in effect, kill Tom Robinson or any other innocent man to protect their own prejudices. Through Boo they also see the redeeming qualities of their society more clearly. They see the compassion of the neighbors who treat Boo not as a novelty but as a man and a neighbor. They witness both their father's brave defense of a man he knows will be convicted and Mr. Underwood's willingness to put aside his own racial prejudices and watch over Atticus the night that Atticus stands between

Tom and a lynch mob in the interest of fair play. Through Boo, Scout and Jem come to understand that all people are essentially alike—as Scout explains to her brother: “Naw, Jem, I think there’s just one kind of folks. Folks” (240).

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