

## THE POWER OF THE UNSPOKEN: RUMOURS AND GOSSIPS IN THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD AND TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

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### Abstract

This study explores the prevalence of gossip and rumours in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Both novels demonstrate how unspoken words and hearsay impact the lives of heroes and bring a clash between them and their communities. Both are set in the American South during a period of social and racial conflict. This paper examines how Hurston and Lee employ whispers and gossip as narrative strategies to emphasise themes of prejudice, identity and societal judgement. In Hurston's novel the unrelenting chatter of the villagers continuously impedes and shapes Janie Crawford's path for self-discovery. It mirrors the social dynamics and power structures in her community as a challenge to her route of self-fulfillment. Analogously, Lee depicts the detrimental effects of racial and social prejudice in Maycomb, Alabama. He shows how the dissemination of false rumours affects the lives of people like Boo Radley. This study contends that rumours and gossip function as both representations of larger society issues and instruments for character development in both novels. The purpose of the article is to show how important rumours and gossip are to comprehending the writers' criticisms of social injustice and the human condition. In the end, this analysis aims to highlight the significance of the unsaid and its deep influence on interpersonal relationships as well as community dynamics.

**Keywords:** Rumours, vacuum, self-empowerment, irrational society, moral and ethical failure.

### Introduction

Rumours and gossip are powerful narrative devices in literature that reveal the underlying dynamics of social systems and human behaviour. Two classic novels, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, deftly incorporate these themes into their narratives to provide important insights regarding society conventions and the human condition. Both books, which are set against the backdrop of the American South, examine the significant impacts that words have on the lives of their characters and the communities. It primarily relies on demonstrating the widespread influence that social whispers have on people's fates. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* tells the story of Black woman Janie Crawford as she navigates the difficulties of autonomy,

identity, and love in early 20th-century Florida. Three different men—Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake—mark Janie’s journey and are the main turning points in her quest for self-discovery. The unrelenting talk of the villagers moulds and frequently distorts her relationships and experiences on her voyage. These murmurs highlight Janie’s fortitude in the face of social criticism and represent the community’s problems with issues of gender, ethnicity, and power. The gossip sections that precede and finish the book serve to show how rumours may shape someone’s life narrative and to place Janie’s story within the larger framework of social scrutiny.

Similar to this, Scout Finch’s naive and inquisitive eyes allow *To Kill a Mockingbird* to explore the ingrained prejudices of a tiny Southern town. The book does a great job of illustrating how people like Boo Radley and Tom Robinson can become marginalised and victims of false allegations and rumours. The neighbour, who lives alone, Boo Radley, is the target of irrational and false rumours that portray him as a terrifying person. These unfounded rumours, spread by ignorance and fear, conceal his actual character as a good-hearted, but misunderstood, person. Tom Robinson, a Black man who was wrongfully charged with raping a white lady, falls prey to Maycomb’s malicious gossip culture. Harper Lee uses these elements to critique the moral and ethical failings of society, particularly in relation to racial injustice and the loss of innocence.

Several scholars have examined how gossip functions as a form of social control, enforcing community norms and ostracizing those who deviate. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, gossip about Janie’s relationships serves to police her behavior, reflecting the community’s expectations for women. Scholars such as Deborah Clarke have noted that Janie’s journey towards self-realization involves her negotiation with these communal judgments (Clarke, 2001).

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, gossip about Boo Radley and Tom Robinson reflects and reinforces the town’s racial and social hierarchies. Lee employs these rumors to expose the underlying prejudices and moral shortcomings of Maycomb society. According to scholars like Claudia Durst Johnson, the gossip surrounding Boo and Tom reveals the community’s fears and biases (Johnson, 1994).

Character Development and Narrative Function: Gossip and rumors also serve as catalysts for character development and narrative progression. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie’s evolving responses to gossip mark her growing independence and self-awareness. Her marriages to Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake are all subject to communal scrutiny, which she ultimately learns to navigate and transcend.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout’s understanding of morality and human complexity is shaped by her exposure to and eventual rejection of the town’s

gossip. Her father, Atticus Finch, serves as a moral anchor, challenging the rumors and teaching Scout to seek truth and justice beyond the prevailing narratives.

Comparative studies of Hurston and Lee's works reveal differing but complementary uses of gossip and rumors. Hurston often focuses on the intra-community dynamics within African American culture, highlighting both the supportive and restrictive aspects of communal life. In contrast, Lee addresses broader societal issues, using gossip to critique racial injustice and moral hypocrisy in the segregated South.

