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Teaching Moral Lessons in Public Schools

 Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been under scrutiny because of its religious aspects and use of racial slurs. Objectively, the characters in the book display moral insight that students can learn from without having to be taught religious concepts. *To Kill a Mockingbird* explores the importance of instilling moral lessons in public school curriculum. Students can learn values and virtues without dealing with the topic of organized religion. Through examples provided by Scout as an innocent child observing morality, through Bob Ewell, as a reflection of moral deficit, and through Atticus Finch, as an example of moral excellence, students can gain insight into moral virtue.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* is a novel appropriate for young people and it can be taught in school as early as the 8th grade. This is because the narrator of the book, Scout, is a young child herself who experiences the horrific drama that unfolds throughout the novel. She exemplifies how morality should be instilled in kids at a young age. Scout, a first grader, recognizes when people are not morally sound. The storyline of the novel involves the trial of a black man named Tom Robinson, who allegedly rapes a young white girl named Mayella Ewell. Scout’s father is the lawyer who defends Tom. After Robinson trial, Scout’s father Atticus is threatened by Bob Ewell, the father of Mayella, because he defends Tom. Atticus insists that Ewell is of no harm to him, but Scout is still worried because she realizes that Bob Ewell is conflicted morally. Scout states, “the name Ewell gave me a queasy feeling” (Lee 241). She is unsure about him, even when Jem tells her, “not to be afraid [because] Mr. Ewell [is] no more than hot gas” (Lee 241). Scout, though still a child, recognizes that some people are just bad. Mr. Ewell does not show a positive moral direction, and Scout picks up on that. This demonstrates that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is an appropriate book that recognizes good moral behavior and is also on a level for young people to understand. Peter Zwick acknowledges Scout’s innocence in his scholarly journal, “Rethinking Atticus Finch”. Zwick recalls that, “Scout is extremely young...so childlike, in fact, that much of the racist status quo in Maycomb flies completely over her head [but realizes] that the epithet [that the townspeople say] is all objectionable” (Zwick 1358). Though innocent, Scout recognizes when someone is saying or doing something immoral, which makes the requirement of teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* to young people a good lesson of morality.

Teaching this book at a young age is important to encourage moral development, but there must be relevant moral content that students can learn from. The character Bob Ewell is one that students can learn from because of his complete lack of moral code. He can help to exhibit in literature what people should not do, in particular, the students who are reading *To Kill a Mockingbird.* Ewell sends his children to school for one day out of the year and doesn’t care if they are clean or not. He cannot hold a job and is lazy. When he is called upon the stand during the Robinson trial, he confirms that he is unintelligent, and evidence is presented that could prove he is abusive. No one in Maycomb knows how many kids he has, and the Ewell property is on a garbage dump. Bob Ewell is the character that no one should strive to be like. Bob Ewell demonstrates that morality can be taught through his character without having to use religion to support what is morally wrong or right. According to Robert Kunzman, “morality is only weakly independent from religion,” but because Bob Ewell is so morally flawed, he can successfully teach students what not to do by demonstration of his actions (Kunzman par. 4).

In a Christian setting, the lesson that Ewell’s character can teach would taught as the seven deadly sins, but in a public school setting, that topic is taboo. The seven deadly sins are lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride, and Ewell exhibits all of them. He exhibits lust through the way he has uncontrolled desires. Although lust is normally associated with sexual desires, it could be any desire that is out of control. For example, he has an uncontrolled desire to put Tom Robinson to death which results in him lying about the rape of Mayella, Ewell’s daughter. He displays gluttony through the way he drinks. Ewell models greed through the way he chooses to live off the government. He talks about being able to sign his name on his welfare check when asked if he could write. He receives money but does not work hard to get off of the welfare system. Ewell displays sloth because he is lazy and refuses to work, being satisfied with living off the government on a property that is covered with garbage. If Ewell had work ethic, he would try to improve his quality of life, starting with where he lives, but he doesn’t. Ewell exhibits wrath at Atticus when he threatens him for making a fool out of him in court, and again when he attempts to kill both Scout and Jem. He displays envy in moments when he feels that people act superior to him. He feels that Atticus is superior to him, which leads him to envy Atticus. This could be another potential reason for his wrath. The last deadly sin that Bob Ewell displays is pride. Although the Ewell family is mocked by the citizens of Maycomb, Ewell exhibits pride in the color of his skin. He believes he is at least better than the black people particularly Tom Robinson simply because of the color of his skin.

