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AP Language/Composition

16 April 2021

To Kill A Mockingbird: A Literary Triumph or Racial Slur?

To Kill a Mockingbird is a widely acclaimed novel by Harper Lee, noted for its powerful writing on the topic of prejudice. The story describes Southern life and racial injustice from the perspective of a young girl named Scout, offering a unique take on the concept of equality. The premise of the book hinges on Scout's father, a lawyer, choosing to represent an innocent black man accused of rape which leaves him an outcast in Southern society. Ultimately, the book ends with the death of this innocent black young man, leaving modern day society confused at how to receive the underlying message. Is *To Kill a Mockingbird* a story promoting racial justice, or is it a story of how society will forever be trapped by despicable prejudice of the past? Present day society is choosing to erase this novel from classroom settings, banning it from schools as an attempt to suppress the offensive topics discussed in this literary classic. While literary enthusiasts praise the writing and message behind Harper's classic novel, the offensive topics spark debate, which has led to many in the field of education arguing for its banishment from classroom shelves..

To Kill a Mockingbird has received mixed reviews on its concept of equality. The main characters, Atticus Finch, Scout, and Jem all appear to support rights for African Americans, a shocking revelation in a society of conservative Southerners at the time. However, despite the protagonists' support for equal rights, comments from these characters have been said to emit racist undertones. An example of Atticus' support for "people of color" is revealed through a conversation between his sister about firing Calpurnia, a black nurse:

Alexandra, Calpurnia's not leaving this house until she wants to. You think otherwise, but I couldn't have got along as without her all these years. She's a faithful member of this family and you'll simply have to accept things the way they are. Besides, sister, I don't want you working your head off for us--you've no reason to do that. We still need Cal as much as we ever did... Besides I don't think the children have suffered one bit from her having brought them up.....she's never indulged them the way most colored nurses do. She tried to bring them up according to her lights, and Cal's lights are pretty good--and another thing, the children love her." (Lee 182-183).

These simple remarks from Atticus have received both praise and scorn. Those who support *To Kill a Mockingbird's* status as a novel of equality would say, Atticus stands up for Calpurnia as his racist sister attempts to fire this hard-working lady from their household. He shows his admiration and respect for her when he claims "we still need Cal as much as we ever did." Furthermore, Atticus claims that she is a member of the family, and says that Cal can decide for herself when to leave, proposing that he believes this "colored nurse" is worthy and loved, representing how he sees all people equal regardless of skin tone. However; not all readers will agree with this interpretation.

Atticus' argument with his sister over Calpurnia was designed to show his support of "colored" people's rights, many who support the book as a novel promoting equality would agree with this interpretation, yet those who claim this book showcases racism would disagree. During his remarks about Calpurnia, Atticus says, "...she's never indulged them the way most colored nurses do." This seemingly innocent statement states that "colored nurses" are indulgent, and Calpurnia is an exception to this "colored" habit. Essentially, Atticus' argument shows there are different standards for nurses of color and nurses of paler skin tone. His argument shows that "colored nurses" were regarded differently as he forces her into a category of being colored and stereotypes her race as indulging children. Simply put, even phrases made in support of "people of color" have different interpretations from readers. Some might argue that Atticus' argument to keep Calpurnia signifies his belief that those of "color" deserve to be

treated equally, while others might argue that having a black woman serve white individuals and stereotyping her race promotes injustice.

Simple phrases in *To Kill a Mockingbird* spark controversy over whether or not this book is appropriate for schools. Isaac Saney, makes his opinion on this topic known as he claims; “pressure from the community forced the Department of Education to face up to its social responsibility to provide enlightened education and teaching materials and address the issue of restricting racist’s materials in the province’s classrooms, in the same way that pressure had forced the government to abandon its legislated policy of segregated schooling for the African Nova Scotia population...In 1996 three works--*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee...were taken off the authorized lists of texts recommended by the department of education...[In] March 2002...Nova Scotia recommended that the three works be removed from school uses altogether. Many educators consider these demands to be minimal and as barely beginning to address the serious inequalities which continue to pervade the education system.” (*The Case Against to Kill a Mockingbird*, 1). From this statement, it becomes clear that Saney believes *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not only an inappropriate expression of racism, but that its removal from the classroom is as important as the removal of segregation. Saney compares community pressure to remove the novel from the classroom to the pressures which ended segregation, showing how he believes that these two movements were equally significant. Furthermore, Saney explains how novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* must be removed in order for the Department of Education to be socially responsible. Simply put, Saney argues how Harper Lee’s novel is disruptive to the community because of its racist themes, and reveals how its removal is necessary in order for Education to be free of racism.