This study aims to investigate how Hurston and Lee use gossip and rumours as essential elements that propel their stories and further their themes, rather than just as background noise. We may comprehend how gossip and rumour reflect and critique the larger societal challenges of their eras better by analysing pivotal moments in both novels where these aspects emerge. By demonstrating how the power of the silent can change lives and the very fabric of a community, we hope to shed light on the works' ongoing relevance and their profound insights into the human condition. Both books depict rumours and gossip as two-edged blades that can damage and distort as well as expose and clarify. These components are used by Hurston and Lee to highlight the underlying concerns and biases in their respective societies. They force readers to face the frequently unsaid presumptions and judgements that influence social interactions by making rumours and gossip the main themes. In the end, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* show that the silent voice can have just as much, if not more, of an impact on shaping social standards and personal lives than spoken words. Through their nuanced portrayals of gossip and rumours, Hurston and Lee offer timeless reflections on the human condition, inviting readers to consider the profound impact of what is said, and what is left unsaid, in shaping our world.

### **Background**

In literature, rumors and gossips often play crucial roles in shaping narratives, revealing character dynamics, and driving plot developments. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, these elements are instrumental in highlighting social tensions, cultural norms, and individual struggles. By examining the power of the unspoken in these two novels, one can gain deeper insights into the social fabric of the settings and the inner lives of the characters.

### **Research Problem**

The Influence of Rumors and Gossip on Character Development and Interpersonal Relationships:

How do rumors and gossip influence the actions, perceptions, and development of central characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

The Role of Rumors and Gossip in Reflecting Social and Cultural Contexts:

How do rumors and gossip reflect and perpetuate the social and cultural contexts of the respective settings in the novels?

Comparative Impact of Rumors and Gossip on Plot Progression:

In what ways do the authors utilize rumors and gossip to drive the narrative and plot progression in each novel?

### **Research Objectives**

Analyze the Impact on Characters:

To examine how rumors and gossip influence character actions and development in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Explore Social and Cultural Reflections:

To investigate how rumors and gossip reflect the societal norms and cultural contexts within the novels.

Compare Narrative Techniques:

To compare the narrative techniques employed by Zora Neale Hurston and Harper Lee in utilizing rumors and gossip to propel the storylines.

### **Research Methodology**

Literary Analysis:

Conduct a close reading of both novels to identify instances of rumors and gossip. Analyze the language, context, and consequences of these instances on character development and plot.

Contextual Analysis:

Examine historical and cultural contexts relevant to each novel to understand how they shape and are reflected in the rumors and gossip portrayed.

Comparative Analysis:

Compare the findings from both novels to identify similarities and differences in the use and impact of rumors and gossip.

### **Research Conclusion**

Character Influence:

Rumors and gossip significantly impact the perceptions and actions of characters, often leading to pivotal developments in the narrative.

Social and Cultural Reflections:

Both novels use rumors and gossip as tools to reflect and critique the social and cultural contexts, highlighting issues such as racial prejudice, gender roles, and community dynamics.

Narrative Techniques:

While both authors utilize rumors and gossip to drive their plots, their approaches differ, with Hurston often focusing on the personal and communal implications within African American culture and Lee emphasizing the broader societal impact within a racially divided Southern town.

Overall Impact:

The power of the unspoken in these novels underscores the pervasive influence of societal narratives on individual lives, revealing the intricate interplay between personal identity and communal perception.

### **Results and Discussion**

The themes of self-creation and community are central to understanding the protagonist Janie's journey and the broader social context of the novel. Hurston depicts the African American community of Eatonville and the Everglades as central to the narrative. According to John Kalb "This notion of creation of self and community is critical to understanding Hurston's novel" (1988:172). Janie's journey towards self-realization is deeply connected to her interactions with the communities she is part of. The community provides a backdrop against which Janie's personal story unfolds. Barbara writes in *Black Women Novelists* (1980):

Janie Stark tells the story of her childhood, her life, and her loves to her best friend, Pheoby, and to the community to which she has just returned. This aspect of the novel is critical to its substance, for Janie Stark is not an individual in a vacuum; she is an intrinsic part of a community, and she brings her life and its richness, joys, and sorrows back to it. As it has helped to form her, so she also helps to form it.

The community serves as both a support system and a source of conflict for Janie. The townspeople's gossip and judgment often challenge her decisions and actions. Hurston's novel illustrates that the creation of self is not an isolated endeavour but one that is profoundly influenced by the surrounding social and cultural environment.

