



## Scout's Visions of Sin; or, Why It Might Be Okay to Kill a Mockingbird after All

Simon Stow

College of William and Mary

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Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.

– Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

The aphorism that gives Harper Lee's most famous novel its title seems problematic on two counts. From a literary perspective, it encourages unproductive speculation about which character is the mockingbird. From an ornithological one, Atticus's preference for mockingbirds over bluejays seems somewhat arbitrary: both are aggressive pests known to attack humans. While many find the mockingbird's song pleasurable, others are irritated by its nocturnal warbling. Thus, while regionally appropriate, Atticus's idealizing of the gray over the blue seems a little puzzling. Extant criticism on the aphorism has focused on the mockingbird; here I focus on the sin. I seek not to wade into a thicket of theological speculation (Shaffer), simply to contextualize Atticus's assertion within the context of the language of sin as it appears in the novel. Arguing that such language reveals much about those who utilize it, I suggest that Atticus's use of the word "sin" groups him with other characters for whom the term is a mask for prejudice understood as a "preconceived opinion not based on reason or actual experience" ("prejudice"). The reading calls into question Atticus's alleged moral rectitude (Johnson), offering further evidence for those who would see Finch as ethically compromised (Gladwell).

The word "sin" appears fourteen times in the novel. It is ascribed, in thought or speech, to seven characters: Miss Maudie, Scout, Atticus, Reverend Sykes, Mrs. Merriweather, Mr. Underwood, and Heck Tate. With one exception, each use is presented in a less than straightforward manner. Indeed, the word is often employed by the narrator and/or the author to indicate a character's hypocrisy. Observes Miss Maudie of a sect of fervid Baptists: "Foot-washers believe that anything that's a pleasure is a sin. Did you know some of 'em came out of the woods one Saturday and passed by this place and told me me and my flowers were going to hell?" (59). Further asserting, "foot-washers

think that women are a sin by definition. They take the Bible literally” (60). Scout makes clear that she does not share these views, declaring: “You’re the best lady I know” (60). The language of sin, it is suggested, can be a mask for prejudice, and that those who employ it cannot necessarily be trusted. Among the latter would appear to be Reverend Sykes and his professional brethren. Scout observes of Sykes: “His sermon was a forthright denunciation of sin.” “Again,” she continues, “as I had often met in my own church, I was confronted with the Impurity of Women doctrine that seemed to preoccupy all clergymen” (138). Her wry depiction of religious intolerance couched in the language of sin is echoed by her far more critical depiction of Mrs. Merriweather’s views about the recipients/victims of J. Everett Grimes’s missionary work. “Out there in J. Grimes Everett’s land,” she twice tells Scout, “there’s nothing but sin and squalor” (265). Similarly, her—wholly justified—attack on white Northerners’ professed commitment to black equality not only highlights their use of principle to obscure prejudice, it also reveals her culpability for the same. “At least we don’t have that sin on our shoulders down here,” she declares (268).

“Sin” is also problematized in non-religious contexts. Following the snow, Mr. Avery tells the children: “It’s bad children like you that make the seasons change.” Observes Scout, “if this was our reward, then there was something to say for sin” (74). Her irony, executed with the dry humor of the adult narrator laid over the naivety of her younger self, is further evidence that assertions of sin cannot always be taken at face value. Likewise, watching Dolphus Raymond comfort Dill, Scout declares, “I had a feeling that I shouldn’t be here listening to this sinful man who had mixed children and didn’t care who knew it” (229). Raymond, nevertheless, reveals himself to be a considerate man who pretends to be drunk so that others might accommodate themselves to his lifestyle. While more recent critics might be concerned about whether the mother of Raymond’s mixed-race children could have given meaningful consent to his sexual advances (Stow), the language of sin is once again employed in a less than straightforward manner.

