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SPEAKEASY

Data Miners Dig for Answers About Harper Lee, Truman Capote and 'Go Set a Watchman'

By **ELLEN GAMERMAN**

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EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY

Harper Lee's new book is not just a literary sensation. It is also a data set.

Hours after "Go Set a Watchman" went on sale Tuesday, the developers of a computerized text-analysis tool ran the long-awaited novel and Ms. Lee's Pulitzer-Prize winning "To Kill a Mockingbird" through an algorithm that searched for signs of heavy editing, frequent rewriting and other influences. The findings, which attempt to shed light on a book that has sparked world-wide attention by an author who has famously declined to discuss her work, show Ms. Lee as the undisputed author of both novels but suggest that her style as a writer was more consistent in "Watchman" than "Mockingbird."

MORE IN GO SET A WATCHMAN

- Authors, CEOs and Publishing World Offer Up Tributes to Harper Lee (<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2016/02/19/harper-lee-tributes/>)
- Harper Lee's Career by the Numbers (<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2016/02/19/harper-lees-career-by-the-numbers/>)
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- No New Novel in Harper Lee Safe-Deposit Box (<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2015/08/31/no-new-novel-in-harper-lee-safe-deposit-box/>)
- Dr. Seuss's 'What Pet Should I Get?' Sells 200,000 Copies in Its First Week (<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2015/08/06/dr-seuss-what-pet-should-i-get-sells-200000-copies-in-its-first-week/>)
- How Much of Scout Do You See in Jean Louise in 'Go Set a Watchman'? (WSJ Book Club) (<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2015/07/22/how-much-of-scout-do-you-see-in-jean-louise-in-go-set-a-watchman-wsj-book-club/>)

“Wat
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Jan
Rybicki,
who

with fellow literature scholar Maciej Eder studied the texts and wrote up their analysis for The Wall Street Journal. Messrs. Rybicki and Eder used software they released in 2013 to compare word patterns across different books. Mr. Rybicki’s scholarship includes attempting to distinguish a translator’s voice from an author’s in translated texts, while Mr. Eder recently took on Greek literature, arguing in a coming paper that Aeschylus didn’t write the classical tragedy “Prometheus Bound.”

In a new study titled “Go Set a Watchman While We Kill the Mockingbird in Cold Blood,” Mr. Eder and Mr. Rybicki, both affiliated with universities in Krakow, Poland, also explored the enduring speculation that Truman Capote wrote or heavily edited “Mockingbird.” The rumors stem in part from the close bond between Ms. Lee and Mr. Capote: the two wrote stories together as childhood playmates in Monroeville, Ala. Their creative interplay continued into adulthood: Ms. Lee, a research assistant for Mr. Capote’s book “In Cold Blood,” modeled the character of Dill in “Mockingbird” on Mr. Capote.

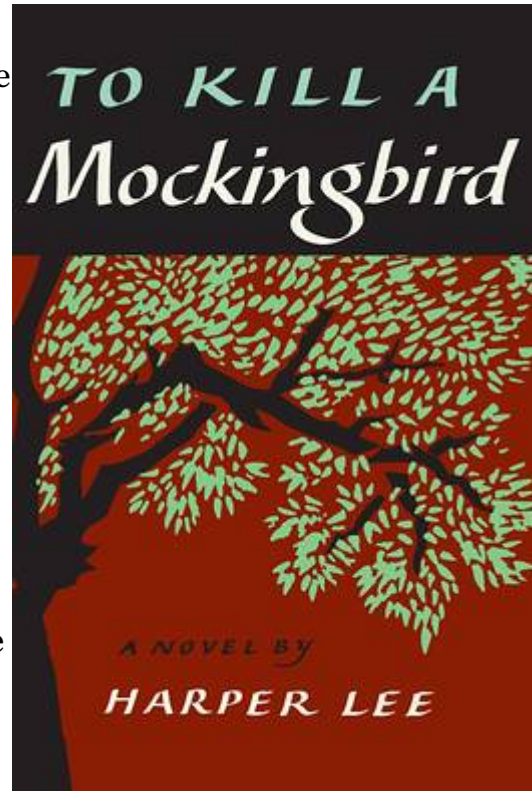
The researchers used a computer program to tally the frequency of common words —“the,” “a,” “he,” “she”—and other “function” words that they said typically make up 50% of a novel. Both Ms. Lee and Mr. Capote sent out clear signals of authorship based on how often they used such words—a result that scholars in the growing field of digital humanities have found with other writers, too.

Text mining aims to shed light on authorship and the creative process by examining word patterns in individual books, but it also can analyze thousands of texts at once in search of broader trends. Some scholars call this method a vital tool to aid in literary analysis while others dismiss it as digital quackery.