In these books, rumours and gossip serve as more than just story devices; they are reflections of larger social issues and forces that drive character growth. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the rumours that followed Janie's return to Eatonville regarding her connection with Tea Cake perfectly capture the inclination of the locals to pass judgement and make assumptions without fully appreciating the breadth of her experiences. The contrast between Janie's strength and independence and the narrow-mindedness of the town's residents highlights her journey towards self-empowerment in spite of social restraints. Janie Crawford, the protagonist of the novel, returns to Eatonville, a small all-black town in Florida, after a long absence. Her reappearance stirs a mix of curiosity, judgement, and gossip among the townspeople. Hurston explicitly shows disdain for these gossips: "These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and

other brutes had occupied their skins” (32). Hurston draws a parallel between the people and laboring animals to convey severe antagonism towards the gossipers. The townspeople, who sit on their porches and observe Janie’s arrival, are quick to speculate about her life and the reasons for her return. They note her physical appearance, particularly the overalls she wears, which starkly contrast with the traditional feminine attire they expected her to don. Her confident stride and the fact that she is alone—without a husband—fuel their gossip. “Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs” (32). The responses of the community toward Janie Crawford show their underlying feelings of envy and resentment. They wonder about the fate of her last (third) husband, Tea Cake, and speculate on the events that led her back to Eatonville.

The community’s reaction is characterized by a mix of envy, curiosity, and judgment. The men are drawn to Janie’s physical beauty and strength: “The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grapefruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unravelling in the wind like a plume; ... (33). Hurston captures this dynamic episode vividly through the dialogue and inner thoughts of the townspeople:

“What she doin coming back here in dem overalls? Can’t she find no dress to put on?—Where’s dat blue satin dress she left here in?—Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her?—What dat ole forty year ole ‘oman doin’ wid her hair swingin’ down her back lak some young gal?—Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid?—Thought she was going to marry?—Where he left her?—What he done wid all her money?—Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain’t even got no hairs—why she don’t stay in her class?” (33)

The complaint of the community that Janie “could stop and say a few words with us” indicates a sense of entitlement to Janie’s time and attention, as well as a demand for her conformity to social norms. “She act like we done something to her” (34) suggests a lack of self-awareness or acknowledgment of their own role in marginalising Janie. It shifts the blame onto Janie, painting her as unreasonably distant or arrogant. This reflects Janie’s actions and choices, especially those that defy traditional gender roles or expectations and are harshly criticised by her peers. Lulu and Pearl’s remarks to Pheoby demonstrate the casual, often intrusive nature of community interactions in Eatonville. Their willingness to “mind yo’ house” (35) suggests a close-knit, albeit nosy, community where everyone feels entitled to know each other’s business. Lulu’s comment, “just go right ahead, us can mind yo’ house for you till you git back,” (35) shows a superficial layer of support, though it is tinged with the expectation of gossip. Her words imply a readiness to keep tabs on Janie’s affairs under the guise of neighbourly concern. The community’s desire for

the answers to be “cruel and strange” reflects their tendency to revel in sensationalism and schadenfreude. Janie’s response to the community’s chatter is one of composed silence. Her quiet demeanour and calm presence in the face of their judgmental gaze highlight her strength and self-assurance. Against this community gossip, “she kept walking straight on to her gate. The porch couldn’t talk for looking” (33). This silent defiance against their scrutiny and gossip demonstrates Janie’s inner transformation and resilience. She “discovers a self in opposition to the cultural prescriptions, and proceeds on a quest of self-fulfillment” (Fulton, 2006: 83). She no longer seeks validation from the community; instead, she is confident in her own story and worth. Janie’s struggles with the community’s scrutiny represent her broader conflict with societal expectations. Fulton’s comments on the Janie’s conflict with community: “Janie must contend with the culturally inscribed representations of women from African American culture that are influenced by the dominant white culture. She then rejects these representations, discovers a self in opposition to the cultural prescriptions, and proceeds on a quest of self-fulfillment” (83). The interactions among the women underscore how community pressure can impact personal freedom and choices. Hurston shows the tension between individual autonomy and communal surveillance, enriching the narrative with a realistic portrayal of Southern African American life in the early 20th century.

Pheoby, Janie’s friend, acts in contrast to the attitude of the community. She intends to check on Janie and bring her supper, signifies a deeper, more genuine form of friendship and care. Janie expresses her appreciation for Pheoby’s kind words, recognizing that they are sincere. She says, “Ah takes dat flattery offa you, Pheoby, ‘cause Ah know it’s from de heart” (36). This means she accepts the compliment because she knows it’s genuine. Janie extends her hand to Pheoby, signaling that she is ready to receive whatever food Pheoby has brought: “Good Lawd, Pheoby! ain’t you never goin’ tuh gimme dat lil rations you brought me? Ah ain’t had a thing on mah stomach today exceptin’ mah hand” (36). Pheoby acknowledges that she knew Janie would be hungry: “Ah knowed you’d be hongry. No time to be huntin’ stove wood after dark” (36). The covered bowl of mulatto rice symbolizes Pheoby’s nurturing nature and the cultural significance of food in their community, acting as a bridge of care and comfort. The “heaping plate of mulatto rice” (35) is not just food but a gesture of solidarity and support, reinforcing the importance of their bond in a community that often seeks to isolate and judge. Pheoby’s actions contrast with the other women’s more voyeuristic interest in Janie’s well-being. Hurston emphasises friendship made popular in African literature by Alice Walker’s concept of “Womanism”.

