



## Unveiling the Unspoken: Exploring the Communication Dynamics and Disability Discourse in *To Kill a Mockingbird* through Grice's Maxims

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### Abstract:

Language has always been one of the potent tools for exploring meanings and contexts, both in comprehending situational experiences and elucidating the existential predicaments of individuals. Through the intricacies of language, individuals make meanings of umpteen otherwise complicated ideas- sometimes discursive and, in certain cases, societal. Various literary texts have tried to elucidate the nuances associated with what can be considered as a "dis-abled body" as opposed to something as the 'abled body.' Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* acts as one of the foundational texts encompassing the ramifications of disability of the character Boo Radley. That stated, it is language and its subtle overtones which make the aspect of disability prominent throughout the narrative for the readers, as there are innumerable gossips and murmurs which validate the subordinate position of the disabled, Boo Radley. By hinging on the theory of maxims by H.P. Grice, this paper critically attempts to postulate the myriad complexities associated with the communication of various characters in the text, which reiterate the disability of Boo Radley. In doing so, the paper also aims to depict the general tenets of communication, which further situate language as a decisive means of unfurling a given context. The research will follow a qualitative design in that it will make an effort to critically explain the dynamics of communication seen in the text, thereby paving the way for the surfacing of Boo Radley's disability.

**Keywords:** Communication, Disability, Discursive, H.P. Grice, Maxims

### 1. Introduction:

Human relations and interactions, in most cases, get wrapped in the complexities of the dynamics of a society, which are manifested in numerous literary texts. Even with the underlying significance of difficulty in decoding the accurate meaning of a particular situation, certain texts sometimes tend to provide the readers with ambiguous scenarios. The text concerning this research, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, stands as one of the towering narratives centering on the predicaments of disability of Boo Radley, the entanglements of the different processes of interaction between other characters coupled with the stunned silence which the narrative employs to make the readers aware of the inherent disability associated with Boo. Set in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama in the 1930s, the text appears gripping and enticing as it draws the readers to delve deep into the intricacies

of the tangled thoughts and ideas exchanged between characters like Jem and Scout. Lee employs a very subtle narrative technique to make the readers know that Boo appears almost an outcast, someone who was made to lead his life away from the general milieu of the people and society. However, it is the discourse associated with Boo's disability which underlies layers of communication between different characters seen in the text as the narrative gets engulfed in the secluded life that he leads throughout the novel.

Bordering what can be regarded as discrimination based on race between the whites and the blacks, Lee employs a narration based in first-person, primarily from the standpoint of Jean Louise 'Scout' Finch. The conversation among various characters appears to be highlighted in illustrating a separate aura in the novel, as the style associated with communication generally mirrors various physical settings, time zones, and the societal positioning of the people in Maycomb. It has to be acknowledged that the author adheres to three deliberate modes associated with communication in the novel in terms of communication among children, adults and guardians. The character of Atticus is presented to the readers with the assumption that the individuals he speaks to are primarily adults. Significantly, Lee also deals with many situations of intelligible grasping of conversations and overhearing situations by different characters, which further facilitates the inextricable layers of communication that permeate the narrative. As an instance, Atticus was seen to be extending his support towards a black man who was accused of raping a white girl named Mayella Ewell. Atticus is even seen to be urging Scout to develop an empathetic behaviour for the black people in his conversation with Scout as he says, "I just hope that Jem and Scout come to me for their answers instead of listening to the crowd. I hope they trust me enough." (Lee, 93). The novel, thus, becomes a true living picture of human communication which echoes ramifications of the associated language, which falls in line with what Littlewood has stated to explain the context

Literary texts have a different relationship to external reality. They, too, depend upon it for their raw material and interpretability. Still, after selecting elements from it, they aim to combine these elements into a new portion of reality that exists only within the text. The reader is asked to recreate this reality in his mind, using evidence from the text's language and his own knowledge of the world. His relationship to a literary text thus differs in important respects from that of the reader of an informational text. (cited in Carter and Brumfit 14)

Concerning Boo, the interactions he carried out with the people of Maycomb act as substantiation of his disability, as there are many instances in the novel where people from the village spread rumours related to him, committing heinous acts which he did not commit. Diagnosed with Autism spectrum disorder, Boo is presented as a child to the readers, with communication strategies which are broken and fragmented, retarded social skills just as to mingle with other members of society. However, Lee depicts him to be having extraordinary intelligence, as is the case with autistic individuals, which makes him different from other individuals. Thus, it is this intelligence of Boo which acts as the foil for the heroism which he displays towards the end of the novel.