The seven deadly sins are in the curriculum for a Christian ethics course, but if taught through a character such as Bob Ewell, they do not need to be called the seven deadly sins. They just become words that can explain to children how they should not act while still in secular settings, such as public schools. According to Richard Weissbourd, “70 percent of public school parents want schools to teach ‘strict standards of right and wrong,’ and 85 percent of parents want public schools to teach values” (Weisbourd par. 1). Christian virtues cannot be taught in public schools, although they offer a good basis of what is right and wrong. Educators struggle because “even if public schools and educators may espouse moral positions, the First Amendment forbids them from taking moral positions insofar as those positions would amount to the establishment of Religion” (Jenkins 597). This makes it difficult for educators because the parents demand that morals be taught, but if their moral position is linked to religious views, the educator could face consequences. That is why *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a book that can teach morals without Christian morality being the basis of right and wrong. Ewell’s character teaches the seven deadly sins without use of The Bible or Christian doctrine.

Atticus Finch, the father of Scout and Jem, is the foil of Bob Ewell, morally speaking. He is the moral backbone of the story, always doing his best to be empathetic and professional. Harvard Law Review’s article “Being Atticus Finch” suggests that Atticus is different from the typical image that a lawyer would have. The article states “The classic image of the legal professional...is that of the attorney who acts, within the bounds of the law, as a zealous advocate of his or her client’s interests, regardless of the moral outcome or impact on others” (Harvard Law Review). Atticus doesn’t practice law in that format. He shows genuine interest in his clients’ lives and does everything possible to direct his trials in a way to result in a morally good outcome. This is evident in the trial of Tom Robinson. Critics often comment that Atticus did not take Tom’s case by choice, but rather because the judge assigned it to him. Although that is true, Atticus graciously accepted what would be “a trial unwinnable for the defense” (Zwick 1354). Atticus did everything he could to protect Tom Robinson, even sitting outside of the jail to shield Tom from angry citizens of Maycomb, like Mr. Walter Cunningham. Atticus also made an incredibly good case to prove Robinson’s innocence, so fantastic that he even had Jem convinced that “‘We’ve got him’” (Lee 178). Although Tom Robinson was charged with the crime of rape, Atticus was still respected in the town and has done what he can to rid injustice in Maycomb. This is because, according to Miss Maudie, “he’s the only man in [Maycomb] who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that...it’s just a baby-step, but it’s a step” (Lee 216). Thanks to men like Atticus Finch, injustice is being defeated little by little. His actions in the book are admirable and help him to become a character looked upon with great respect.

Another reason that Atticus Finch is respected and looked up to by many students is because he is not perfect. If someone sees a perfect character and believes that they can strive to be like him or her. When a character shows imperfections and misjudgements, he or she becomes much more relatable. There are a few moments in *To Kill a Mockingbird* when Atticus doesn’t act in a way that a perfect moral example would. The first moment is when Atticus is assigned the Tom Robinson case. If Atticus is a perfect person, someone who is morally flawless, he would volunteer himself to defend a black man. Instead, Atticus says, “I’d hoped to get through life without a case of this kind, but John Taylor pointed at me and said, ‘You’re It’” (Lee 88). Atticus does the right thing by taking the case. He defends Robinson the best he can, but he only does it because Judge Taylor does not give him any other option. This human tendency of avoiding what is the morally correct thing to do and wanting to fade into the background is exactly what Atticus does. In a time where racism and discrimination are prevalent, no one would have willfully volunteered. Once Atticus is assigned to the case,though, he does everything he can to prove Tom Robinson’s innocence.

Another way that Atticus’s flaws show is when he is faced with a threat from Bob Ewell. It happens when Atticus is leaving the post office and Ewell approaches him and threatens to kill him. This is after Atticus’s cross examination during the trial embarrassed Ewell. When Jem and Scout hear about the threat against their father, they change their behavior until Atticus notices how scared they are of Bob Ewell. Atticus assures Jem that Ewell is of no danger when he says, “Jem, see if you could stand in Bob Ewell’s shoes a minute. I destroyed his last shred of credibility at that trial, if he had any to begin with. The man had to have some kind of comeback, his kind always does...He had to take it out on somebody and I’d rather it be me than that houseful of children” (Lee 218). Atticus tries to understand Ewell’s situation, but if he really understood the human nature of someone like Bob Ewell, he would tell his children to be afraid of Ewell and to be careful. Atticus is lucky; Ewell is murdered before he could kill Jem and Scout, but that did not stop him from trying, and succeeding, to hurt them. Atticus realizes his mistake and is shocked to discover that Bob Ewell was determined to “get Atticus if it took him the rest of his life” (Lee 267). Ewell proves Atticus wrong and dies in the process of seeking revenge. This isn’t to say that Atticus fails as a father and as a role model for morality, but it does say that Atticus is human, and Atticus describes human nature perfectly during the trial when he says, “This is a truth that applies to the human race and to no particular race of men...There is not a person who has never told a lie, who has never done an immoral thing, and there is no man living who has never looked upon a woman without desire” (Lee 204). Atticus is an imperfect human being who is striving to be an example for his children on living a good moral lifestyle, which is what makes him so admirable.

