

To Kill a Mocking Bird: An Analysis

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The 1961 Pulitzer prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee is a book for all seasons; a book whose vastly popular universal appeal extends to readers of all ages. It works at various levels with a wealth of moral implications, which though subtly present in the background, make no clumsy didactic intrusions into the telling of the story. The book has as its setting a small Southern American town near Montgomery in Alabama which goes by the fictional name of Maycomb . Harper Lee with tremendous insight and sensitivity relives her own childhood memories of the nineteen thirties in the midst of a conservative White population, still nursing the wounds of defeat during the American Civil War, and tenaciously clinging to the traditions and beliefs of an outdated order. The Black community has no expectations from its White counterparts. These Black folk are a submissive, generous, caring people, resigned to their fate and uncomplainingly accepting it. The trial of an innocent negro, Tom Robinson, for supposedly raping a White woman and the pronouncement of guilty by an all White jury, serve as a glaring example of wilful prejudice and a blatant miscarriage of justice. The trial is undoubtedly one of the high lights of the book, but amongst its greatest achievements is Harper Lee's portrayal of the lawyer for the defence, Atticus Finch, a remarkable presentation by any account.

One of the most challenging tasks a novelist faces is to depict a near perfect character. Dickens, a great caricaturist, fails miserably when he attempts to draw his paragons of perfection. But in the presentation of Atticus Finch's character, inspired by that of Harper Lee's own father, we have a remarkable creation of a perfect gentleman, near faultless individual, who is still very much alive and can hold his own among the world's greatest creations.

Children are a product of their home lives and environment. Boo Radley, Dil, Mayella Ewell, Jem and Scout become what they are because of what

life metes out to them at home. It is here, as in everything else related to Atticus, that he stands way above others, and yet not a whiff of the saccharine is there in his making. He stands as a model of the non-interfering, widower-parent who respects his children's individuality and allows them to develop according to their own preferences and not the dictates of a tradition-bound, hypocritical, hierarchical society. A delightfully amusing and revealing scene, indicative of the family relationship and the pressures at work occurs when Atticus' sister Alexandra, whom Scout firmly believes is a changeling, comes to stay with them. A close examination of the scene is indicative of the informal, natural ties between father and children, the embarrassment and discomfiture that occurs when Atticus duty-bound, is compelled to subscribe to something which goes against his grain and the amazement and disturbing impact it has on his children.¹

But if Atticus never enters into his children's rooms without knocking, does not pry too closely at the games they play, he is by no means an indulgent parent. Discipline is firmly and sternly exercised when other individual's feelings are at stake. "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view, until you climb into his skin and walk around in it"² is his belief. He not merely adheres to this but makes sure that his children also learn to stand in other people's shoes. Their education is a product of several such instances, where Atticus teaches by example, occasionally faces opposition from the children, but eventually the lesson is driven home. The Mrs. Dubose episode where Jem is compelled by his father to read to the nasty, incurably sick woman who takes every opportunity to verbally attack Atticus, "the nigger lover" is one such incident. After her death, Atticus tells his children: "I wanted you to see what real courage is... It's when you know you're licked before you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. Mrs. Dubose won, all ninety-eight pounds of her."³ The point Atticus wishes to underline to his indignant children, who were compelled to sacrifice much of their free time reading to a mean and bigoted woman, is that Mrs. Dubose had achieved her goal to break free from

morphine. This incident could well have been conveniently omitted. The moral war Mrs. Dubose wages against her addiction serves no purpose and does no good for she herself is a dying woman. In hindsight, a more mature Scout, who as a little girl had been painfully embarrassed, puzzled and humiliated because her father had aroused tremendous resentment by putting up a strong defence for a black man, probably saw events in a different perspective. Mrs. Dubose's struggle against "the clock and mortality", self-centred as it is, may be compared to Atticus' disinterested struggle to uphold his own morals. Despite the hopelessness of his case, the resentment and humiliation the family were subject to and the lack of support in the town, Atticus persisted. He informed his children that he would not be able to ever look them in the eye, if he had not done his best for an innocent black man condemned to the gallows. And the effort was not in vain. Tom was falsely implicated. But the shocking verdict was glaringly there and could not be wished away. A giant step taken, would see fruition several decades later as Atticus optimistically foresaw.