The novel’s perpetually slanted presentation of sin is also evident when the word is employed straight by otherwise compromised characters. “Mr. Underwood,” observes Scout of the newspaper editor’s essay following Tom Robinson’s death, “didn’t talk about miscarriages of justice, he was writing so children could understand. Mr. Underwood simply figured it was a sin to kill cripples, be they standing, sitting, or escaping. He likened Tom’s death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children, and Maycomb thought he was trying to write an editorial poetical enough to be reprinted in *The Montgomery Advertiser*” (276). Underwood is, however, a man who “despises Negroes, won’t have one near him” (178). Nevertheless, far from being a mask for prejudice, here the language of sin is underpinned by

evidence of moral reasoning. In invoking a version of the book's titular aphorism, Underwood does not assert that killing a songbird is, in and of itself, a sin, only when that killing is "senseless." This suggests the possibility of circumstances under which such a killing might be considered acceptable.

Heck Tate's use of the language of sin is also complicated by his personal failings. Prior to employing it, Tate asserts that he "is not a very good man" (317). Then, attempting to protect Boo Radley by convincing Atticus to say that Bob Ewell fell on his own knife, Tate declares: "Mr. Finch, taking the one man who's done you and this town a great service an' draggin' him with his shy ways into the limelight—to me, that's a sin. It's a sin and I'm not about to have it on my head. If it was any other man it'd be different. But not this man, Mr. Finch" (318). The complexity here is twofold. First, Tate juxtaposes two sins—lying and hurting the innocent—and suggests that the latter is worse than the former. Second, the novel juxtaposes two figures—Finch and Tate—one who is seen as a paragon of virtue and another who declares himself to be flawed, and ascribes a more obvious capacity for moral reasoning to the latter. Predicating his use of "sin" on a form of consequentialism—the impact that acting otherwise would have on Boo—Tate is, in a significant moment of moral confusion, capable of doing self-consciously—employing the language of sin—what Atticus can only do unselfconsciously in an entirely trivial context: the killing of mockingbirds. Thus, Tate's use of "sin" is predicated upon clear moral reasoning, even as he—like Underwood—is understood to be ethically ambiguous.

The language of sin is offered 'straight' on only one occasion, when Miss Maudie observes: "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (103). Like Tate and Underwood, her use of "sin" is underpinned by moral reasoning; unlike Tate and Underwood, she does not appear to be ethically compromised. Nevertheless, when juxtaposed with Atticus's formulation of the aphorism, Maudie's use of the language of sin is just as revealing as other characters' use the same. Indeed, it further suggests that Atticus is among those who employ such language as a mask for prejudice.

Atticus offers his famous-yet-puzzling homily shortly after giving his children air rifles. "I'd rather you shot at tin cans in the back yard but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (103). This, Scout observes, was "the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something" (103). The remark and its uniqueness raise a number of questions about why Atticus felt so strongly about mockingbirds; why he was prepared to use such unequivocally moralizing language to support an entirely unexplained preference; and why in this one instance and in no other. Possibly recognizing the

problems that these questions pose for Atticus as a moral actor, Horton Foote's 1962 movie screenplay has the lawyer attribute the maxim to his father, suggesting a piece family lore whose origins are lost in time. Lest this prove inadequate, which it surely does, the screenplay further ascribes to Atticus Miss Maudie's justification for the aphorism, highlighting his lack of moral reasoning in the novel (33). That Atticus does not—to Scout's knowledge—use the language of sin in any other area of his life suggests that, in employing this language, he is trying to prop up a prejudice by disguising it as a moral principle. Indeed, his aphorism demands that his children bend to his preference without explanation, precisely that for which he chastises his brother at Finch's Landing (99).

That Atticus employs the language of sin as a mask for prejudice does not make him morally worthless. It does suggest, however, that the novel repays closer attention to its allegedly clear-cut depictions of good and evil than has often been suggested (Bloom). This claim is not without precedent. Indeed, recent criticism—much, but not all, focused on Atticus—has highlighted the morally and/or politically problematic aspects of the novel (Goodwin, Nichols). The argument here suggests that far from exposing the text for its flaws, such criticism might reveal something of which the novel is itself already acutely aware.

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