Atticus Finch can also teach a valuable moral lesson. In a Christian setting, Finch can teach students the Cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, fidelity, and prudence, but these are lessons that can even be taught in public schools. These virtues are of great importance not just to Christians, but to society in general. People are encouraged to display justice, to be wise, to be courageous, and to live in moderation. Atticus’s ability to demonstrate the Cardinal Virtues determine that he is an upstanding moral character and can teach students that they have the ability to be morally sound if they’re taught by his example. In Amanda Osheim’s article “Atticus Finch and the Cardinal Virtues”, she states that “the cardinal virtues [provide] a lens for interpreting and evaluating Atticus as a moral actor...they are among the first [word of virtue] providing the bare essentials for human living and specific action” (Osheim 200).

Atticus is first and foremost an example of justice. As a lawyer, he must be a figure of justice, especially when it comes to the storyline in *To Kill a Mockingbird,* when a black man is wrongly charged of rape. Atticus must seek justice in the courtroom to ensure that he is doing his job. Osheim defines justice as “demand[ing] that the welfare and rights of others be upheld, and that others be recognized as our neighbors” (Osheim 200). Atticus is able to successfully do this, as he demands that the citizens of Maycomb uphold Tom Robinson’s innocence.

 The second virtue that Atticus possesses is temperance, which is, according to Osheim, “one’s responsibility for one’s own spiritual, mental, physical, and emotional well-being” (Osheim 201). The best example of Atticus practicing temperance is after Jem and Scout discover that he is skilled with a rifle. They wonder why he never mentions this skill when Miss Maudie tells them “I think maybe he put his gun down when he realized that God had given him an unfair advantage over most living things. I guess he decided he wouldn’t shoot till he had to, and he had to today” (Lee 98). Osheim describes this as “honest self-reflection and discipline” which points to Atticus practicing temperance and only using his talent when it was necessary. He does not boast or brag about his ability to shoot a rifle, which means he is in turn respected not only because he has good aim, but because he is not prideful about it. Atticus also exemplifies the virtue of fidelity.

Osheim defines fidelity as “[recognizing] that we are to act in a particular way towards the people to whom we are particularly joined” (Osheim 200). An example of this in the novel is the way in which he treats Calpurnia, the African American woman who takes care of the house. Although the normal citizen of Maycomb would not treat Calpurnia with respect, Atticus views her as part of the family. He shows respect to those who he is “particularly joined” with, therefore, exemplifying fidelity.

The last virtue is prudence, which is defined as “mediating the diverse goods sought by the other three” (Osheim 200). Prudence is essentially the ability to exemplify justice, fidelity, and temperance. It could be argued that Atticus exemplifies prudence because his life at home and at work are morally the same. He displays the other three cardinal virtues because of his moral integrity in all areas of his life.

Atticus Finch fully displays the cardinal virtues because of the morally sound way in which he lives his life. Students can look up to him because he is a virtuous man who genuinely cares and respects the people he encounters. In some situations, he misjudged people and he paid the consequences, knowing full well that the mistakes were his fault. He is not quick to blame others for his misjudgements, but rather, takes responsibility for his own actions. Atticus is a positive moral role model that students of all ages can look to for strong moral guidance.

Arguing that this book should be taught in school systems is important because in recent years, many books have been banned from the public school system. Books containing religious implications and books that reference the “n” word have been removed from the public school’s curriculum. *To Kill a Mockingbird* frequently references the “n” word and does have moments in which the characters practice religion, such as the time Calpurnia took Jem and Scout to church. Although both of those situations arise, they are not quality reasons to remove a book from the curriculum if the student can learn valuable life lessons from the material that the book contains. Peter Jenkins says, “A community should be free to express moral opinions in its curricular choices..removing a book from a school library usually does not establish religion...it merely allows the school to decline to endorse the message of the book” (Jenkins 621).

Teaching virtues, even if it is in a completely secular setting, is the best way to instil values into young student’s lives. Teaching virtues through a narrative is also an effective way to teach values in young students, which is what *To Kill a Mockingbird* does. Alasdair MacIntyre explains the importance of narratives in his book *After Virtue* when he says “[narratives] provide a moral background to contemporary debate” (MacIntyre 121). Lee’s novel provides this moral background which is important for shaping student’s beliefs in today’s society, which is why reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* is important in the moral formation of young students.

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