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Bildungsroman and Trauma in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Dorothy Allison's
Bastard Out of Carolina

Published in 1960, Harper Lee's debut novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, recounts the childhood of Scout Finch and the events that transpire in her town of Maycomb. In a Bildungsroman, Lee has Scout's adult self narrate the novel as she documents her younger self's apparent growth from her naivety about the world to her maturation and viewing of the world with more sympathy. While Scout witnesses the impacts of the prejudices that permeate Maycomb, rarely is she affected by these events, leaving her an ambivalent witness to other people's trauma. When George Garret published his review of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, in which he likened Allison's novel to Lee's, he compared the technical aspects of their prose. Both Lee and Allison create "a living language" that is "exact and innovative" (3). However, the similarities between the two writers and their quintessential works do not stop there. Like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) recounts the childhood of a young girl's coming of age. However, for Allison's Bone Boatwright, her growth is a direct result of the traumas she experiences. While both novels center around young heroines' growth, Lee's Scout Finch still retains a childlike naivety, as she never truly reacts to and processes the traumatic events encompassing her childhood. Conversely, Allison's Bone Boatwright's trauma prevents her from sentimentalizing the circumstances of her childhood, allowing Allison to construct a more realistic and authentic Bildungsroman.

To compare these works appropriately, there must first be an understanding of what constitutes trauma. According to scholars Lesia M. Ruglass and Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, “psychological trauma can occur when a person experiences an extreme stressor that negatively affects his or her emotional or physical well-being” (4). For an extreme stressor to be a traumatic event, the event is typically “considered traumatic if [it] resulted in death or threatened death, actual or threatened physical injury, or actual or threatened sexual violation” (5). For the event to be deemed traumatic, the traumatized individual “could have directly experienced the event, witnessed the event, or learned of the event happening to a close friend or relative” (5). As research involving trauma has expanded, so has the discussion of what qualifies as a traumatic event. According to Don Catherall, there exists “small t traumas and large T traumas,” with large T traumas aligning with Ruglass and Kendall-Tackett’s definition and small t traumas referring to “events that are also life changing but do not qualify for the stressor criterion of PTSD or acute stress disorder” (63). Both large T and small t traumas can affect a child’s well-being and growth. “Depression, anxiety, anger, and fighting” (9) are just some of the symptoms of both large T and small t traumas (Greenwald). However, unlike small t traumas, large T traumas can result in post-traumatic symptoms including re-experiencing, avoidance, hyperarousal and hypervigilance, and affect dysregulation (Greenwald 16-18).

Scholar Laura Fine argues that “Scout absorbs, and learns from, everything that happens around her. Her every interaction and realization help form the adult she is to become” (76), but this argument does not align with the small impact that trauma has on Scout’s narrative. The first thing that Scout tells readers is that “when he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow” (3). She then admits that she believes the circumstances of his injury begin with the Ewells, while he believes “it began the summer Dill came to us” (3). This opening

allows Lee to establish at least two things about the narrative: it is being told retrospectively by a biased narrator, and it will most likely culminate in the breaking of Jem's arm. Having the adult Scout state that she maintains "that the Ewells started it all" suggests that even though Scout has gone through the events that lead to Jem's arm breaking, her age during these events inhibits her from processing them as completely as her older brother. Jem's assertion that the means of his injury begin with Dill is because "Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out" (3), and it is Boo Radley who saves the Finch children from Bob Ewell. However, because Scout is only six when she becomes fascinated with Boo Radley, she never picks up on the significance of the relationship that she and Jem form with him, a relationship that allows her to walk away relatively unscathed from Bob Ewell's attack. This is the first instance that readers are privy to Scout's naivety regarding traumatic events throughout her childhood.

Most of the traumatic events surrounding Scout's childhood directly relate to her father's involvement in Tom Robinson's case. The first time she is aware of Atticus's involvement is when Cecil Jacobs taunts her by saying Atticus "defended n—," a sentiment later echoed by her cousin Francis calling Atticus a "n— lover" (Lee 100, 110). In both situations, she is humiliated by these accusations, but it is only when she attacks Francis that she is physically punished. Her spanking by Uncle Jack should qualify her as a victim of a traumatic event, as she receives physical punishment without an opportunity to explain herself. Furthermore, this is the first instance where Scout's actions result in a physical punishment. Atticus has previously "been able to get by with threats," which means the act of physical punishment should be a big deal to Scout (116). However, Lee reveals that Atticus does not feel bad for the misunderstanding because "she earned it" (115). This admission implies that Atticus may have physically punished Scout himself if he had been the one to witness Scout's actions. This also implies that so long as

Atticus feels Scout has not been wronged, Scout herself will not view a situation as having wronged her. Scout's reason for her actions was to defend Atticus; if she respects her father enough to physically attack another, she will respect him enough to not feel wronged by Uncle Jack. Aside from Bob Ewell's attack, these are the only other instances of Scout experiencing first-hand trauma as a result of Tom Robinson's case.

