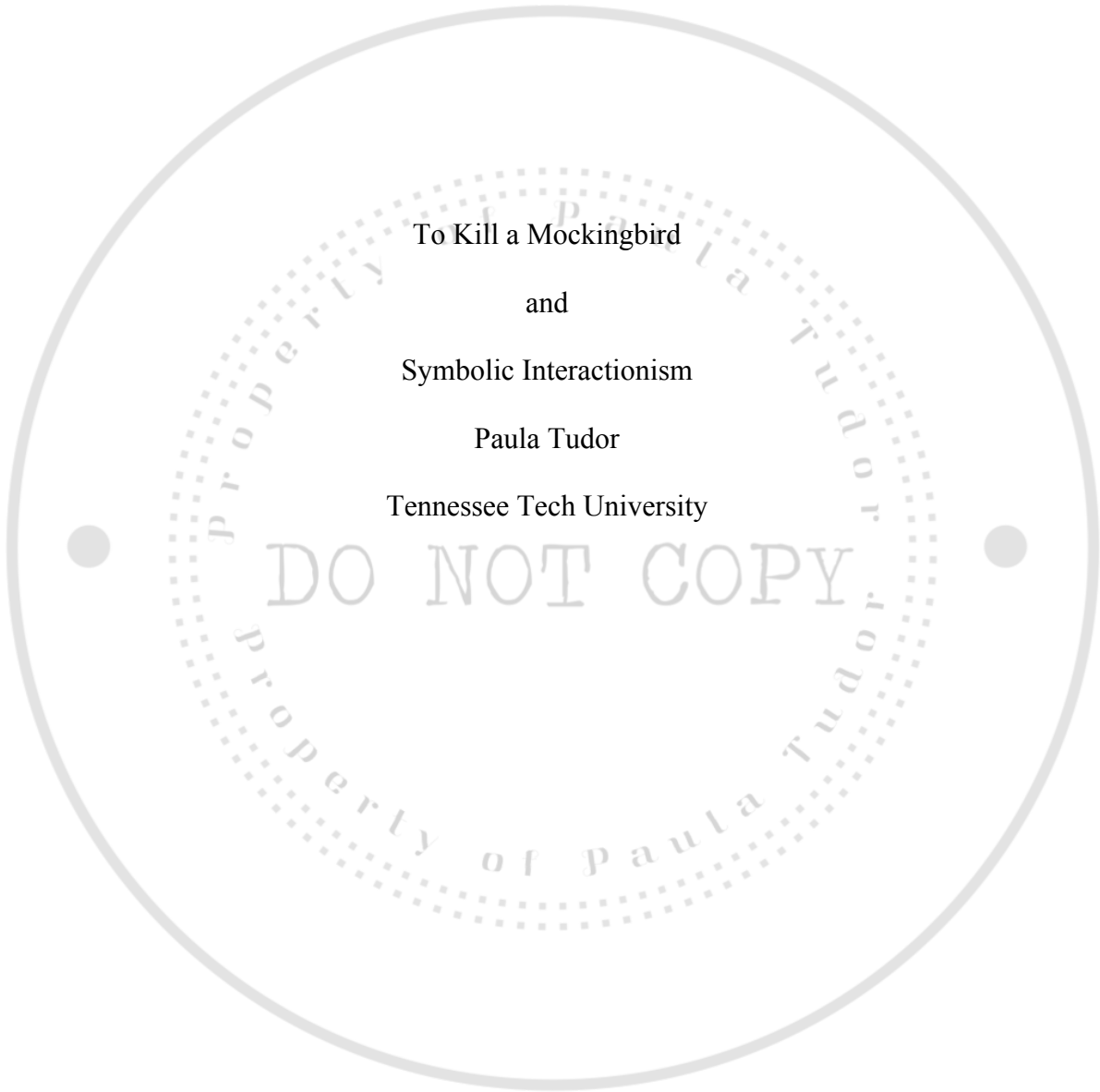


Running head: MOCKINGBIRD



Most people are familiar with Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird and most are familiar with the film based on the now legendary novel. To some, this story is about racial relations in the Deep South; but from a sociological standpoint and from a symbolic interactionist perspective in particular, it is a story about society and its treatment of anything perceived as being different (Kendall, 2010)(Pakula & Mulligan, 1962).

Although the film never makes it clear, one could assume that Arthur "Boo" Radley is someone who suffers from some sort of disability. The general consensus was that he had tried to kill his father with a pair of scissors and that there had been talk of sending him to an institution, but his father would now allow it because of the stigma attached to it. From a symbolic interactionist perspective Boo is someone who had been cast out by society because of his differences. No one understood him or even tried to understand him because through his disability he had been labeled as a deviant. Society had determined that he was violent and not to be trusted. Therefore Boo became an outcast and someone who was essentially a prisoner in his own home (Kendall, 2010)(Pakula & Mulligan, 1962).