## **2. Objectives:**

1. To make a character sketch of Boo Radley enveloping his disability alongside the critical analysis of the communication discourse about the interactions with other characters.
2. To amalgamate Grice's theory of maxims with the intricacies of communication and associated language, focussing on the disability of Boo Radley.

## **3. Literature Review:**

As a foundational text of racial discrimination, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has found a home among researchers across the globe. Many works have been carried out, considering its varied themes. However, as observed, the earlier works primarily focussed on discrimination

based on race, the societal tendencies of the people in the 1960s, and the nuances of communication seen in the novel, among others. The literary works which have been reviewed for carrying out this particular research are stated below in table no – 3.1:

Table – 3.1: Review of Literature

Author	Year	Title	Key findings
Lindsey Horn	2020	Boo's Superpower: An Exploration of <i>To Kill a Mockingbird's</i> Boo Radley on the Autism Spectrum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The research Explains the nuances of disability surrounding Boo Radley as he was diagnosed with autism.</li> <li>• It deals with the different modes of behaviour and interaction of Boo with other members in the fictional town of Maycomb in Alabama, which made him an object of laughter as he was not normal.</li> <li>• The chief finding of the research was that the character of Boo appears as one of the most important ones in the novel as he is presented to be an intelligent individual as opposed to what was thought of him by the people.</li> </ul>
Chen Sun and Dan Zhou	2021	Exploring Discipline and Resistance in <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> from Perspective of Foucault's Theory of Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on the aspect of power which regulates every activity of an individual in the modern society.</li> <li>• The research argues that different characters in the novel get disciplined by various acts dealing with communication, which border on the idea of a regulatory agent.</li> <li>• The research draws on the idea of power put forward by Michel Foucault and opines that the powerful group in a society always tends to exert their control and power on the secondary section, which is the case in the novel as Boo, an autistic child, becomes an object to be laughed at, by other people in the town of Maycomb.</li> <li>• The primary finding of the research was that every society appears to be a mechanism associated with discipline and subsequent control which deals with aspects of justice and injustice to regulate people.</li> </ul>
Yam Kala Bhusal	2012	Mode of Communication in the Novel <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deals with the various modes of communication seen in the novel concerning different characters that lend an artistic dimension to the narrative.</li> <li>• The research argues that intricacies of communication play a pivotal role in unmasking different hidden meanings of a</li> </ul>