In 1957, Ms. Lee submitted “Watchman,” her first attempt at a novel, for publication. Her editor, Tay Hohoff, liked the childhood flashbacks in “Watchman” and encouraged Ms. Lee to write a story about her protagonist’s childhood using many of the same characters. After two years of extensive rewriting and editing, the author completed a new novel, “To Kill a Mockingbird,” a story of race in small-town America that went on to sell more than 40 million copies world-wide.

Ms. Lee, now 89 years old, wanted “Watchman” published with just a light copy edit, according to the book’s U.S. publisher, HarperCollins, which like The Wall Street Journal is owned by News Corp. “Harper Lee wanted to have the novel published exactly as it was written, without editorial intervention some sixty years after it was completed,” Jonathan Burnham, publisher of HarperCollins’s Harper imprint, said in a statement about “Watchman.” “As her publishers, we naturally respected her wishes.”

At the climax of “Mockingbird,” Ms. Lee’s voice as a writer is less distinct than at any other point in the novel, the researchers said. Here, near the end of the book, when Scout and her brother Jem are attacked and the racist villain Bob Ewell is killed with a kitchen knife, Ms. Lee’s writing style has more in common with Mr. Capote’s than her own, they said. The academics reached this conclusion by comparing sections of “Mockingbird” with two of Mr. Capote’s works, “In Cold Blood” and “The Grass Harp.”



AP

The researchers aren’t declaring that Mr. Capote wrote the passage but say that at this fraught moment in the narrative, Ms. Lee may have been subliminally using words as Mr. Capote did—or she may have been pulled off her typical authorial voice for some other reason.

“Either she was rewriting many, many times, struggling with the style or overwhelming her own style again and again so that her natural voice would disappear or be less noticeable—or the other possibility is that she was helped by someone else in terms of being deeply inspired by someone or something, or copy edited by someone,” Mr. Eder said. “We have no clue which is the most probable.”

Ms. Lee isn’t known to have addressed the ghostwriting rumor about Mr. Capote, who died in 1984. But over the years, many scholars have rejected it. In a 2002 interview, Ms.

Lee's sister, Alice Lee, called the speculation "the biggest lie ever told." Alice Lee died last year.

Charles J. Shields, author of the biography, "Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee," said it's hard to believe that Mr. Capote played any large part in writing "Mockingbird" for several reasons, including that Ms. Lee and Ms. Hohoff were "like mother and daughter" and Ms. Lee could not have deceived her editor about something so important. There's also Mr. Capote's ego: "Truman loved the limelight—he craved attention," Mr. Shields said. "If he had written 'To Kill a Mockingbird,' we would've heard about it when Truman was in his cups on Johnny Carson."

Other parts of the text-mining study strongly attest to Ms. Lee's voice. Messrs. Eder and Rybicki, who with their universities will co-host a global digital humanities conference next year, said that in a crucial passage of "Mockingbird"—the chapter in which Atticus tells his son "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird"—Ms. Lee's style does not mirror Mr. Capote's even for a moment. Here, the study said, Ms. Lee is "truest to herself."

As far as "Watchman," the scholars similarly did not find any parallels between writing by Ms. Lee and Mr. Capote, nor any signs of a strong editor. Such findings make sense for a first novel, the academics said, since many authors submit manuscripts that are a raw initial account in their own voice. The style in this rediscovered novel is Ms. Lee's from beginning to end, the researchers said. The extent of editing on the drafts that followed "Watchman" is unclear; the researchers will compare Ms. Lee's writing to Ms. Hohoff's in a study they plan to release later this month.

In a history of the now-defunct J.B. Lippincott Company, which published Ms. Lee's "Mockingbird" in 1960, Ms. Hohoff described "Watchman" as "more a series of anecdotes than a fully conceived novel." Ms. Hohoff, who died in 1974, praised Ms. Lee's genius but did not say whether she rewrote her, allowing only that Ms. Lee needed help organizing the material and developing the plot. "We saw a great deal of each other during this period, and, if conditions make it possible, I believe such close, frequent communication can be of enormous benefit to the author, the book, and incidentally to the editor," Ms. Hohoff said in a document provided by Mr. Shields that appeared in a published history of the Lippincott Company. "But of course writing is the loneliest of activities. Harper Lee literally spent her days and nights in the most intense efforts to set down what she wanted to say in the way which would best say it to the reader."

Writing and rewriting "Mockingbird" kept the author and her editor locked in a creative struggle. In the corporate history, Ms. Hohoff describes debating criticisms with Ms. Lee "sometimes for hours," each changing the other's mind at points. In his biography, Mr. Shields describes Ms. Lee rereading a page in her typewriter again and again before throwing her entire draft out her apartment window on a cold winter night in

Manhattan. In tears, she called Ms. Hohoff, who convinced her to go outside immediately and gather the pages from the snow.

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