Ignorance Can Harm the Innocent

“People hurt the ones they love. That’s how it is all around the world,” In *The Green Mile* John Coffey said these as his last words after walking his own green mile. John was wrongfully given the death sentence for a crime he took no part in. Unfortunately, innocence as John’s being over looked happens all around. It happens to a number of characters in Harper Lee’s piece of historical fiction, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This occurs as two children come of age while their father tries to free an innocent black man accused of raping a white woman. Lee uses her characters of Tom and Boo to share her message. She also does it using the archetype of initiation. Harper Lee wants readers to see that ignoring innocence being punished is to allow it to occur.

As compelling evidence, Lee uses Tom and his case as a “mockingbird” to get her point across. Tom, a black man accused of raping a white female, is clearly innocent in his court case and is only being distrusted simply because he is black. Lee has the jury ignore Tom’s blamelessness because of their racist views so that he is convicted, punishing him for nothing. One would argue that he is convicted because people believed he was guilty however, in Atticus’s closing argument he says, “The state has not produced one iota of medical evidence to the effect that the crime Tom Robinson is charged with ever took place” (Lee 271). Lee makes Atticus point out the lack of physical evidence in the case so that the reader can infer that Tom, “is not guilty, but someone in the courtroom is” (Lee 271). Consequently, Tom is unfairly convicted because of everyone involved, turning the other cheek and allowing the injustice to happen.

Lee creates another character in the meantime, Boo Radley, to prove that ignorance can harm the innocent. Boo, one of Maycomb’s residents, had committed a small crime in his youth and then was locked away for years; a punishment far too much for the delinquency. “The doors of the Radley house were closed on weekdays as well as Sundays,” Lee describes, “and Mr. Radley’s boy was not seen again for fifteen years” (13). Furthermore, another resident of Maycomb, Miss Stephanie, tells a lie of Boo stabbing his father. She says, “Mr. Radley passed by, Boo drove scissors into his parents leg, “She even gets a bit graphic saying he “pulled them out, wiped them on his pants, and resumed his activities” (13). Boo’s unfair imprisonment to his home is rationalized by his neighbors with stories. The neighbors’ rationalization was in part to do with their actual ignorance, and in part to do with easing their guilt of not stepping up to help Boo. Boo was serving too much for his wrongdoing though his town ignored the injustice, allowing it to continue.

Along with these characters, Lee uses an initiation in her bildungsroman to help prove noticing innocence can prevent unfair punishment. Jem, the brother of Lee’s protagonist, was asked to remove his sister, friend, and himself from an adult fight. Jem realizes the men intend to hurt his father and “was not thinking of budging” (203). Jem goes through a stage of comprehension so that Atticus being harmed for doing nothing wrong does not go unnoticed, therefore not allowed to happen. Lee also uses the initiation archetype when Scout, the protagonist, is trying to torture a roly-poly. “Because,” Jem answers when asked why Scout shouldn’t kill the roly-poly “they don’t bother you” (320). Jem figures out that punishing something for no crime is immoral and that he can’t allow it to happen. Jem’s initiation helps the reader see what will happen if Lee’s message is put into action.

Punishment for those who’ve done nothing wrong goes on because it is overlooked. Harper Lee uses the troubles Tom and Boo face, along with Jem’s initiation to bring this to the reader’s attention. Not turning ones back to injustice could save a person’s life. Even if the injustice is as small as standing up for a person being picked on, someone needs to notice. If justice had been done for John, maybe he would have been around to help the lives of more people.