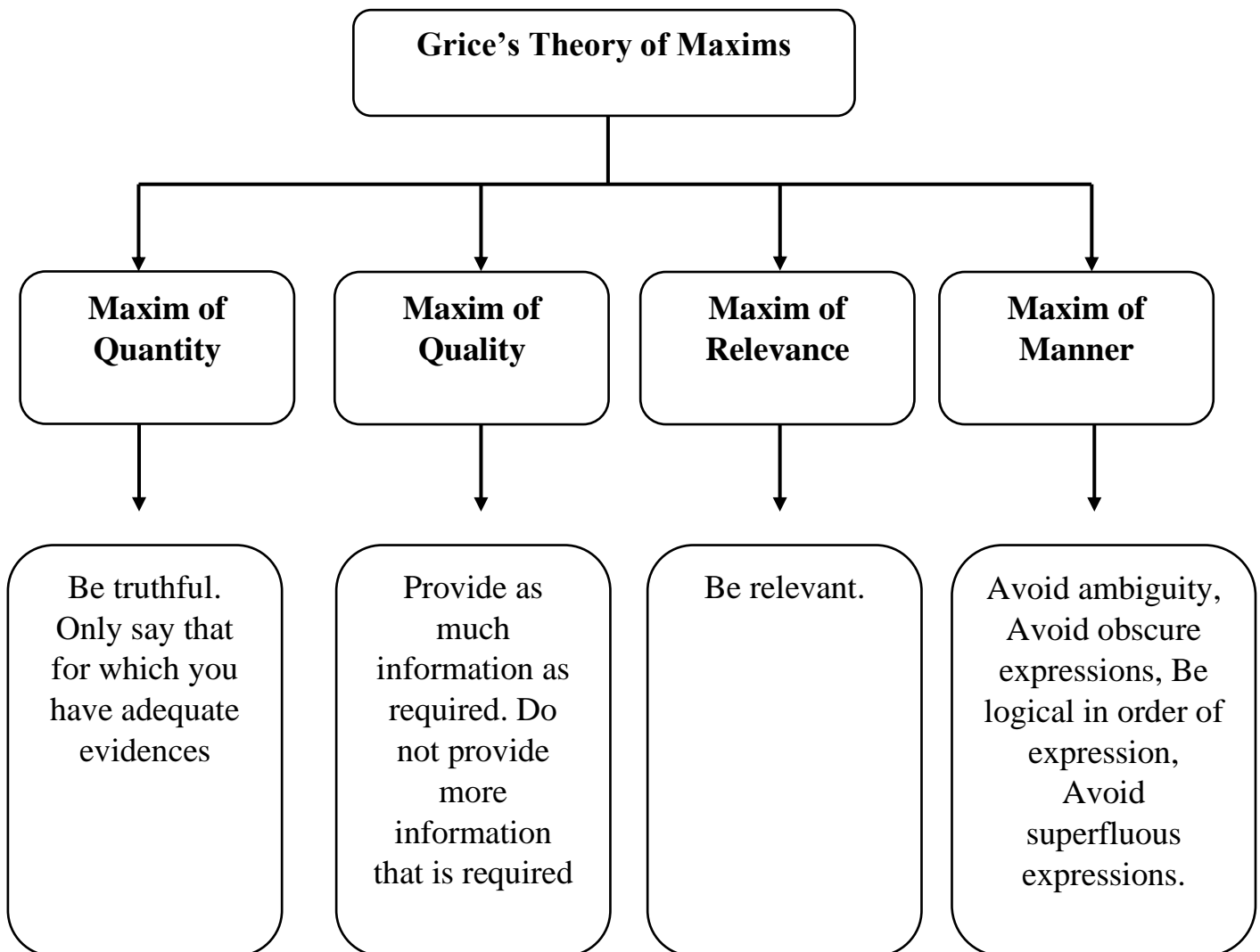
			<p>text, which find notable manifestation in the narrative as characters like Atticus and Jem seem to employ subtle communication strategies, even silent responses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The primary finding of the research is that communication strategies employed in the novel help comprehend the diversity associated with social language and the traits of a society set in racially discriminatory America in the 1960s.</li> </ul>
Wening Tyas Rah Hutami	2014	Racial Prejudice Revealed in Harper Lee's <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasises the layered discrimination based on race that occurred during the Great Depression in America.</li> <li>• The research centres on the black character, Tom Robinson, who becomes the victim of racial discrimination by the whites in the city of Maycomb. As an instance, the research pends down the example of discrimination when the whites are being given the seats downstairs in the court where it was assumed to be cooler as opposed to the blacks who were asked to be seated upstairs.</li> <li>• The primary finding of this research is that people should develop traits of compassion and empathy towards each other so that the world becomes a better place to live in. It also argues that no individual should be oppressed based on racial belonging.</li> </ul>
Thomas A. Mattappallil	2017	Significant Facets of Harper Lee's Novel <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> : A Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study plunges deep into the primary aspects of the novel by focusing on the alterations which took place in the world after the devastations of the World Wars.</li> <li>• The research is a significant explication of the author's development to the maturity phase, as innumerable personal traits in the narrative echo the author's personal experiences.</li> <li>• The research depicts an urge to change the mindset of the American people towards the racially divided Blacks.</li> <li>• The primary finding of the research is that there is the creation of a modern America with compassion and empathy being the significant traits of the people alongside a display of welcoming behaviour for the blacks in the society.</li> </ul>