When Pheoby sees Janie, she is sitting on the steps of the back porch, engaging in everyday task of cleaning “the lamps all filled and the chimneys cleaned” (35). This mundane activity underscores her resilience and her attempt to maintain normalcy and self-care amidst the turbulence of her life. Her response to Pheoby, “Aw, pretty good, Ah’m tryin’ to soak some uh de tiredness and de dirt outa mah feet,” (35) along with her laughter, illustrates her strength and ability to find moments of levity despite her struggles. Janie’s close friend Pheoby Watson is the one person who does not indulge in idle gossip. Instead, she welcomes Janie and expresses genuine concern and curiosity about her journey. “Pheoby Watson hitched her rocking chair forward before she spoke” (34). Pheoby’s sarcastic remark, “You’d think de folks in dis town didn’t do nothin’ in de bed ‘cept praise de Lawd,” (35) critiques the hypocrisy of the townspeople. It suggests that while they are quick to judge Janie, they themselves are not without fault. The townspeople’s eagerness to judge Janie while ignoring their own flaws highlights the hypocrisy prevalent in the community. Pheoby’s pointed critique exposes the double standards and moral inconsistencies of the townspeople, emphasizing the novel’s exploration of social judgment and the often unjust nature of communal scrutiny. Hurston uses this hypocrisy to critique the superficial morality often upheld by society.

Pheoby dismisses the concerns others have about Janie and tries to appear unaffected by the gossip: “nobody don’t know if it’s anything to tell or not. Me, Ah’m her best friend, and Ah don’t know” (34). The dialogue between the characters reflects on gossip, judgment, and the impact of envy and malice in social interactions. They believe community tend to gossip and pass judgment on others, often based on envy and assumptions. This is skilfully captured by Hurston, “An envious heart makes a treacherous ear” (37). Through their conversation, we gain a deeper understanding of the pressures and challenges faced by the characters in their community. “Yes indeed. You know if you pass some people and don’t speak tuh suit ‘em dey got tuh go way back in yo’ life and see whut you ever done. They know mo’ ‘bout yuh than you do yo’ self” (37). They conclude with the realisation that people often believe they understand someone’s life better than the person living it.

Pheoby’s presence provides Janie with a safe space to recount her story, which she does through a narrative framed as a conversation between the two women. Through Pheoby, Hurston provides Janie with a listener who values her experiences and her voice. This sets the stage for the novel’s structure, where Janie’s story unfolds as a series of flashbacks narrated to Pheoby. Janie’s return in overalls, a symbol of her labour and experiences, juxtaposed against the townspeople’s expectations, underscores the theme of individuality versus societal norms. Janie’s return to Eatonville and the community’s reaction to her presence introduce

readers to the central conflict between individual desires and societal expectations. Her silence in the face of gossip represents her rejection of their superficial judgments and her embrace of her own truth. The porch sitters, representing the collective voice of the community, serve as a Greek chorus, commenting on the action and setting the social context in which Janie's story will be told. Their gossip and speculation provide a backdrop against which Janie's narrative of empowerment and self-discovery unfolds. Through this scene, Hurston establishes Janie as a strong, independent woman who, despite the community's scrutiny, remains unwavering in her sense of self.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* examines the societal dynamics of Maycomb County, Alabama, particularly through the lens of the Radley family. At the heart of the narrative lies the mysterious figure of Boo Radley, who, along with his family, is viewed with suspicion by the townsfolk. The Radleys' unconventional customs and reclusive lifestyle make them outsiders in the tightly-knit community of Maycomb. Their home, shrouded in secrecy and rumour, becomes a symbol of the town's collective fear and prejudice. Through the eyes of the young protagonist, Scout Finch, and her brother Jem, the Radleys represent the unknown and the other, prompting curiosity, speculation, and even fear among the residents. "Boo—because he is so different from the children and their neighbours and because nothing they know of can explain his behaviour—is fascinating to Jem and Scout" (Rebecca H. Best, 2009: 549). As the story unfolds, the Scuttlebutts concerning the Radleys serve as a microcosm of the larger issues of racism, social inequality, and moral hypocrisy that permeate Maycomb society. Because the Radleys deviate from the norms and customs of Maycomb society, they are quickly branded as outsiders. "In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Boo Radley exists as a kind of everyman character who represents people everywhere who are different and therefore, misunderstood, forgotten, and abused" (Power, 1996: 173). People are quick to judge others based on their family heritage, perpetuating stereotypes that further marginalize certain individuals or groups. The notion of inherited traits perpetuates the stigma concerning the family, as people believe that certain behaviours or tendencies are passed down through generations. There are stories, often exaggerated or entirely fabricated, making it difficult for the Radleys to integrate into society. Contrived stories contribute to the creation of a mythic figure out of Boo Radley, portraying him as a malicious and perilous presence. Boo Radley is depicted as a "malevolent phantom" who haunts the imaginations of Maycomb's children. Stories circulate about Boo's supposed nocturnal prowling and acts of vandalism, heightening the fear.

