

Leanna Waldron

Rob Hale

Writing About Literature Laboratory

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Morality Overcoming Prejudice in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a coming-of-age story set in small-town Maycomb, Alabama in the 1950s. Like any small southern town in this era, Maycomb is full of scandal, gossip and prejudice; many characters are considered outcasts simply for being different from those who make up society's rules. Throughout the novel, Lee's innocent and naïve protagonist, Scout, is surrounded by a harsh social hierarchy that ranges from well-to-do white folks to the poor black community. However, Scout has positive influences in her life—her father, Atticus, and a neighbor, Miss Maudie—who teach her to disregard the so-called importance of this hierarchy. Lee effectively uses indirect characterization in the form of character's actions and interactions with others in order to demonstrate the empathetic nature of these characters. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee uses indirect characterization to illustrate that empathy for outsiders is more important to becoming a moral person than trusting society's conventions.

Atticus Finch is characterized as an exemplary father figure who not only takes an active interest in his children, but teaches them true lessons of morality and empathy. Early on, he gives Scout a piece of advice that recurs throughout the story and helps her along the road to maturity. He tells her, "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" (32). It is this advice that Scout repeats to herself during some key moments in the novel and helps her understand Walter Cunningham and her teacher, Miss Caroline (32) as well as deal with her ever-changing relationship with her brother Jem (57). Ultimately, her father's

lesson teaches her that Boo Radley is a person, not just a phantom that lives in a creepy house. By showing the effect that Atticus's advice has on Scout, Lee indirectly characterizes him as both a father that has a positive influence on his children, as well as a man who is taking an active role in teaching his children good morals and values.

Atticus does not just tell Scout to put herself in other's shoes; he willingly takes his own advice. He constantly considers what others may be feeling and explains reasons for their actions. For example, after Mrs. Dubose's death, despite the fact that she constantly rained down insults on the Finch family, Atticus tells his children, "You know, she was a great lady...According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody. She was the bravest person I ever knew" (105). In demonstrating his ability to feel compassion for even the most racist and insulting old woman, Lee is using indirect characterization to show readers Atticus's strong sense of morality. Lee emphasizes this again when Atticus decides to take on the Tom Robinson case, even though he knows there will be repercussions, possibly even for his children. Unlike many of the people in Maycomb, Atticus acts with compassion toward the poor blacks, the lowest level in the town's social hierarchy. When his children question why he took the case in the first place, he says, "I couldn't go to church and worship God if I didn't try to help that man...before I can live with other folks I've got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience" (99). Although it would be easier for Atticus and his children if he were to decline the case, his sense of morality and empathy for the oppressed will not allow him to go down without a fight. Atticus refuses to bend to common social rules and conventions, understanding that just because society views a person as inferior does not mean that person should not be given an equal opportunity to defend themselves.

Miss Maudie, the Finches' neighbor, is another moral compass for the children throughout the novel. Much like Atticus, Maudie encourages the children, especially Scout, to consider others rather

than relying on stereotypes and rumors. When they are discussing the history of Arthur "Boo" Radley, Miss Maudie tells Scout, "No child...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'" (46). In making as simple a gesture as refusing to use Arthur Radley's nickname of "Boo," Maudie teaches Scout to treat even the most outcast member of society with respect. Lee's use of indirect characterization in this instance shows readers that Miss Maudie is a compassionate and morally upright influence on Scout. Additionally, she treats Scout with the same respect she shows every other societal outsider. During the Missionary Society meeting, many of the women laugh at Scout when she tells them she is wearing her pants under her dress. She says, "My cheeks grew hot as I realized my mistake, but Miss Maudie looked gravely down at me. She never laughed at me unless I meant to be funny" (210). In showing Scout quiet support her during an embarrassing situation, Miss Maudie is once again showing the young girl the value of compassion for those who are different from the majority of people. Maudie's actions characterize her as a person able to empathize with Scout, despite the fact that Scout's refusal to be a "lady" pushes her to the fringe of society.

In addition to teaching Scout about compassion, she also has no problem with calling out others on their prejudices and hypocrisy. During the social hour of one of the Missionary Society meetings, Mrs. Merriweather complains about her servant sulking around the house since the verdict of the Tom Robinson trial. She tells the other women that there is "nothing more distracting than a sulky darky" and, referring to Atticus, says, "there are some good but misguided people in this town...thought they were doing the right thing a while back, but all they did was stir 'em up" (212). Miss Maudie does not abide this sort of snide attitude and quickly calls Mrs. Merriweather out, stating, "His food doesn't stick going down, does it?" (213). She essentially tells Mrs. Merriweather that her disapproval of Atticus and those he tries to help does not stop her from coming into his house for the meeting and eating his food. This exchange is another way Lee indirectly characterizes Maudie as a person who, despite what society

says about Atticus Finch defending a black man, still supports him and feels he did the right thing. She, like Atticus, feels that those who are rejected by society still deserve an equal chance.

Throughout the novel, Scout learns what it means to be a good person, though she is exposed to prejudice, hatred and gossip on a daily basis. However, through the positive influences on her life—the extremely moral characters of Miss Maudie and Atticus—she is able to become her own person and disregard what society deems “proper.” Harper Lee uses indirect characterization of two strong characters to teach Scout as well as readers that an essential part of becoming a moral person is the ability to have empathy for those that society tries to bring down through its misguided prejudices.

Works Cited

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960. Print.