However Atticus, generous with others and mindful of extenuating circumstances when dealing with them, can be rigidly obstinate when it comes to situations involving himself and his children. As long as Atticus was convinced that Jem in defending himself and Scout had caused Bob Ewell's death, he would not compromise with the supposed truth. In a powerfully moving yet determined, emotion-charged speech, he explains his stand.⁴ Matters change, when the truth comes out. It was the publicity shy recluse Arthur Radley, in his attempt at rescuing the children, who had struck that fatal blow. "Scout, Mr. Ewell fell on his knife. Can you possibly understand?"⁵ asks the hapless father to his daughter. "Atticus looked like he needed cheering up. I ran to him and hugged him and kissed him with all my might.' Yes sir, I understand,' I assured him. 'Mr. Tate was right.' Atticus disengaged himself and looked at me. 'What do you mean?' 'Well, it'd be sort of likes hootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?"⁶ Atticus' advice to his children when he bought them the guns they so desired as a Christmas gift, had finally gone home. "Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a

mockingbird.”⁷ As Scout points out it was the only time Atticus spoke of something as a sin. Mockingbirds spread joy with their music. They were neither destructive nor vicious. They become a symbol of innocence. This mockingbird motif which gives the novel its name is the device by which the two otherwise different plot elements are unified. Boo Radley and Tom Robinson may be interpreted as the two principal mockingbirds. They come from totally different backgrounds, but are innocent victims, exploited by callous, self-centred forces. Boo has been transformed by rumour into a mysterious, unnatural figure with blood-stained hands who dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch. His imprisonment at home is the consequence of a youthful prank in the company of other boys. He is made to pay a life-long price by being made to live at home in solitary confinement by unimaginative foot-washing Baptist parents whose proud family name had received a set-back. Tom Robinson must bear the consequences of a White woman’s indiscretion and for being the gentleman that he was and rendering her the help she required. Ultimately to kill a mocking-bird is to exploit another’s weakness. To Atticus no crime could be worse than that of a White man taking advantage of a Black man’s helplessness. Despite the pain both men have suffered, it is the purity of their heart that distinguishes them in their interactions with others. Both Jem and Dill may also be termed mockingbirds for their exposure to the world results in their loss of innocence and the pain of growing up.

At one level *To Kill a Mocking Bird* has the makings of a Bildungsroman. It is a sensitive portrayal of Jem’s painful entrance into adolescence and the accompanying disillusionment that follows in a world characterised by exploitation. The Finch children’s home provides them a security most other children do not enjoy. Harper Lee uses this as yet another theme in a novel which focuses attention on the upbringing of children and their crucial formative years. Dill’s broken home contributes to his sensitivity and the grief he experiences at the crass behaviour of the prosecution attorney during the Tom Robinson trial. His constant escape into a world of the imagination, his unnatural interest in Boo Radley, his promise to

get married to the eight year old Scout and get babies are all an outcome of this.

The book's vast portrait gallery of eccentric characters of varied hues and prejudices further adds to the interest of the novel. These characters are essentially flat but contribute in no small measure to the quiet and at times wry humour that characterizes both Lee's style of functioning as also that of some of her more sensitively drawn characters. Probably the most entertaining of these characters is the eight year old Scout herself. She is the book's narrator and her naivety in reporting adult actions without understanding them add to the quiet hilarity of many a scene. With her as narrator, the novel has a double perspective. We see situations both from the child's point of view and at times from the retrospective musings of an adult. Her sense of justice is still basic and fundamental. Thus the hypocrisy of her teacher who can whole-heartedly condemn Hitler's persecution of the Jews and yet "be ugly"⁸ about the poor persecuted Blacks at home baffles her. She accepts the norm that the verdict of the majority must be right and therefore questions the actions of her father whom the White community viciously term a "nigger lover". Scout's mercurial, lovable nature adds new dimensions to a novel rich in God's plenty. The only regret Lee's many admiring readers undoubtedly have is that she did not think it fit to write more novels than she has.

All page numbers from the text are from the following edition:-

Lee, Harper: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Published by Arrow Books, 2010. London: The Random House Group Limited.

1. Harper Lee: *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. See pgs. 146, 147 and 148.
2. *Ibid.*, pg. 33
3. *Ibid.*, pg. 124
4. *Ibid.*, pgs 300, 301 and 302
5. *Ibid.*, pg.304
6. *Ibid.*, pg. 304
7. *Ibid.*, pg. 99
8. *Ibid.* pg.272