#### 4. Discussion and Analysis:

Suppose the communication among different characters takes centre stage in explaining the inherent meanings of the narrative. In that case, it is also the cruel code of conduct by the people of the town of Maycomb in isolating Boo and making him lead a life of segregation that needs mention. Lee presents the character of Boo in the novel almost as a voiceless individual only once, making him adhere to verbal means of communication when he asks Scout, "Will you take me home?" (Lee 320). Thus, as the readers learn, more than a verbal mode of expressing ideas and thoughts, body language, gestures, and different objects play significant roles in Boo's life to complete the means of expressing his views and ideas to others. Also, Lee depicts that Boo never preferred light as he was not comfortable with the light that other people would generally prefer. As Scout remarked, "Boo would feel more comfortable in the dark" (Lee, 313).

With his four maxims of language, Herbert Paul Grice stands as a colossal figure in the global field of language. The behaviour depicted by different characters in the novel aligns with the idea of the theory associated with implicature propounded by Grice. While communicating with one another, Grice opined that human beings always depict more meanings than what is seen as the literal meaning of words. In his words, the situation of implicature is visualised when individuals violate one of the four notable maxims associated with communication: Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner. The figure 4.1. Given below shows the Grice's Theory of Maxims.

Fig: 4.1 – Grice's Theory of maxims



### Maxim of Quantity:

The Maxim of Quantity refers to the precise use of information without giving exaggerated information for a particular exchange of thoughts and ideas in communication. The primary attribute of this communication is sticking to whatever information is demanded in a particular situation. It prioritises a particular length of information so that a particular communicative act occurs without any ambiguity. It violates this maxim when there is extra information in a particular context than whatever is required in a situation.

#### Violation of Maxim of Quantity in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*:

It is about the conversations associated with Boo in the novel that different characters violate the four Maxims in many instances. There are innumerable instances where the readers can find incomplete and misleading information and facts regarding the character from other characters, which create ambiguous situations and incoherent narration. The readers cannot but find themselves in the dark concerning the contemplation of the presentation of the character of Boo by other characters in the novel who violate the maxim of quantity in this case. The presentation of misleading information by other characters depicts both the societal attitudes of the American societies of the 1960s along with their behaviour towards disabled individuals. The following paragraph is a captivating illustration of the violation of the maxim.

Inside the house lived a malevolent phantom. People said he existed, but Jem and I had never seen him. People said he went out at night when the moon was down and peeped in windows. When people's azaleas froze in a cold snap, it was because he had breathed on them. (Lee 19)

It was seen that Boo was never welcome by other members in Maycomb and was labelled as an object of fear- to be discarded and thrown away, and thus, he was made to live away from the residence of other individuals. It was even seen that his caretakers also contemplated on the fact of sending him to the mental hospital. Lee also portrays that Boo made a stronger connection with younger individuals, as is the case with autistic individuals, to develop a closer bond with younger individuals. Thus, Boo was closer to Scout, who was six-year-old and Jem, who was ten years old. The fact that Boo is an individual to be hated by other members of the fictional town of Maycomb begets an air of suspicion among the people, leading to the construction of a completely false and misrepresented identity of the character. This fact, as it was seen right throughout the novel, contributed a great deal to the societal exclusion of Boo, thereby urging the readers to draw on the complexities of the societal behaviour of the people alongside the perceived nuances of modes of communication.

