Autism and *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Representing autism in forms of media can be difficult, especially when the creator does not have autism themselves. The experience of autism can be difficult for neurotypical people to understand because there is no one way to live with it. The “nothing about us without us” movement is relatively recent, but helps demonstrate just how poorly autism has been represented, even in works that are heralded as progressive. One work consistently deemed ahead of its time is Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird.* While there are certainly aspects of Lee’s novel that were ahead of the thinking at the time, her representation of Arthur Radley, who could be read as a character with autism, is most certainly not, both due to his own presentation, and the other characters’ reactions to him. Although Lee intended her novel to be progressive, the characters’ treatments of Arthur Radley and his potential autism further dehumanize him, which sets back the narrative that people with autism are just as worthy as those without.

Autism, as a concept, is tough to trace and precisely pin down. There are a wide range of symptoms attributed to the condition, and there is no definitive cause, which can be frustrating to medical professionals. The attributes of autism, in particular, can be hard to accurately assess, because a person being diagnosed may only exhibit a few symptoms, but will still classify as being on the autism spectrum, and others may demonstrate multiple, but end up having an entirely different disability or mental illness. However, there is general criteria used to make an initial assessment. This list contains three categories which present more specific behaviors. Some of this criteria includes “marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors”, “stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms”, also known as stimming, and “persistent preoccupations with parts of objects,” (Murray 17). Although official guidelines can be helpful in diagnosing an individual as on the autism spectrum, the experience of having autism is far more complicated and varied than formalities would lead one to believe. Namely, the sensory experience that autism creates. One commonality that seems to exist is relating to the world and the past not through concrete recollections of events, but rather what writer Tito Mukhopadhyay refers to as “sensory challenges.” To people with autism, the world appears to be the combinations of sounds, sights, and what they can touch, affecting their ability to adjust to new spaces (Savarese 10). Autism may cause differences in the mind, but that does not mean one with autism is any less of a person than someone who is neurotypical. They simply exist and relate to the world differently, but those differences should be celebrated, not treated as roadblocks.

Arthur Radley, as a concrete character rather than an entity, only exists for a brief period of time. However, within those two chapters, a bevy of characterization is presented. At the end of Chapter 29, Scout gives a description of mostly his physical appearance, but makes special note that when he had attention on him, “a strange spasm shook him,” (Lee 310). While there is no confirmation on this “[Arthur’s] hands slipped slightly” right before said spasm, so this could be interpreted as stimming. He also rarely speaks, only uttering one line throughout the end of the story, which could be associated with autism as well. Though Arthur would not be completely nonverbal, it can be assumed that he either does not speak much in general, since he has been cloistered in his home for his entire life, or that he felt overstimulated around a group of people paying attention to him. Toward the end of Arthur’s presence in the story, audiences see him relating to the world through one of his senses—touch. When it is time for him to leave the Finch home, he wants to bid an unconscious Jem goodbye, but rather than simply bidding him farewell, or something of the like, he is encouraged to “pet him” by Dr. Reynolds (319). Going along with his different means of communication, it has been commonly speculated by readers that Arthur was the one leaving the gifts in the knothole of the tree for the children, which was his way of becoming closer to them. The little things about Arthur seem to point to him being on the autism spectrum in some regard, and can make for an interesting further study.

Infantilization is one of the biggest issues those with autism face in terms of representation, and Arthur Radley is no exception. Throughout his time with the Finch family, he only ever has one line, and remains a quiet observer for the rest of those chapters. When he asks to be taken home, Scout notes that “he almost whispered it, in the voice of a child afraid of the dark,” (319). She does decide to take him home, but takes him by his arm—an action that recurs throughout her time making his acquaintance. Scout leads him throughout their home, holding onto his hand as though he needs the help getting from place to place. Even someone as young as Scout, who would not be expected to have these preconceived notions about those with disabilities, treats him as though he is a child. However, that was not always her attitude toward him. Another issue that people with autism, and disabilities in general, face is demonization and dehumanization for their conditions. Arthur is no exception, and has been the subject of town rumors and tales for as long as Scout can remember. In Chapter 8, after Mrs. Radley passes away, “Jem and [Scout] assume that Boo had got her at last,” (72) referring back to a rumored incident in the past when Arthur supposedly stabbed his father in the leg with a pair of scissors (12). This is not the exception, but rather the rule, to the point where the children of Maycomb County are taught to be afraid of him. When Jem gives his description of what he believes Arthur Radley looks like, he makes specific mention of the fact that “his hands were bloodstained” because he would “[dine] on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch,” further dehumanizing a person already shrouded in mystery (14). It is Arthur’s differences from the rest of the people in Maycomb that make others treat him as though he is not an adult, let alone a person whose life experience should be considered valid.

Although there is no definitive proof that Arthur Radley has autism, certain traits listed in *Autism* line up with Arthur’s patterns and mannerisms. However, it can be assumed that, if he does not have autism, he at least has some sort of disability that makes him act different from what is deemed “normal” in southern society. It is Arthur’s differences that make people speculate about him, and invent stories that dehumanize him and paint him to be a dangerous individual, or treat him as a child. There are plenty of elements of Lee’s novel that were ahead of its time, but when it comes to the representation of Arthur Radley, up until the very end of the novel, she does not write him as a character meant to be liked or admired as a human being.

Works Cited

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