Inside the house lived a malevolent phantom. ... People said he went out at night when the moon was down, and peeped in window. When people's azaleas froze in a cold snap, it was because he had breathed on them. Any stealthy small

crimes committed in Maycomb were his work. Once the town was terrorized by a series of morbid nocturnal events: people's chickens and household pets were found mutilated; although the culprit was Crazy Addie, who eventually drowned himself in Barker's Eddy, people still looked at The Radley Place unwilling to discard their initial suspicions (Lee, 6).

The mention of Boo "went out at night when the moon was down, and peeped in windows" adds to the aura of fear. The description of "events" involving mutilated chickens and household pets creates a sense of unease and dread within the community. The fact that people still "looked at The Radley Place unwilling to discard their initial suspicions" underscores the deep-rooted prejudice and superstition in Maycomb County. Despite evidence to the contrary, the community continues to harbour unfounded suspicions about the Radleys. This highlights how the people of Maycomb County have spread rumours and formed negative opinions about Boo. The mention of Boo's nocturnal activities and acts of vandalism effectively convey the perversion of reality within the community. This prejudice ultimately leads to Boo's isolation and ostracisation, illustrating the destructive impact of societal judgment based on misinformation.

Boo's demonisation extend to the point where he becomes a scapegoat for all manner of crimes even though people have known who does the crimes in Maycomb. Many residents of Maycomb find it easy to attribute any misdeeds to Boo, regardless of evidence. Rather than critically evaluating each situation and seeking the truth, people readily accept the narrative that Boo is responsible for any wrongdoing. It absolves others of responsibility and allows them to avoid confronting uncomfortable truths about themselves and their community. The fear instilled in the minds of both children and adults regarding the Radley place serves as a powerful barrier that prevents them from negotiating the Radley family. The fear instilled in the minds of both children and adults regarding the Radley place serves as a powerful barrier that prevents them from negotiating the Radley family. The disappearance of animals and children in the vicinity of the Radley place only amplifies the fear of Radleys. Children are particularly susceptible to these fears, as they are warned by their parents and peers to avoid the area at all costs. The prospect of being "eaten by Boo" looms large in their imaginations.

A Negro would not pass the Radley Place at night, he would cut across to the sidewalk opposite and whistle as he walked. The Maycomb school grounds adjoined the back of the Radley lot; from the Radley chicken yard tall pecan trees shook their fruit into schoolyard, but the nuts lay untouched by the children: Radley pecans would kill you. A baseball hit into the Radley yard was a lost ball and no questions asked (Lee, 6).

The mention of a Negro avoiding passing the Radley Place at night by crossing to the opposite sidewalk highlights diabolism enforced on Radley's. The description of the Radley nuts being untouched by children due to the belief that they would be lethal underscores the extent to which the Radley family is demonised. Boo is portrayed as a mysterious and potentially menacing figure. His reclusive nature and lack of social interaction contribute to his evil behaviour. Rumors abound about Boo's supposed criminal activities and violent tendencies, painting him as a threat to the community. Calpurnia, the Finch family's African American housekeeper, is indeed affected by the illogical hatred directed towards Boo. She understands the harmful impact of judging others based on rumors and hearsay, as she herself is often subject to unfair treatment because of her race. Lee points out that, "An individual's nature is one of self-centeredness; consequently it requires an individual to be educated regarding the consistent and moral correctness with which to treat others in a diverse society" (Ezzo 16-17). Yet she succumbs to the narrative of denigrating others. Calpurnia makes a remark upon hearing about the death of Mr. Radley, Boo Radley's father. "There goes the meanest man ever God blew breath into," murmured Calpurnia, and she spat meditatively into the yard. We looked at her in surprise, for Calpurnia rarely commented on the ways of white people" (8). It reflects the general sentiment of the community towards Mr. Radley. It illustrates how rumours and hearsay can shape public perception and perpetuate stereotypes, even in the absence of concrete evidence. Her sudden remark surprises Scout and Jem because it's a departure from her usual demeanour. She rarely expresses her opinions on the behaviour or character of white individuals.