### Maxim of Quality:

The Maxim of Quality indicates adhering to attributes of truthfulness for a successful conversation between two individuals or individuals in a group. It vehemently rejects the falsity of information, which would cloud a communicative act with an air of doubt and uncertainty. This maxim espouses an honest delineation of concepts so that there is truthful presentation of any information that a particular situation demands about it being true to the situation. Violation of it implies giving any information that is not true in a particular situation or giving any information that is not adequate for substantiating a particular situation.

#### Violation in Maxim of Quality in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*:

The readers can find the violation of the Maxim of Quality in the narrative in the following remark by Jem about the desire of Boo to stay inside the house rather than going outside, "I think 'm beginning to understand why Boo Radley's stayed shut up in the house all

this time... it is because he wants to stay inside" (Lee, 43). It has to be acknowledged that an autistic individual comes with myriad experiences and desires, and there are numerous thoughts which seem to work in tandem in the mind of the person. Considering the presence of multiple forms of experiences, attributing reclusive behaviour to a person just by taking his desire to stay indoors into account is indeed a reductionist means of comprehending an individual's personality. This violation of the maxim significantly falls in line with the argument put forward by Ane Gilje, considering the perceptions of individuals to make someone a deviant and disabled as opposed to others who are considered normal. In her words, "What people overlook when viewing literary characters as either normal or less normal is why we see them as different, alienated or queer, compared to other characters in literary works" (21).

Suppose the discourse associated with a disability is considered. In that case, the remark by Jem completely negates the multifarious lived as well as situational experiences of Boo, which structure and also regulate his autonomous self in a society which was not conducive to him. Scout opined that Boo never behaved normally with the other characters and depicted traits which implied "as if he [is] not sure his hands and feet could make proper contact with the things he [touches]" (Lee, 318). Thus, the behaviour of the different characters in the novel becomes evident that they never depicted compassionate behaviour towards disabled characters, casting a cold eye to the nuances of communication. They also became representations of poor understanding of the life of an individual who is not generally considered able.

Maxim of Relation:

The Maxim of Relation implies becoming relevant in a particular context. A particular act of communication always demands a correct presentation of information relevant to a particular context. This maxim stands tall as it places its value on deleting multitudes of extra or irrelevant information. It also pertains to the extent of relevance so that a particular conversation is clear regarding the exchange of meanings. Violation of this maxim is seen when there is an abrupt change in the topics of a conversation, shifts in the degree of a topic being relevant to a particular talk, etc.

Violation of Maxim of Relation in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*:

The behaviour depicted by Boo concerning sound is one of the significant aspects associated with the violation of the maxim of relation. Scout made the following remark in this regard, "Every night-sound I heard from my cot on the back porch was magnified three-fold; every scratch of feet on gravel was Boo Radley seeking revenge" (Lee, 6). Lee does not showcase any straightforward connection between sound and the so-called abnormal behaviour of Boo, but Scout makes the assumption of the same and links it to their apprehensive nature of Boo. One can, in this regard, associate the characters in the novel with not having a proper understanding of the characteristic traits of an individual who is diagnosed with autism, as they always resort to either false or ambiguous assumptions to label Boo as an outcast and a secluded individual. As a general phenomenon, in most of the literature emerging out of the Southern American countries, disability acts as a potent force which affects and alters various structures of society. As Kathrine Patterson makes a notable point

Even when the community is confronted with clear evidence which contradicts their beliefs, Arthur Radley still functions as a scapegoat for all things morbid, inexplicable and mysterious. He is 'Other' for the community to use him as a catch-all explanation for anything and everything they do not understand and cannot explain otherwise. (33)

The remark by Scout also indicates the direct connection between the perceived meaning associated with sound and the real connection which showcases the missing link of

authenticating the correct meaning in an act of communication. The readers can also sense an associated fear in Scout's mind considering Boo, which further substantiates the fact that the character was unaware of the ways of dealing with an autistic individual. Human beings, while in their lived situations, become subjects to numerous experiences and societal conditions which might appear alien to them, as is the case with the different characters in the novel, considering the disability of Boo Radley. Thus, the constructed and false information can be regarded as a result of the lack of knowledge of the characters concerning the disability and also the lack of compassionate behaviour for Boo, which further relegated him to secluded corners.