Yet where Saney sees racism others see support for equality. In “Books and resources to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *To Kill a Mockingbird*” several authors, Sandip Wilson, Terrell Young, Deanna Day, and BarabarWard, all combined to produce a journal discussing the conflicting opinion surrounding the book. These authors note that; “One of the main messages from the book (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) is standing up for what is right even when the costs are high.” (82). This theme is prevalent throughout the book as Atticus Finch chooses to take on an innocent black client convicted of a

heinous crime, despite knowing that in doing so his reputation will be ruined. Atticus knew of the punishments for pursuing a case such as this, yet he believed that innocence surpassed stereotypes, he believed in justice. Just as the authors stated, Atticus pursued justice despite the disrespect and isolation he would face from society. As the journal shows, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is viewed by many to be a novel which disputes racist notions. The journal explains how the underlying theme of the book is about fighting for justice, not promoting racism. The underlying theme of liberty present in this novel, as claimed in the journal, would suggest that it deserves to remain in classrooms, as it helps to encourage the importance of justice.

The idea of Atticus as a supporter of equal rights is controversial. Teresa Gowin Phelps states, “For me, Atticus’s acceptance of the racist status quo of Maycomb seriously undermines his character.” (*Atticus, Thomas, and the Meaning of Justice*, 925). Phelps also discusses a critique of Atticus written by another author, where she states, “Freedman wrote that Finch was complicitous in a racist society, made excuses for the Ku, Klux Klan and for the leader of a lynch mob, and generally acted out of “an elitist sense of noblesse oblige” rather than true compassion,” (*The Margins of Maycomb: a Rereading of To Kill A Mockingbird*, 511). Phelps clearly defines Atticus as being unsupportive of equality. She shows how he accepts the racism present in his town, rather than attempt to actively change the situation. Furthermore, Phelps’ critique of another interpretation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* showcases Atticus’ ambiguity about racism as he defended heinous acts of discrimination. Atticus’ actions were also described as being driven by his own privilege rather than kindness. Atticus Finch can be viewed in many lights, as Phelps shows society can interpret his actions as being racist and selfish as he acts based on his prestige rather than grace. With this perception in mind, many educators argue that *To Kill a Mockingbird* should be removed from schools because of the racist character being depicted with a false halo of equality.

Despite the racist undertones many perceive emanates from the actions of Atticus Finch, the book expresses his profound sense of justice. In *To Kill a Mockingbird* Atticus has a conversation

with Scout where he states; “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” (Lee 39). Atticus’ statement showcases his sense of justice, and his hesitancy towards judgement. He explains to Scout that it is impossible to understand what someone has been through until you yourself experience it.

Interestingly, Atticus states that you must “climb into his skin” in order to understand somebody, a strange detail which implies that Atticus was referencing how one can not understand the sorrows and discrimination people undergo as being a person of color. In this quote, Atticus shows how he accepts the sorrows others have gone through, and acknowledges that those of color have experiences which others can only imagine. In this quote a profound sense of respect for people of color is shown from Atticus, when he explains that he will never be able to fully understand the extent of others’ struggles. This appreciation and respect, along with the morality of Atticus’ statements would imply to supporters of the book that *To Kill a Mockingbird* deserves to remain in a classroom environment.

The question over whether or not *To Kill a Mockingbird* deserves to remain in schools results in controversy. Is the book a racial slur, exposing Southern racial discriminations of the past? Or is the book an advocate of justice as Atticus Finch defends an innocent black man in court? Varying perspectives on this topic have been expressed as this book has been ripped from classroom shelves. The lines are blurred between whether this book is a proponent of equality or an attack on the African American race, leaving the question as to if it is acceptable for schools. However, one thing is certain, as Atticus Finch said; “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” (Lee 39). This same principle applies to the modern world as classrooms are stripped of this famous novel. There are two sides to every story, whether one supports the novel or believes it should be banned, they must understand the other side’s perspective as the world does not live in black and white.

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