Jem and Scout primarily receive information about Boo Radley from Miss Stephanie Crawford, a prominent figure in the neighbourhood known for her tendency to gossip. Miss Stephanie is quick to share her supposed knowledge about Boo Radley with Jem and the other children, adding to the made-up speculation related to the Radley family. Miss Stephanie's gossip often exaggerates and distorts the truth. Despite her claims of having "true knowledge" about Boo Radley, her information is largely based on hearsay and conjecture, bereft of any personal interaction with the Radleys.

According to Miss Stephanie, Boo was sitting in the living room 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. Mrs. Radley ran screaming into the street that Arthur was killing them all... (7)

Her account of seeing Boo Radley looking through her window in the middle of the night is a prime example of the sensationalised misinformation. Her story adds to the aura of mystery and fear, painting him as a sinister and potentially dangerous

figure. The description of Boo's head as "like a skull" (9) heightens the sense of dread and unease in Miss Stephanie's tale, evoking imagery of death and decay. This vivid description serves to further demonize Boo Radley in the eyes of the townsfolk

Boo Radley's humanity is a central theme gradually revealed through the perspectives and experiences of the characters, particularly Scout and Jem Finch. Boo Radley's humanity is depicted through moments of kindness, compassion, and vulnerability throughout the novel. Through Boo's character, Harper Lee challenges readers to confront their own prejudices and to recognize the humanity in those who are often misunderstood or marginalized. The children in the story, particularly Jem and Scout Finch, are fascinated by Boo and speculate about the reasons for his reclusiveness. "Nobody knew what form of intimidation Mr. Radley employed to keep Boo out of sight, but Jem figured that Mr. Radley kept him chained to the bed most of the time" (20). Jem's speculation that Boo may be kept chained to his bed adds to the aura of mystery for the Radley house and its inhabitants. One of the important conversations in the novel between Scout and Miss Maudie is about Boo Radley's reclusive behaviour. Miss Maudie explains that Boo Radley chooses to stay inside his house, prompting Scout to inquire why. "Arthur Radley just stays in the house, that's all," said Miss Maudie. "Wouldn't you stay in the house if you didn't want to come out?"/ "Yessum, but I'd wanta come out. Why doesn't he?" (35) Miss Maudie's response reveals that Boo's father, Mr. Radley, was a foot-washing Baptist, a religious sect known for its strict beliefs and practices, believing that anything enjoyable is sinful. This provides insight into Boo Radley's upbringing and the strict religious environment in which he was raised. This upbringing instilled in Boo a deep sense of guilt and shame associated with worldly pleasures, leading him to withdraw from society and confine himself to his home. Rather than being the malevolent figure that many in the community believe him to be, Boo is revealed to be a shy and reclusive person who simply wishes to remain within the confines of his home. Boo's desire to stay inside his house is not due to any malicious intent, but rather reflects his own personal reasons throughout the novel, Boo's true nature is gradually revealed, challenging the prejudices and misconceptions that have been perpetuated about him. Miss Maudie serves as a valuable source of information about Boo Radley for Scout and Jem. She provides insights into Boo's background and offers a more nuanced perspective on his character, countering the rumours and misconceptions that abound in Maycomb County. Scout and Jem's interactions with Miss Maudie and Boo Radley play a crucial role in their character development and in the novel's exploration of themes such as prejudice, empathy, and the complexity of human nature. Through these experiences, Harper Lee challenges

readers to question their own biases and to see beyond appearances to recognize the humanity in others.