In comparison many individuals aside from Scout are traumatized by Tom Robinson's case, including Jem, Mayella Ewell, and Tom Robinson. Jem is arguably the most affected by the events of the novel, as he is older and more aware of Maycomb's racial and poverty-based tensions. It is Jem who processes that Atticus prevents a lynching, a term that is never used in the scene with the Maycomb jail. It is Jem who witnesses and understands the trial and cries while muttering "it ain't right" after the guilty verdict (284). Finally, it is Jem whose arm breaks with "a dull crunching sound" in the encounter with Bob Ewell (351). Throughout all of these instances, Scout only is distressed when she sees Jem in trouble and views herself as being in danger. In contrast, Mayella Ewell's trauma is made a public spectacle at the trial, as Tom Robinson alludes to her sexual abuse, stating that "she says she never kissed a grown man before...she says what her papa do to her don't count" in his testimony (260). Atticus also implements victim-blaming tactics with Mayella when he questions her, asking her why she did not fight Tom off and if she seduced him. Finally, no character experiences more traumatic events than Tom Robinson. He falls victim to assault and accusations from a white family that he perpetuated the assault, and, as a result, he is put on trial, convicted, and murdered. At best, these instances provide a detached narrative where readers are aware that Scout is too young to understand the events around her. Jem even states that Scout should be allowed to remain at the trial because "she doesn't understand it, Reverend, she ain't nine yet," (232). At worst, Scout

reads as not caring about these instances until they affect her. While she may only be nine during Tom Robinson's trial, Jem is also a child, yet he is able to empathize with the people around him.

Allison centers her Bildungsroman with trauma and her heroine's accompanying responses. Readers immediately learn that Bone Boatwright's mother is in a coma during her birth and that the ones who name her "hadn't bothered to discuss how Anne would be spelled, so it wound up spelled three different ways on the form," highlighting a neglectful attitude towards Bone in the earliest stages of her life (3). Here, Allison underscores that Bone is "certified a bastard by the state of Carolina" because no matter how many times her mother attempts to change the "illegitimate" status on Bone's birth certificate, the courthouse clerks refuse to do so (3). This highlights her isolation from her family even further. Not only does her mother's side of the family appear to be neglectful of Bone, but the state solidifies her otherness from the rest of the Boatwrights by officially labeling her a bastard. Allison's readers are also informed of the financial status of the Boatwrights, as Bone comments that her mother "hated being called trash" (3). Right away, this indicates that Bone is a child who is a victim of poverty and only has a partial claim to family, as she has no idea who her father is and her mother's side is a bit negligent. Unlike Scout, there is no other voice to contest these truths, as her family and the state assert that she is an illegitimate child who comes from a poor background.

It is her illegitimacy and poverty that cause the two biggest traumatic events in Bone's life: her sexual abuse and her mother's abandonment. As previously discussed, Bone's illegitimate status renders her an outsider to her family. Her "blue eyes" and "hair as black as midnight" in contrast to her mother's blonde, "gold as sunlight" hair serve to isolate her even further (28). Not only is she legally marked as other, but her appearance physically also marks her as an outsider from her family. Her grandmother attempts to reassure Bone that her

appearance is a result of her great-great-grandfather's Cherokee blood, that "blue eyes an't that rare among the Cherokee around here" (26). However, this is contradicted by her aunt who tells her "you got a family you an't gonna know is your own—all you with that dark hair he had himself" (26). Bone's appearance remains a physical reminder to the rest of her family, especially to her mother, that she is an outsider. The isolation that Bone's mother feels as a result of an illegitimate daughter causes internal shame. Scholar J. Brooks Bousan cites this shame as Allison connecting "the damage of incest to the shame of illegitimacy" by showing "how the shaming of Bone's mother, Anney, and of Bone around illegitimacy" prepares Bone for the trauma and shame of incest (36). One of the biggest humiliations that Anney has, on top of her illegitimate daughter, is her poverty. It is one of the driving forces behind her pursuit of Glen Waddell, whose upper middle-class family "owned the dairy, and the oldest Waddell was running for district attorney" (Allison 10). As scholar Natalie Carter observes, when Anney meets Glen, "she sees something far more important than a chance at love...she sees an escape from the ceaseless poverty into which she was born" where she will no longer have to cope with the shame it brings herself and daughters (891). Having Glen in the family would also give Bone a father, someone to take away the shame that Anney feels by having her daughter labeled as illegitimate. However, it is ultimately Glen's presence that solidifies Bone's trauma of illegitimacy and poverty while also adding in sexual abuse and abandonment.

