

To Kill a Mockingbird

by Harper Lee

Rationale by Winifred E. Sanders

The editor to whom Harper Lee submitted the manuscript of a short story back in the 1950's urged her to expand the story into a novel, apparently perceiving the timeliness of the material, for Jackie Robinson had recently become the first Negro to play big league baseball and in Montgomery, Alabama, the Rev. Martin Luther King was using the fighting technique of passive resistance to attack discrimination.

With such events as a catalyst, Harper Lee reached back twenty years to remember what it was like to grow up the daughter of a liberal lawyer in a small, bigoted Alabama town. Her father became the model for Atticus, who is at the heart of this novel about the various aspects of truth and justice. "It is a love story, pure and simple," Harper Lee has said.

To Kill a Mockingbird became a best seller, was made into a movie, won for its author a Pulitzer Prize, and has been translated into ten languages. It is still one of the most read books in the schools, although frequently censored. What is its value today, more than twenty years after its publication in 1960? Why has it been attacked?

The book is of value because the intense, fully-detailed scenes take the reader into the mind and heart of Scout Finch, the narrator, as she becomes aware of herself in relationship to her father and the assorted people in her world of the 1930's--with their attitudes, traditions, and prejudices. History and sociology books explain the conditions that led to the Civil Rights Movement. This novel lets the reader internalize them.

Without guidance, students may consider the early episodes a mere random collection of childhood experiences. A close reading will reveal that they steadily build up the portrait of Atticus, a wise and loving father, a man who is the epitome of tolerance and courtesy, and a liberal lawyer who steadfastly believes in equal justice for all. The episodes also present the town of Maycomb, with its camellias, cracklin' bread, where illiterate Negroes chop cotton and the doctor charges a bushel of potatoes for delivering a baby.

If students keep a step-by-step record on Atticus throughout the novel, they will not only understand him in his time and place but begin to understand the standards and forces involved whenever men of good will strive against prejudice and injustice.

The main objections to the book seem to come from those who question the wisdom of the Civil Rights Movement and disapprove of having Negroes presented in a favorable light--the quiet power of Calpurnia, the cook, who oversees the children; the helpfulness and courtesy of Tom, the accused but innocent Negro; the dignity of Rev. Mr. Sykes. Some Negroes have objected to the use of the term "nigger" although this is what the Negroes in the book call themselves and Atticus does not let the children use the term. Objections come, too, from those who do not like profane words in any book read in the schools or any reference to religion that is not a warm commendation. Objections come from parents who do not want their children to have any knowledge of lust and rape, even when presented without sensation.

Scout Finch, the narrator, is age six when the story opens, a Tarzan in a treehouse, an actress in imaginative little plays of mystery and make believe concocted with Jem, her brother who is ten, and Dill, the diminutive summer visitor next door, who is going on seven. Their most intriguing drama is a wild embroidery on what they have heard about Boo Radley, a prisoner in a near-by house, a monster that eats raw squirrels.

The episodes in the novel that take the children from their private world into that of men achieve their reality because they are told largely through conversation, each character using his own level of language and expressing his own perception of reality. Scout, Jem, and Dill are young enough at the beginning of the tale to say exactly what they think. Scout is a freethinker and most outspoken. Aunt Alexandra has not yet come to live with them and decree what Finches

may and may *not* think, say, and do. The adult world has not yet filled them with its ideas.

The town, as the children comprehend it, is full of scolds, gossips, silly school teachers, people of various castes, beliefs and prejudices, as well as sharp-tongued, but sensible and kindly Miss Maudie, a widow lady who grew up with Atticus at Finch's Landing. Dill decides, "There ain't one thing in the world I can do about folks except laugh, so I'm gonna join the circus...stand in the middle of the ring and laugh at folks."

The contrast between the candor of the children and the cant of the adults is basic to the structure of the novel--a see-saw pattern of what seems and what is, told always from Scout's point of view, as she and the other children learn the realities of the interesting, puzzling, and ugly aspects of life.

Students need to examine the counterbalancing like and unlike elements that weave the fabric of illusion and reality. Scout is secure in the love and protection of Atticus and Jem, while guilty Mayella Ewell-- Scout suddenly perceives during the trial--"must be the loneliest person in the world." Dill, the cast-off, is the one who cries when Tom Robinson, the Negro, stands hopelessly alone before the sneering prosecutor; Auntie's inexorable emphasis on caste is in conflict with Miss Maudie's respect for integrity. Students can also identify the literary devices in both the structure and theme; the paradox of admiring vitriolic and hateful Mrs. Dubose; the ironical enlightenment of having a father who can't do anything but read, yet who coolly steps into the street to shoot a mad dog; the perplexing irony of a teacher who vehemently denounces Hitler's cruelty to the Jews but thinks that the Tom Robinson trial has taught the local Negroes a lesson-- "They were gettin' way above themselves." Scout and Jem are a white minority in the Negro Church, Underwood, Raymond, and so on and on.