Miss Maudie highlights the pervasive nature of gossip and rumours in Maycomb. By stating that the neighbourhood is “three-fourths coloured folks and one-fourth Stephanie Crawford,” she underscores the significant role that Stephanie Crawford plays in spreading rumours and stirring up trouble within the community. Miss Maudie’s grim tone suggests her disapproval of Stephanie Crawford’s tendency to spread gossip, which often leads to the perpetuation of falsehoods and the tarnishing of individuals’ reputations. Her sarcastic response to Stephanie’s claim about seeing Boo Radley looking in her window reflects Miss Maudie’s scepticism towards such sensationalised stories and her willingness to challenge Stephanie’s credibility. She highlights the importance of critical thinking and scepticism in evaluating the information we receive, particularly when it comes to matters of gossip and hearsay. Miss Maudie’s recollection of Arthur Radley from his childhood emphasizes his polite and respectful demeanour, despite the rumors and gossip that surrounded him. When asked about Radley’s she said “No, child,” she said, “that is a sad house. I remember Arthur Radley when he was a boy. He always spoke nicely to me, no matter what folks said he did. Spoke as nicely as he knew how” (36). Through Miss Maudie’s words, readers gain a glimpse into Boo Radley’s true nature—a kind and considerate individual who has been unfairly judged by society. Despite the negative perceptions of him, Boo treated Miss Maudie with kindness and courtesy, demonstrating his inherent goodness and decency.

When Atticus gave Jem and Scout the air rifles they wanted for Christmas he didn’t teach them how to shoot, instead only telling them not to shoot at mockingbirds, since it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird. Miss Atkinson explains: all mockingbird do is sing and create beauty and pleasure. So it is a sin to hurt them. The advice given by the father to children shows the innocence of the children as it is written:

That was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something, and I asked Miss Maudie about it. “your father’s right’ she said ‘mockingbird don not do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don’t eat up people’s gardens, don’t nest in conncribs, they don’t do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird (77).

The ‘pent episode’ is a pivotal moment in the story, as it marks one of Scout, Jem, and Dill’s attempts to learn more about Boo Radley. They decide to sneak into the Radley property. Despite their initial curiosity, the encounter takes a frightening turn when they are discovered by Mr. Nathan Radley, Boo’s brother, who emerges from the house with a shotgun. The tension and fear of being caught are palpable and in their haste to escape, Jem becomes entangled in the fence, forcing him to abandon his pants in order to flee to safety. It sets the stage for later developments

in the novel, as the children continue to navigate their relationship with Boo and uncover the truth about him. The novel “is a coming-of-age novel in which Jem and Scout Finch begin to understand themselves. To gain this self-awareness, however, Scout and Jem must first understand the community around them and the Others within it” (541)

After their escape from the Radley yard, the shocking discovery occurs when Jem returns to retrieve them later that night. When he goes back to the Radley property to retrieve his pants, he finds them mended and neatly folded over the fence.

When I went back for my breeches--they were all in a tangle when I was gettin' out of 'em, I couldn't get 'em loose. When I went back--” Jem took a deep breath. “When I went back, they were folded across the fence... like they were expectin' me. ... They'd been sewed up. Not like a lady sewed 'em, like somethin' I'd try to do. All crooked. It's almost like—(48)

This conversation between Jem and Scout reflects the profound impact of Boo Radley's unexpected act of kindness on their perceptions. His statement about feeling like someone could read his mind highlights the eerie and unsettling nature of the experience. He seeks confirmation that people cannot predict his actions unless they truly know him as an individual. Scout's response provides him with the comfort and reassurance he seeks, emphasizing the importance of personal understanding and familiarity in truly knowing someone. Boo leaves small gifts such as chewing gum, Indian head pennies, and soap carvings for Jem and Scout in the knothole of the tree that stands on the edge of the Radley property. “He has started giving gifts in the knothole. It is described in the novel as: We went home. Next morning the twine was where we had left it. When it was still there on the third day, Jem pocketed it. From then on, we consider everything we found in the knothole our property (65). These gifts play a significant role in Jem and Scout's evolving perception of Boo Radley. Initially, they are wary of the gifts and uncertain about their origins, but as they come to understand Boo's intentions. The gifts serve as a tangible symbol of Boo's humanity and kindness, challenging the rumours and misconceptions labelled against him. This unexpected act of kindness from Boo Radley shocks Jem and Scout, as it contradicts the rumours and fears they have heard about Boo's supposed malevolence. This moment marks a significant turning point in their perception of Boo Radley, as they begin to see him in a new light and question the validity of the rumours that have surrounded Boo. Debra T. Werrlein in *Infant Nation: Childhood Innocence and the Politics of Race in Contemporary American Fiction* writes: “American literature in particular moves children into the threshold between wilderness and civilization where, as veritable outsiders, they gauge society's virtues and its hypocrisies in ... (works like) Harper Lee's *To Kill a*

*Mockingbird*” (2004: 1). It prompts them to reconsider their assumptions about Boo and opens the door to a deeper understanding of his character.

