"In Defense of To Kill a Mockingbird" by Jill May

When Harper Lee first introduces Scout in To Kill a Mockingbird, she is almost six years old. By the end of the book Scout is in the third grade. Throughout the book events are described by the adult Scout who looks back upon life in the constricted society of a small southern town. Since it is the grown-up Scout's story, the young Scout Finch becomes a memory more than a reality. The book is not a vivid recollection of youth gone by so much as a recounting of days gone by. Yet, Scout Finch's presence as the events' main observer establishes two codes of honor, that of the child and of the adult. The code of adult behavior shows the frailty of adult sympathy for humanity and emphasizes its subsequent effect upon overt societal attitudes. Throughout the book Scout sees adults accepting society's rules rather than confronting them. When Scout finds school troublesome, Atticus tells Scout that they will continue reading together at night, then adds, "you'd better not say anything at school about our agreement." He explains away the Maycomb Ku Klux Klan, saying, "it was a political organization more than anything. Besides, they couldn't find anybody to scare." And when he discusses the case of a black man's word against a white man's with his brother, Atticus says, "The jury couldn't possibly be expected to take Tom Robinson's word against the Ewells' ... Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don't pretend to understand." The author tells us that Atticus knew Scout was
listening in on this conversation and purposely explained that he had been court
appointed, adding, "I'd hoped to get through life without a case of this kind...." And
when the jury does see fit to try and condemn Tom Robinson, Scout's older brother
Jem and good friend Dill see the white southern world for what it is: a world of
hypocrisy, a world burdened with old racist attitudes which have nothing to do with
humanity. Jem says, "I always thought Maycomb folks were the best folks in the
world, least that's what they seemed like." Dill decides he will be a new kind of clown:
"I'm gonna stand in the middle of the ring and laugh at the folks.... Every one of 'em
oughta be ridin' broomsticks."

The majority of white adults in Maycomb are content to keep blacks, women
and children in their place. Atticus's only sister comes to live with the family and
constantly tells Scout she must learn how to act, that she has a place in society:
womanhood with its stifling position of prim behavior and wagging tongues is the
essence of southern decorum. Even Atticus, the liberal minded hero, says that
perhaps it's best to keep women off the juries of Alabama because, "I doubt if we'd
ever get a complete case tried—the ladies'd be interrupting to ask questions." By the
end of the book Scout has accepted the rules of southern society. The once hated
aunt who insisted upon Scout's transformation into a proper young lady becomes an
idol for her ability to maintain proper deportment during a crisis. Scout follows suit,
reasoning "if Aunty could be a lady at a time like this, so could I."
The courtroom trial is a real example of Southern justice and Southern local color storytelling. Merrill Skaggs has analyzed the local color folklore of southern trials in his book *The Folk of Southern Fiction*. Skaggs comments that there is a formula for court hearings, and he suggests that local color stories show that justice in the courtroom is, in fact, less fair than justice in the streets. He discusses justice in terms of the black defendant, saying, "Implicit in these stories ... is an admission that Negroes are not usually granted equal treatment before the law, that a Negro is acquitted only when he has a white champion." During the trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird* Tom Robinson says he ran because he feared southern justice. He ran, he says, because he was "scared I'd hafta face up to what I didn't do." Dill is one of Lee's young protagonists. He is angered by the southern court system. The neglected son of an itinerant mother, Dill is a stereotype of southern misfits. Lee doesn't concentrate upon Dill's background; she concentrates upon his humanity. The courtroom scene is more than local humor to him. It is appalling. When he flees the trial, Scout follows. She cannot understand why Dill is upset, but the notorious rich "drunk" with "mixed children" can. He sees Dill and says, "it just makes you sick, doesn't it?" No one, save Jem and his youthful converts, expects Atticus to win. The black minister who has befriended the children warns, "I ain't ever seen any jury decide in favor of a colored man over a white man." In the end Atticus says, "They've done it before and they did it tonight and they'll do it again and when they do it—seems that only children weep." And Miss Maudie tells the children, "as I waited I
thought, Atticus Finch won't win, he can't win, but he's the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that." Then she adds, "we're making a step—it's just a baby-step, but it's a step."