At the beginning of the story Scout lives on two levels at once. After the fantasy of her daytime play, she sits in the lap of Atticus, her widowed father, and reads the papers with him. She is a precocious child and is allowed to ask questions. From Atticus' careful, judicial and simple answers, she learns--in the abstract, at least--about truth, justice, and the law.

She soon has a personal acquaintance with the law. She decides that she does not want to go back to school after one day of boredom and the humiliation of being whipped for trying to be helpful. The Cunninghams stay out sometimes to do field work for their father, she argues. The Ewells attend only one day each year. Atticus explains that the law is "bent" for the Ewells. The father drinks up all of the welfare money, so people ignore the law and let him hunt out of season and keep the children out of school to comb the dump, behind which they live. But Scout is of the "common folks" and she must obey the law and go to school.

Scout, Jem, and Dill abandon their fantastic speculations about Boo Radley and try to find out the truth about him. They are still afraid. Jem boasts that he is not, he's passed the Radley Place for four years going to school. "Always runnin'" is Scout's taunt. They now engage in ingenious and intrepid attempts to attract his attention, to get a message to him on the end of a long fishing pole, to peek through his window at night. They find little gifts, apparently for them, in the knothole of a live oak tree on the edge of the Radley property near the street.

But Scout wants more exact information. Why is Boo kept inside? She goes to Miss Maudie, whose word she trusts. Miss Maudie tells her that the Radleys are punishing Boo for some youthful skylarking. "They are foot-washing Baptists," she explains. "They take the Bible literally and consider pleasure a sin." She continues, "Sometimes the Bible in the hands of one man is worse than a whiskey bottle in the hands of.... There are just some kind of men who--who're so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one, and you can look down the street and see the results."

Since Miss Maudie serves as a kind of one-woman Greek Chorus in the novel, one reference topic might be to look up the function of the Chorus in Greek Drama. Experience with the book has shown that it is wise to assign it to high school students old enough to understand that Miss Maudie's criticism is not of Mr. Radley's religion, but of the way he practices it. Any assessment of the part religion plays in Scout's development must be based on the many references to and her contacts with religion in the novel, and especially to the statement Atticus makes about the Tom Robinson case as "something that goes to the essence of man's conscience.... Scout, I couldn't go to church and worship God if I did not try to help that man." A reference project on "Hard-Shell" and "Free-Will" Baptists in the North early in this century is

doubtless a must.

At first, justice is something that Scout demands only for herself. At Christmas when Uncle Jack spans her for fighting with Francis, her cousin, she objects, "You ain't fair. You ain't fair." Atticus, she complains, would have heard her side of the case, too, heard that Francis has called Atticus a "nigger-lover" and a disgrace to the family. That is why she has split her knuckles on Francis' front tooth and called him a whorelady. She has to ask Uncle Jack what the term means. He has already given her strict orders not to use bad language. In the evening, Atticus explains to Jack that Scout has lately been using a cussing vocabulary in the desperate hope that he will let her stay home from school, where she has picked it up. Atticus does not like Scout's language. He has chosen to ignore it. His own language is impeccable.

In the first part of the novel the focus is on the children, even though Atticus is their magnetic pole. In the second part, the focus shifts to Atticus. He is assigned the case of Tom Robinson, a Negro accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a white girl. Atticus cannot live with himself, he tells the children, if he does not take the case. He does not expect to win. No Negro ever wins over a white person, but he does not want Tom to go to the chair until the truth is told.

Suddenly defensive about their father, who is being called a "nigger-lover," and fearful for his safety, the children gain a kind of instant maturity of vision. The Haints and Hot Steams of yesterday become insignificant when men gather in the yard one night and in the churchyard the next day to warn Atticus of troubles ahead; when the Old Sarum bunch comes to the jail at night with the clear intention of lynching Tom Robinson, only to find Atticus on guard.

Ignoring orders the next day, they go to the trial, along with the entire county--except for Miss Maudie, who sees it as a "Roman Carnival," although she does not have time that day to explain about gladiators. The trial is pure drama with Atticus the central figure. Even though Scout is only eight and Jem twelve, by this time, they are children of "a lawin' family," as Calpurnia puts it, and they understand the procedure of testimony, cross-examination, summation, and charge to the jury. Scout having absorbed legal tenets "with my baby food." Hour after hour they listen and watch Atticus, asking questions, finding ways to discredit the testimony of Bob and Mayella, walking to the window and back, cool, polite, leisurely, and apparently casual until he makes his plea to the jury. No fantasy--all of this--but absorbing, distressing reality. Their easy, secure, careful life is a thing of the past.

In spite of having lost the case Atticus feels that having the jury stay out a long time may be, he says "the shadow of a beginning" and Miss Maudie says "We're making a step, it's just a baby step, but it's a step" toward racial justice.