Scout’s father, Atticus Finch, plays a central role in the trial of Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman, Mayella Ewell. Despite the personal risks and social repercussions he faces for defending a Black man in a deeply segregated society. Mayella’s father, Bob Ewell, becomes furious with Atticus Finch for defending Tom Robinson and for the embarrassment he suffered during the trial.. Bob displays animosity towards Atticus and other members of the Finch family due to their involvement in the case. Bob Ewell’s personal vendetta against Atticus is fuelled by his desire for revenge attacked the family. Scout recounts her experience during the attack by Bob Ewell. Bob Ewell’s attack on Atticus’s family occurs on the evening of Halloween. As Scout and Jem are walking home through the dark, deserted streets, they are ambushed by Bob Ewell. Jem is knocked unconscious and seriously injured in the struggle. Just as Bob Ewell is about to harm Scout, mysterious person intervenes and saves the children by fights off Bob Ewell, ultimately resulting in Bob’s death. Scout recounts her experience during the attack by Bob Ewell. Initially, Scout mistakes the sound of someone staggering and panting for Jem, but upon further investigation, she realizes it is someone else. She then identifies the stranger as Atticus, thinking he has come to help them. However, it becomes clear that the man in the corner is not Atticus, but someone else. The identity of the man in the corner is later revealed to be Boo Radley.

When I pointed to him his palms slipped slightly, leaving greasy sweat streaks on the wall, and he hooked his thumbs in his belt. A strange small spasm shook him, as if he heard fingernails scrape slate, but as I gazed at him in wonder the tension slowly drained from his face. His lips parted into a timid smile, and our neighbor’s image blurred with my sudden tears.

“Hey, Boo,” I said (228)

As Scout points towards Boo, his palms slip with nervous sweat, small spasm ripples through him, as if he’s grappling with inner turmoil. However, as Scout observes him with wonder, the tension ebbs away from Boo’s face. She “realizes he is not to be feared. “Indeed she [Scout] sees from a new perspective, understands that Boo is not a ‘malevolent phantom’ (15) as described by local rumour [. . .]” (Champion 132). This moment marks a significant shift in their relationship, as Scout sees Boo not as a mysterious figure but as a human being deserving kindness and understanding. This revelation serves as a powerful moment of realization for Scout, as she comes to understand Boo’s true nature and the depth of his kindness and bravery. He is “*A deus ex machina* personified in Boo Radley is thus allowed not only to intervene, to intervene anonymously, to intervene with impunity, but also to

render compensatory justice” (Patrick Chura, 2000: 16). Boo Radley undergoes a significant transformation from being perceived as reclusive and timid at the start of the story to becoming brave and assertive by the end. Boo Radley undergoes a remarkable transformation in the novel, evolving from a reclusive and enigmatic figure to a brave and assertive presence by the end of the story. Through his transformation, Harper Lee challenges readers to question their own assumptions and biases, urging them to see beyond the surface and recognize the inherent humanity in all individuals, regardless of their outward appearance or social status. Boo Radley’s story serves as a reminder of the transformative power of kindness and understanding, inspiring readers to strive for a more inclusive and compassionate society.

### **Conclusion**

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, the power of the unspoken manifests through rumours and gossips. These gossips shape characters’ lives and the trajectories of their communities. The pervasive nature of rumours and gossip in these novels underscores the impact of societal judgement on individual reputations. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Crawford’s life is profoundly influenced by the whispers and stories spread about her. The novel begins with Janie returning to Eatonville, greeted by a chorus of gossiping townsfolk. Their speculations about her relationships and journey highlight the community’s inclination to judge without understanding. Throughout the novel, Janie’s choices, particularly regarding her marriages, become the subject of public scrutiny, reflecting how gossip can define and confine an individual’s identity. Similarly, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the small town of Maycomb is rife with gossip, affecting the characters deeply. The mysterious figure of Boo Radley becomes a focal point of rumours, shaping the children’s perceptions and fears. Additionally, the trial of Tom Robinson is mired in racial prejudice, with gossip and unfounded accusations fueling the town’s bigotry and ultimately leading to a miscarriage of justice. The characters of Scout and Jem Finch grapple with understanding the disparity between rumours and reality, learning crucial lessons about empathy and integrity. In both novels, the authors illustrate that gossip and rumours are not merely background noise but powerful forces that can alter lives and reflect broader societal issues. Hurston and Lee use these elements to explore themes of identity, reputation, and the destructive nature of prejudice. The power of the unspoken in the form of gossip and rumours reveals the fragile nature of truth within the communal consciousness, emphasising the need for discernment and compassion in the face of whispered words and unverified tales. Both novels expose the dual nature of rumours and gossip: as tools of both social cohesion and division. Through the experiences of Janie Crawford and the Finch family, readers

are reminded of the profound impact that unspoken words can have, urging a reflection on how we engage with and propagate the narratives that shape our communities.

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