The first time that Glen assaults Bone is in the car while Anney is in labor at the hospital. Bone is not aware of what Glen is doing, but she knows that it is wrong, painful, and scares her. When Glen is holding his erection—a word not used in this scene like "lynching" in *To Kill a Mockingbird*—Bone says, "I knew what was under his hand. I'd seen my cousins naked, laughing, shaking their things and joking, but this was a mystery, scary, and hard" (47). Unlike

Scout's interactions with trauma, Bone's interactions are direct and horrifying for both her and the audience. Also unlike Scout, Allison makes readers aware of how this molestation, along with the ones that follow it, traumatizes Bone. According to Dianna Kenny, one effect of child sexual abuse is sexualized behavior, including "inappropriate knowledge or behaviour; excessive masturbation" (197). Soon after her molestation, Bone begins to fantasize about "being tied up and put in a haystack while someone set the dry stale straw ablaze" (Allison 63). This violent, masturbatory fantasy, which ends with Bone admitting "I came. I orgasmed on my hand to the dream of fire," aligns with Kenny's assessment of sexualized behavior. Not only is Bone masturbating at a young age, but she admits to doing it "whenever I was alone," aligning with the excessiveness mentioned in Kenny's research (63). Later on, once Glen starts beating Bone regularly, these fantasies grow even more violent. Bone, imagines she "was tied to the branches...someone had beaten me with sticks and put their hands in my clothes...someone had tied me high up in the tree, gagged me and left me to starve to death while the blackbirds pecked at my ears" all while rocking herself against a tree outside (176). Not long after this, she begins to incorporate objects into her masturbation sessions. She finds pleasure in the chain she steals from Aunt Raylene's house, "[putting] it between my legs, pulling it back and forth" (193). The incorporation of dangerous objects into her masturbation sessions demonstrates Bone's need for control, as she now has the sexual power in her hands. Rather than engaging in dangerous acts against her will, Bone is the one choosing to use an old chain to provide pleasure. This further aligns with Kenny's research, as the "powerlessness" (196) that comes with sexual abuse is curbed by her use of the chain.

Bone also suffers from "behavioral sequelae" or "poor self-esteem; depression; anger reactions; delinquency" as a result of her molestation and later beatings (Kenny 197). The chain

she uses to masturbate soon becomes a tool for breaking and entering a store and robbing the place. This act of delinquency is motivated by the “anger beat[ing] inside me” from her repeated beatings; it serves as a stand-in for letting her anger out on the man she believes truly deserves it: Daddy Glen (Allison 226). Bone’s perception of herself alternates constantly throughout the narrative; one moment she views herself as “scared and angry” and then next she believes she is “mean and vicious” (209, 213). This negative self-image is also Glen’s doing. When Bone sees herself in Glen’s eyes, she “wanted to die. No, I wanted to already be dead...He looked at me and I was ashamed of myself” (209). Unlike Scout, Bone is constantly changing and reacting to the traumas that have been inflicted on her, whether that be through her actions or her mindset. This is most apparent at the end of the novel when Glen violently rapes Bone. Prior to the rape, Bone “looked in Daddy Glen’s eyes again and was too afraid to move,” but as he is assaulting her she attempts to fight back; Bone “didn’t care what might happen” so long as she tried to fight against him (281, 282). Bone’s perception of Anney also changes as a result of this final rape. After it occurs, and Anney is comforting her daughter’s rapist, Bone is enraged and thinks “I’d said I could never hate her, but I hated her now for the way she held him” (291). In this moment, Bone finally realizes that her mother will always choose Glen over her. This realization is made official during the novel’s final scene, where Anney gives Bone her birth certificate and leaves her. In this final traumatic experience, Bone thinks to herself, “I was already who I was going to be” because no matter what happens to her following the novel’s conclusion, she will always be shaped by the traumas of her childhood (309). Unlike Scout, who finds comfort in Atticus’ presence at the end of Lee’s novel, there is no room for sentimentality in Bone’s narrative; she begins and ends the novel a bastard.

Lee and Allison construct narratives that have both been given the label Bildungsroman. Both authors center their narratives around young heroines and their experiences with trauma. However, while there are many characters in Lee's novel who are traumatized by the events that transpire throughout the narrative, Lee's heroine Scout is not one of them. Despite its narrator telling her story retroactively, Lee never explores the lasting effects that Scout's trauma and trauma witnessing had on her. Instead, the audience is given incidents where an older Scout still does not comprehend the events that transpired in Maycomb so long ago. In comparison, Allison's heroine Bone is repeatedly traumatized throughout her childhood. Her trauma is the focal point of the novel and it is what the narrative hinges on to move the novel forward. This, combined with the story being told actively through the eyes of a child, allows for Allison to explore how repeated trauma and abuse impacts a Bone. Ultimately, this results in Allison's narrative, while ending bleakly, being a more authentic Bildungsroman than Lee's.

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