



The Moral Vision of Atticus Finch

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Warning: This lesson includes language within the text reflective of the time in which the text was written. This language is now considered offensive.

Framing Question

In *To Kill a Mockingbird* what does Atticus Finch's relationship with the minor but important character Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose suggest about the quality of his moral vision?

Understanding

In *To Kill a Mockingbird* Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose embodies and gives public voice to the values and attitudes of the Old South. The way the novel's protagonist Atticus Finch responds to her suggests that he lacks the critical perspective needed to acknowledge the depth and pervasiveness of his community's racism.

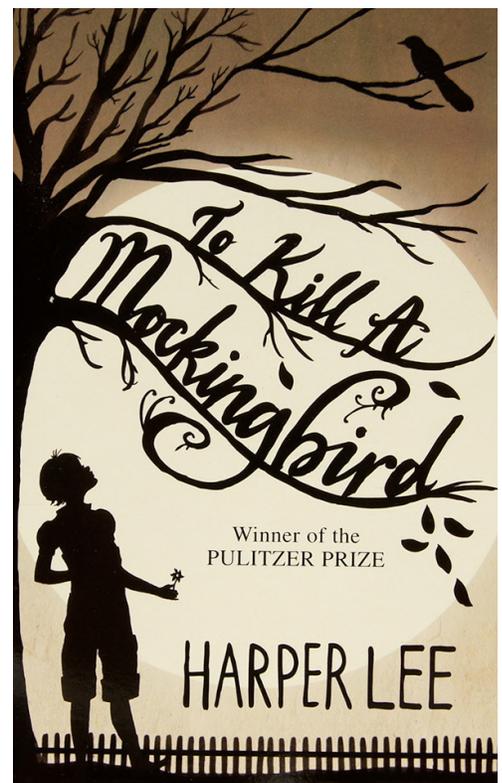
Text

To Kill A Mockingbird (1982 Grand Central Publishing paperback edition)

Background

To Kill a Mockingbird is one of the most popular novels ever to be published in the United States. Since it appeared in 1960, millions of copies have been sold, and in 1962 it was made into an award-winning movie. Readers have embraced its protagonist, lawyer Atticus Finch, as a hero, a brave man who follows his conscience in the pursuit of justice even though most of his neighbors oppose him, and he knows his cause is lost.

Even though the racism of the Atticus who appears in *Go Set a Watchman*, the recently published first draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, has disappointed many, there is much to admire in him as he was portrayed in 1960. Nonetheless, as careful readers we must seek to understand him fully. This lesson follows suggestions in chapter 11 that raise questions about the scope and depth of his moral vision.



Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

Chapter 11, which concludes part one of the novel, ends the largely idyllic portrayal of Maycomb and deepens the foreshadowing of the tragedy we encounter in part two. Chiefly, however, it introduces Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose, a minor but important character. This lesson examines what she represents; how she functions in the novel, and how Scout, Jem, and Atticus respond to her. The children's view of her is very different from that of Atticus, and that sharp difference raises questions about Atticus's ability and willingness to acknowledge the racism of his community. Scout, Jem, and Atticus judge Mrs. Dubose, and this lesson asks you to judge their judgments.



Scout and Mrs. Dubose, from "To Kill A Mockingbird," 1962.

Text Analysis

Mrs. Dubose and the Town

1. At the beginning of chapter 11 the narrator tell us that it was "impossible to go to town without passing" the home of Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose. What position does Mrs. Dubose's home occupy in Maycomb?

2. "It was rumored," the narrator says, that Mrs. Dubose keeps a "CSA pistol" under her shawls. What does CSA stand for?

3. What does the fact that Mrs. Dubose concealment of a pistol is "rumored" suggest?

4. When Scout and Jem pass her house, Mrs. Dubose is not simply sitting on her porch; she is "stationed" there. What connotations does the word "stationed" carry?

5. Considering that Mrs. Dubose's house controls a key approach to Maycomb's business district, that she may be armed, and that she "stations" herself on her porch, how does Harper Lee present her in the opening pages of chapter 11?

6. What does Mrs. Dubose do from her outpost on the porch?

7. What does it suggest about Mrs. Dubose's opinions that she sometimes delivers them in a voice so loud the entire neighborhood can hear them?

8. When Jem and Scout pass her house, Mrs. Dubose insults their father. What is her main complaint against Atticus?

9. How do we know that Mrs. Dubose is trying to be deliberately hurtful with these remarks?

10. Why is it significant that the narrator tells us that Mrs. Dubose's insults "aimed at Atticus" were the first she had heard "from an adult"?

Mrs. Dubose and Her Camellias

Note: To understand fully the symbolism of the camellias, it helps to know that the camellia is the state flower of Alabama and that it is associated with the Knights of the White Camellia, a Ku Klux Klan-like organization, founded in 1867, to enforce white supremacy in the post-Civil War South.

11. When Jem and Scout visit Mrs. Dubose to read to her, she "would hound Jem" on her "favorite subjects." What are they?



12. As we have seen, Harper Lee links Mrs. Dubose's camellias with her views on race and her insulting behavior toward Atticus and the children. How do these associations explain why Jem attacks the flowers?

13. After Jem attacks the flowers, Mrs. Dubose taunts him by saying that the blossoms have re-grown. Considering the associations that cluster around Mrs. Dubose's camellias, what does their re-growth symbolize?

14. In symbolic terms, what does Jem's admission that he would pull the camellia bushes up by their roots suggest?

Judging Mrs. Dubose

15. What causes does Atticus cite to account for what Mrs. Dubose says and does?

16. What other causes might he have cited?

17. Is Atticus letting Mrs. Dubose off too easily? Explain your answer.

18. When, at the end of the chapter, Jem opens Mrs. Dubose's gift, he calls her an "old hell-devil"? Why?

19. Atticus is quick to interpret Mrs. Dubose's gift as a peace offering and to assure Jem that "everything is all right." Is "everything all right"?

20. By presenting Jem with the gift of a camellia, what, in symbolic terms, is Mrs. Dubose asking Jem to do?

21. Atticus defines “real courage” as persevering in a lost cause, seeing a struggle though even though you know you are going to lose. Why would this definition of courage be especially appealing to him, and why would it cause him to admire Mrs. Dubose?

22. What does Jem do after his father praises Mrs. Dubose?

23. What does this action suggest about his response to Mrs. Dubose, her gift, and his father’s view of the old lady?

24. What does Jem’s “fingering” of the camellia suggest?

25. How do you interpret Atticus’s return to his reading of the local newspaper?

26. In chapter 11 Jem, Scout, and Atticus judge Mrs. Dubose. “Jem and I hated her,” says Scout. “She was vicious.” “She was horrible.” Yet Atticus considers her a “great lady,” the “bravest person” he ever knew. Do you agree with the children or Atticus? Explain your answer.

Text

- Harper Lee, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, HarperCollins: 1960 (Grand Central Publishing edition: 1982), chapter 11.

Image

- Scout (Mary Badham) & Mrs Dubose (Ruth White) in “To Kill A Mockingbird,” 1962. Universal International Pictures, Silver Screen Collection.