Mayella Ewell is perceived as another type of villain in *Mockingbird*, in that she is ultimately responsible for Tom Robinson's imprisonment and eventual death. However, social bond theory, under the symbolic interactionist perspective explains that she is simply a product of her environment. According to this theory "deviant behavior increases when a person's ties to society are weakened or broken." (Kendall, 2010, p. 188) Mayella's overall behavior could certainly be classified as deviant, beginning with her planned seduction of Tom. Furthermore, since the film implies that Mayella was sexually abused by her father, her act of delinquency could be perceived as learned behavior. Her social bonds were weak because her father kept her

in a perpetual state of oppression, making it easier for her to be influenced by him. This influence is also what ultimately made it impossible for her to tell the truth in court (Kendall, 2010)(Pakula & Mulligan, 1962).

The theme of racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird* can also be looked at from a symbolic interactionist perspective. As the film depicts, blacks and whites did not have equal rights during the time that Tom Robinson was being accused of rape, therefore racist attitudes were allowed to persist. Tom's case went to trial based on the fact that it was easy for most to believe he was guilty. He had been stereotyped because of the color of his skin. There was no evidence to support the idea that he raped Mayella, only her word and her father's word. And despite the fact that Atticus rather convincingly discredited their testimony in court, the jury still found Tom guilty. From a symbolic interactionist perspective this is an example of the tendency for people to ignore any information that goes against their stereotypical beliefs. This is in contrast to the way Atticus raised Scout and Jem. In their childhood innocence it was often easy for them to believe the worst about people based on the long-held stereotypical beliefs of the town. They believed the worst about Boo and spent nearly every day of their childhood either running away from his house scared, or running to it as part of some dare. They received countless negative feedback for this behavior, both from Atticus and from the immediate consequences that ensued. It was not until they were exposed to the Tom Robinson case, and began seeing items inside Boo's tree that their attitudes changed. They no longer ran scared from Boo's house or from the elderly woman down the street. According to the symbolic interactionist perspective Scout and Jem's exposure to different groups is what ultimately changed their way of thinking. In fact one could look at the gifts left inside Boo's tree as positive feedback for them having learned

something about discrimination and its effect on people (Kendall, 2010)(Pakula & Mulligan, 1962).

Sociologist Georg Simmel “believed that the social interpretations people give to money often produce individual feelings of cynicism and isolation.” (Kendall, 2010, p. 68) This belief, based on the symbolic interactionist perspective, explains much of the interactions that occurred between Scout and the Cunninghams. When the film begins, Scout is too young, and perhaps too sheltered to understand the way money is perceived by society. She does not understand the reluctance of Walter Cunningham, Sr. to see Atticus in person when he comes to their house to pay for legal services with produce; nor does she understand what makes a person poor or how it affects one’s self-perception. This is proven when she fights Walter Cunningham, Jr. on the playground after she points out his tendency to refuse handouts and gets in trouble for it. Then it is proven again when she embarrasses him in front of her family after he pours syrup all over his food. Scout’s interactions with the Cunninghams also reflect the differences in their social classes. She clearly does not understand when she is breaking certain rules of social conduct because she cannot detect the differences that exist between classes. However these differences are certainly clear to everyone else, as evidenced by the Cunninghams’ behavior and by the reactions Scout receives for her behavior (Kendall, 2010)(Pakula & Mulligan, 1962).

Class differences are also reflected in the courtroom scenes during Tom Robinson’s trial. The courtroom is racially segregated, with the black people sitting in the balcony and the white people sitting in chairs on the floor. These differences become even more pronounced when Tom Robinson tells the courtroom that he felt sorry for Mayella. The reactions he receives from

breaking this rule of social conduct reflect that he has crossed a boundary placed on him by society. This also further explains why it would have been impossible for Mayella to tell the truth in court. She too had crossed a boundary as a white woman who tried to seduce a black man. Admitting that would have meant being exposed for breaking a societal rule (Kendall, 2010)(Pakula & Mulligan, 1962).

From the perspective of frame analysis one might conclude that the reason it was so easy for people to believe Tom was guilty of raping Mayella in the first place was because of how her interaction with him was framed. Mayella's father saw her with him, and according to Tom, knew what was taking place but decided to tell everyone that Mayella had been raped. Assuming that this framing of the situation played a part in Tom's perceived guilt, Mayella's father essentially started a small-scale social movement with his accusations. He began a process of frame alignment in which he convinced people to join his "movement" by appealing to preconceived notions about black men. One could argue that because of these preconceived notions it was not difficult for Mayella's father to convince people that Tom was guilty, regardless of his own reputation and complete lack of evidence. Framing explains how Mayella's father was able to motivate the townspeople into showing up outside Tom's jail cell with weapons. It also explains why, despite convincing arguments from Atticus, Tom was found guilty, and may even explain Tom's death (Kendall, 2010)(Pakula & Mulligan, 1962).

The sociological issues present in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are clearly defined. Based on the symbolic interactionist perspective this film examines the social interactions in one small town and uses them to explain society at large. It illustrates how people are bound by society's rules and expectations and the inherent consequences for going against them. The character of

Scout allows viewers' to see society and its issues from a fresh perspective, while Atticus redefines the social interactions encountered in everyday life. Through this character viewers can easily see how situations can be misinterpreted because of alternate, and sometimes faulty perspectives (Kendall, 2010)(Pakula & Mulligan, 1962).



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