In his book, Skaggs points out that obtaining justice through the law is not as important as the courtroom play in southern trials and that because the courtroom drama seldom brings real justice, people condone "violence within the community." Atticus realizes that "justice" is often resolved outside of the court, and so he is not surprised when the sheriff and the town leaders arrive at his house one night. The men warn Atticus that something might happen to Tom Robinson if he is left in the local jail; the sheriff suggests that he can't be responsible for any violence which might occur. One of the men says, "—don't see why you touched it [the case] in the first place.... You've got everything to lose from this, Atticus. I mean everything."

Because Atticus wants courtroom justice to resolve this conflict, he tries to protect his client. On the night before the trial Atticus moves to the front of the jail, armed only with his newspaper. While there, the local lynching society arrives, ready to take justice into its own hands. Scout, Jem, and Dill have been watching in their own dark corner, but the crowd bothers Scout and so she bursts from her hiding spot. As she runs by, Scout smells "stale whiskey and pigpen," and she realizes that these are not the same men who came to the house earlier. It is Scout's innocence, her misinterpretation of the seriousness of the scene, her ability to recognize one of the
farmers and to talk with guileless ease to that man about his own son which saves Tom Robinson from being lynched. The next morning Jem suggests that the men would have killed Atticus if Scout hadn't come along. Atticus who is more familiar with adult southern violence, says "might have hurt me a little, but son, you'll understand folks a little better when you're older. A mob's always made up of people, no matter what.... Every little mob in every little southern town is always made up of people you know—doesn't say much for them does it?" Lynching is a part of regional lore in the South. In his study of discrimination, Wallace Mendelson pointed out that the frequency of lynchings as settlement for black/white problems is less potent than the terrorizing aspect of hearing about them. In this case, the terrorizing aspect of mob rule had been viewed by the children. Its impact would remain.

After the trial Bob Ewell is subjected to a new kind of Southern justice, a polite justice. Atticus explains, "He thought he'd be a hero, but all he got for his pain was ... was, okay, we'll convict this Negro but get back to your dump." Ewell spits on Atticus, cuts a hole in the judge's screen, and harasses Tom's wife. Atticus ignores his insults and figures, "He'll settle down when the weather changes." Scout and Jem never doubt that Ewell is serious, and they are afraid. Their early childhood experiences with the violence and hypocrisy in southern white society have taught them not to trust Atticus's reasoning but they resolve to hide their fear from the adults around them. When Ewell does strike for revenge, he strikes at children. The
sheriff understands this kind of violence. It is similar to lynching violence. It strikes
at a minority who cannot strike back, and it creates a terror in lawabiding citizens
more potent than courtroom justice. It shows that southern honor has been
consistently dealt with outside of the courtroom.

Harper Lee's book concerns the behavior of Southerners in their claim for "honor,"
and Boo Radley's presence in the story reinforces that claim. When Boo was young
and got into trouble, his father claimed the right to protect his family name. He took
his son home and kept him at the house. When Boo attacked him, Mr. Radley again
asked for family privilege; Boo was returned to his home, this time never to surface
on the porch or in the yard during the daylight hours. The children are fascinated
with the Boo Radley legend. They act it out, and they work hard to make Boo come
out. And always, they wonder what keeps him inside. After the trial, however, Jem
says, "I think I'm beginning to understand something. I think I'm beginning to
understand why Boo Radley's stayed shut up in the house ... it's because he wants to
stay inside."

Throughout the book Boo is talked about and wondered over, but he does not
appear in Scout's existence until the end when he is needed by the children. When no
one is near to protect them from death, Boo comes out of hiding. In an act of
violence he kills Bob Ewell, and with that act he becomes a part of southern honor.
He might have been a hero. Had a jury heard the case, his trial would have
entertained the entire region. The community was unsettled from the rape trial, and this avenged death in the name of southern justice would have set well in Maycomb, Alabama. Boo Radley has been outside of southern honor, however, and he is a shy man. Lee has the sheriff explain the pitfalls of southern justice when he says, "Know what'd happen then? All the ladies in Maycomb includin' my wife'd be knocking on his door bringing angel food cakes. To my way of thinkin' ... that's a sin.... If it was any other man it'd be different." The reader discovers that southern justice through the courts is not a blessing. It is a carnival.