Although the children's love for Atticus is crystallized by the case, it is other people who make them understand the wider significance of Atticus' efforts to free Tom. Dolphus Raymond tells Scout, "Your pa's not a run-of-the-mill man, it'll take a few years for that to sink in." When the guilty verdict is brought in, Atticus picks up his papers and walks toward the door of the courtroom. The voice of Reverend Sykes comes to Scout as from a distance, "Miss Jean Louise, stand up, your father's passin'!" The Negroes in the balcony are on their feet. Belonging to him and knowing his love have been a private matter before. She now shares him with history.

Miss Maudie tells the children that Judge Taylor appointed Atticus as defense attorney because he could make a better case than anyone else. She tells Aunt Alexandra that the town is--that is, the handful of people of background in the town--paying tribute to Atticus, their highest tribute, for they trust him to do what is right. They are the ones saying "a fair trial is for everybody, not just for us; the handful of people with enough humility to think, when they look at a Negro, there but for the Lord's kindness am I."

Although the jury has brought in a guilty verdict, Bob Ewell basks in disgrace, for Atticus has showed his accusation to be phoney. Bob threatens to get Atticus, and the children live in fear. But in the final melodramatic scene, they are the ones who are attacked by the vindictive, drunken, knife-wielding man. Ironically, the person who saves them is Boo Radley, who hears their cries. The story comes full circle from the children's fantasies about Boo to the reality of his "coming out" when they need him.

Students will doubtless want to gallop through the second part of the novel to see how things turn out before going back to the trial scene to review procedures and to analyze the strategies used by the lawyers, and also to discuss some of the difficult and elusive aspects of justice that form the central theme of the book.

These are some of the topics:

Jem puzzled over the guilty verdict. Why don't the fine folks serve on juries? Why only people from the woods? Should rape be a capital offense? It's the law? Then Atticus should go to Montgomery, for he is a state representative, and change the law. Judges should set the penalties, not juries.

Atticus tells Jem that he has misgivings about the case although it was tried legally, because the verdict was based on circumstantial evidence only.

Atticus has ignored the name-calling of the townspeople, considering them still his friends. He is sanguine even after Bob Ewell threatens him. Should he have listened to the children's fears and put Bob Ewell under a peace bond? Aunt Alexandra says that Bob's "kind'll do anything to pay off a grudge." Is the broader question here what society can do to protect itself from the kind of people that Aunt Alexandra calls "trash"?

Is justice served by "bending" the law for the Ewells of the world? Would it have been better for Mayella if she had been forced to go to school?

When Atticus finally realized that Boo Radley has saved Jem and Scout by sticking a kitchen knife into Bob Ewell and that Heck Tate, the sheriff, intends to report that in the scuffle Bob was killed by falling on his own knife--then Atticus has to decide whether justice can be served by concealing the truth. Can a lawyer, who has lived by the strict codes of law, allow this? Even though Boo is returning to the prison of his house?

Some time after the trial, Atticus says to Jem, "...it's all adding up and one of these days we are going to pay the bill for it." Fifty years later we are still paying as we fumble our way toward justice for all. Students need to read this book, a kind of social history, to help them understand, through the eyes of one family, at one time, in one town of the United States some of the problems of justice. The students are the ones who must continue the search for solutions, which will not come from people like perfumed ladies of the Maycomb Missionary Society, in pastel prints, "rocking slowly, fanning gently," eating dewberry tarts, and tearfully bemoaning the deplorable conditions of the natives in far-off jungles.

Reviews

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Reference Books

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Perrine, Laurence, *Sound and Sense*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956, Chapter 7 (Paradox and Irony), pp. 85-105.

Possible Comparisons

- Scout to Frankie in *A Member of the Wedding*
- The trial to that in *The Caine Mutiny*

Epilogue

Winifred Sanders' rationale for *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the lead article in this issue of *CEJ* not by chance. In 1967 Miss Sanders chaired the English Department of Lewis S. Mills Regional High School in Unionville, CT, during a censorship controversy which centered on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The controversy and Miss Sanders' beautiful defense of the book are reported in John Hove, Chairman; *Meeting Censorship in the School: A Series of Case Studies*; National Council of Teachers of English, 1967. Now, as then, Miss Sanders exemplifies the courage, grace, and professional conduct of the very best sort of English teacher. Because she was brave, young people in Lewis Mills School can read about the bravery shown in Harper Lee's book.

[At the time of original publication,] Winifred E. Sanders has taught English in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. She is a former President of CCTE and NEATE; and Secretary of CSSEDC.

From *Rationales for Commonly Challenged Taught Books*. Themed issue of *Connecticut English Journal*, Diane P. Shugert (Ed.), vol. 15, no. 1, Fall 1983. Used with the permission of the Connecticut Council of Teachers of English.

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