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English I

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### The Implementation and Use of Gothic Details in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

"Maycomb was an old town, but it was a tired old town when I first knew it"(Lee 5). In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the setting has a great deal to do with the events that occur throughout the novel. Events affecting the setting occur throughout the novel, some of which are very out of the ordinary. Supernatural or unusual happenings in a novel are classified as gothic details, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* is riddled with them. Michael Behe, a biochemist/author, says,"Many people, including many important and well-respected scientists, just don't want there to be anything beyond nature. They just don't want a supernatural being to affect nature"(Michael Behe). Harper Lee uses gothic details as a motif to develop the characters and theme by highlighting the children's susceptibility to believing superstitions, revealing strange happenings the night of the fire, and showing how the mad dog disrupts the peace of the town.

The first instance of this motif is hidden in the children's superstitions. Jem says to Scout and Dill that,""A Hot Steam's somebody who can't get to heaven, just wallows around on lonesome roads an' if you walk through him, when you die you'll be one too""(Lee 41). This emphasizes the idea that they are too young to understand things that exist outside the realm of reality. Spawning off of this belief, the superstitions they possess about Boo Radley are also quite unbelievable and rather out of place in the small town of Maycomb. According to the children and Miss Stephanie Crawford, Boo ate raw squirrels, and sometimes cats, and had

horribly discolored teeth. Seeing as though they have never seen him, the children believe whatever they hear about him. Miss Crawford says that, "[he] was cutting some items from *The Maycomb Tribune* to paste in his scrapbook. His father entered the room. As Mr. Radley passed by, Boo drove the scissors into his parent's leg, pulled them out, wiped them on his pants, and resumed his activities" (Lee 11-12). This emphasizes the theme that the town has social classes, and in this case, Boo is always on the bottom. It doesn't matter what people say about him, for he will always be considered a type of ghost, somehow inhuman. When placed in the small town of Maycomb, these events appear quite unbelievable and unreal. Gothic details are shown, in just one way, by these superstitions, as they are unnatural in this serene setting.

This serene setting is in the south, and in most southern towns, warm weather is a constant. On this occasion, the rule has an exception. To quote Atticus, "'As it has not snowed in Maycomb County since 1885, there will be no school today'" (Lee 73). Coincidentally, the day of the snow falls on the same day that Miss Maudie Atkinson's house catches fire. Seeing the abrupt change in weather patterns mixed with the surprising inferno that becomes Miss Maudie's home, one can conclude that gothic details are present. Things like this don't usually disturb the peace in Maycomb, and with the upcoming trial, these events act as a sort of foreshadowing device for trouble. Another event that foreshadowed trouble in the small town of Maycomb was Halloween night, when Bob Ewell attacks the children. On this night, Scout narrates that, "The weather was unusually warm for the last day of October" (Lee 293). The verifiable truth of the children's fear directly correlates with the gothic details present at this time. The author uses these to show that trouble is ahead, even on a rather pleasant and unmenacing evening.

The final way gothic details are expressed in the novel is by the exhibition of the mad dog that interrupts the normalcy of a Saturday afternoon in Maycomb. Lee creates this dog to symbolize the chaos and fear that are present during this time period. In Chapter 10 of the novel, Calpurnia has alerted everyone in town of the mad dog growing closer and Scout narrates that, "[e]very wood door within our range of vision was closed tight" (Lee 107). This can be seen as another instance of foreshadowing for the trouble that ensues later in the novel. Because the children think of their father as weak and feeble, they do not expect him to be the "deadest shot in Maycomb County in his time", but they learn this when he ends Tim Johnson's misery (Lee 112). Gothic details are presented here due to the fact that, according to the novel, mad dogs foam at the mouth and come out in August. Everyone is locked up in their houses, an abnormality for Maycomb, so it creates an eerie quiet that disturbs daily life. Tim Johnson illustrates gothic details by interrupting the peace and creating fear for the citizens of Maycomb.

In summary, many supernatural occurrences are present in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The children are quite young, so they don't understand Boo as a person, but more an old wives' tale. The unusual weather changes suggest that trouble is ahead. The final way gothic details are expressed in the novel is by the introduction of Tim Johnson. All of these events are connected because they disturb the nature of Maycomb county.

Works Cited

Behe, Michael J. *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*. Print.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: HarperPerennial, 2001. Print.