#### Maxim of Manner:

The Maxim of Manner is indicative of precision during a talk. Its primary focus is on how a particular conversation gets carried out in terms of being conveyed correctly. This maxim avoids any pompous language in a speech that would obscure clear ideas transfer. It also espouses avoidance of a particular phrase and word that can be explained in numerous ways to uncover its meaning and urges a presentation of a talk in complete order. Its violation implies the delineation of an idea in a complex way that would not appear for comprehension of its meaning.

#### Violation of Maxim of Manner in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*:

To showcase the violation of the maxim of manner, Lee presents the readers with a notable conversation between Atticus and Scout, "Atticus, is Boo Radley really crazy?" – "Scout, just because someone doesn't conform to what society expects doesn't mean they're crazy. Boo Radley's just different, and we need to respect that" (44). The readers can sense the violation of the maxim in the reply by Atticus to the question put forward by Scout because Atticus, instead of delving deep into the features of disability, makes use of highly sophisticated language and takes an indirect route to answer. With this answer, the readers can find themselves in a state of confusion concerning the actual condition of Boo as the reply by Atticus does not give any hint of the same, thus, inviting the readers to draw their conclusions which can easily be ambiguous and vague. As a disabled character, Boo emerges as someone who reifies the imperfect elements in a particular society as "The disabled are, in fact necessary to expose the imperfection and inhumanity" (Behling 88).

The indirect response by Atticus, as it can be stated, dismantles the foundations of the discourse associated with the broader field of disability and its associated literature. However, the readers can also sense an empathetic behaviour in the reply as he insists on becoming cordial towards a person who does not align with society's given norms and codes of conduct. As opposed to other characters who make a blatant rejection of the mental health of Boo, Atticus displays an air of compassion which ignites a ray of sensibility in the pages of the narrative which otherwise have been harsh on the disabled character. Disability studies advocate for inclusivity of every individual regardless of mental or physical health, and the reply by Atticus acts as a foundation for embracing Boo within the confinements of his secluded physical space in the fictional town of Mayford. Lee also presents the character of Atticus to be encompassing the traits of kindness and generosity as he is shown to be full of affection for Boo. He says, "You never really understand anyone a person until you consider things from his point of view-- until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee, 33).

#### **5. Conclusion**

In the larger scheme of ideas, the different misrepresented facts and information regarding Boo Radley by other characters in the novel lead him to lead a life of social exclusion. The character, if one observes minutely, never displays welcoming behaviour towards Boo, which further bog him down in society as the hated behaviour of the other members is not conducive to him. The violation of the four maxims by Grice is ample



evidence that they never adhered to the correct rules of effective communication, often mislabelling the disabled character to suit their purpose rather than developing signs of care and love for him. The presentation of the character of Boo almost becomes gothic in the novel, which echoes the general tenets of gothic fiction. As Sonya Freeman Loftis remarks

Lee's Gothic depiction of autism reflects more considerable cultural anxieties about autistic differences. The Gothic mode is centrally concerned with interrogating the human's boundaries. The frequent dehumanisation of autistic people in literary works and cultural representations has an exact parallel in the Gothic examination of the division between natural and supernatural. (22)

Harper Lee, thus, in the novel, invites the attention of the readers to not only develop kind and compassionate behaviour for individuals struggling with disability but also, at the same time, portray the societal tenets of the 1960s Southern American societies. As a remarkable turn, the novel, towards its end, presents Boo as a hero, thereby hinting at the creation of a society which prioritises equality of every member irrespective of their mental or physical health condition. Thus, the application of Grice's maxims to the novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird* acts as a lens to view the novel from a new perspective, eliciting a major standpoint of the recreation of a society devoid of discrimination, where empathy reigns supreme and individuals tend to get their desired value and ontological position. The associated 'otherness' of Boo right throughout the novel gets subverted at the end with his presentation as a hero. This act makes the text, a cornerstone of a society, advocating for the equality of individuals.

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