

One Way to Raise a Child

Scottish actor Ewan McGregor said, "The thing about parenting rules is there aren't any. That's what makes it so difficult." This lack of rules causes lots of debate on how parenting should be done, with a plethora of literature spouting diverse viewpoints on this matter. Novels can educate about parenting just as well as nonfiction books, using characters as role models. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee uses Atticus Finch to show readers that a good parent teaches their children to understand the real world, shapes them into independent people, and serve as role models for their children.

Atticus teaches his children the harsh aspects of the real world instead of shielding them from these realities. One example of this is when Scout becomes curious about Tom Robinson's alleged crime. "What's rape?" Scout asks her father, who truthfully answers "Rape is carnal knowledge of a female by force and without consent." (180). Faced with such a morbid question for a young child, Atticus could have given her a false answer or refused to respond. However, he chose not to shield her from the reality that in this world, women are sometimes sexually abused. Scout is not the only child he raises this way, though. When Jem was furious about the trial's unjust verdict, he decides that Alabama's laws need to be changed. He discusses his opinion on legal matters with Atticus and tells him to simply ask the state to change the law. Atticus replied, "You'd be surprised how hard that'd be. I won't live to see the law changed, and if you live to see it you'll be an old man." (295) Instead of convincing Jem he has the power to change the world, a message many ambitious children get, Atticus tells him the truth: Not many people finish the long, hard journey to change the world. At another point in this conversation, Jem said people simply cannot base a conviction on the kind of evidence the Ewells gave at the trial. Atticus replied, "You couldn't, but they could and did. The older you grow the more of it you'll see. The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is the courtroom, be he any color of the rainbow, but people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury

box.”(295). Jem and Scout were raised to respect everyone regardless of race. They were not happy to find out how deeply their world was steeped in racial inequality. Here, Atticus could have comforted them by saying this was not what normally happens or that the situation will improve, but he chooses instead to let them know this is how the world normally functions, and it will continue functioning this way as long as the children live. He chooses to let Jem and Scout out of a perfect-world bubble that will burst sooner or later, because at some point, they will have to face the real world.

Another way Atticus prepares his children for the real world is that he raises them to be independent and guides instead of forcing them in the right direction. After Mrs. Dubose insulted Jem and Scout for having a father that defends black people, Scout asks Atticus why he chose to defend Tom Robinson when everyone around him thinks he made the wrong choice. Atticus answered that in order to live with others, he must “live with [himself]. the one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.”(140). In other words, he tells the children that they themselves are in charge of their beliefs and actions. This attitude fosters independence from peer pressure. Atticus not only teaches his children to be free, he also allows them to be free. When Jem and Scout receive air rifles for Christmas, Atticus tells them it is a sin to shoot mockingbirds. Scout noted “That was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something...”(119). The fact that Atticus does not regularly dictate what the children should and should not do reflects the freedom he allows Jem and Scout, giving them room to explore, experience and develop their own sense of morals. In fact, Scout is not even forced into gender roles, unlike many girls of the 1930s. When the family visits Aunt Alexandra for Christmas, Scout notes that “Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of my attire. I [Scout] could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches; when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn’t supposed to be doing things that required pants.”(81). Growing up, Scout was not raised to be the lady she was meant to be. Atticus did not mind if she played with the boys and

acted like them, nor did he have Calpurnia teach her to be a woman. He simply let Scout become however feminine she wants to be, giving her plenty of choices.

While Atticus instills his own values of honesty and freedom into his children, he also teaches them to understand others who may not live like them or hold those same values. One example is when Scout and the other children got in trouble with Atticus for trying to tempt Boo Radley out of his house. She recounts something she learned from that incident: "How would we like it if Atticus barged in on us without knocking, when we were in our rooms at night? We were, in effect, doing the same thing to Boo Radley." (65) For much of the novel, the children see Boo as such a mysterious entity that he does not need privacy or respect. Just because he is a recluse, they fail to understand that Boo is a human that deserves to be treated like other humans. Atticus, however, tells them otherwise. Beside recluses, Atticus also teaches his children to understand people not from Maycomb. This is shown when Scout comes home miserable on her first day of school. Her teacher Miss Caroline (who was from a different part of Alabama) had punished her because she thought Scout was lying when she told the truth about how poor Walter Cunningham was. Atticus tells Scout not to blame Miss Caroline for this, because "We could not expect her to learn all of Maycomb's ways in one day, and we could not hold her responsible when she knew no better." (40). Growing up in a small town, Scout has gotten used to people who knew the ins and outs of Maycomb and all its citizens. Those people knew not to hand something to a Cunningham or that the Crawfords are gossips. However, Miss Caroline was not one of those people, and Scout is not used to her. Here, Atticus encourages Scout to understand that Miss Caroline did not hate her; she was just unaware. Atticus's teachings of empathy to his children even extend to those who treat them badly, as demonstrated when Jem destroys Mrs. Dubose's garden in a fit of rage, which was triggered by her insults about Atticus's choice to defend Tom Robinson. Atticus explains to Jem why doing so is wrong, saying that Mrs. Dubose is "old and ill. You can't hold her responsible for what she says and does." (140). As a punishment, Jem has to visit Mrs. Dubose and read to her every day

for a month. However, the punishment was not just a punishment, Atticus had already wanted him to do this before Jem ruined the old lady's camelias. Later, the children learn that Jem's reading was meant to distract Mrs. Dubose from drugs. She was fighting a morphine addiction, and faced enough hardship to pass a little of it on to others. Because Atticus let Jem and Scout into Mrs. Dubose's life, they learn have empathy even for those who are not nice to them.

Atticus does not just teach his children, he also makes sure his own actions reflect what his children are taught. When Scout asked her father why he had to defend Tom Robinson, he answered, "if I didn't... I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again." (100). Atticus raises his children to not contribute to the racial bias that plagues the South. If he did not defend Tom because he was black, it would be hypocritical of Atticus to teach his children racial equality. Another value he instills in his children is empathy. When Jem was worried Bob Ewell would carry out his threat to kill Atticus, Atticus reassures, "Jem, see if you can stand in Bob Ewell's shoes for 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." (292). Someone like Bob is not easy for the Finches to relate to. Atticus teaches the children to have empathy for people as different as the Ewells, and is a role model by having empathy for Bob himself. When Stephanie Crawford describes the attack on Atticus, she says that in response to Bob's spitting and threats, "Atticus didn't bat an eye, just took out his handkerchief and wiped his face and stood there and let Mr. Ewell call him names wild horses could not bring [Stephanie] to repeat." (291). Atticus has repeatedly preached to Jem and Scout to never fight anyone, no matter what insults they throw. He himself does this here by responding to Bob's violence with peace.

There are so many paths a parent can take with raising a child, and Atticus chose a one that made him a role model parent in all these ways. How parenting is done has critical effects on the child, some of which are their self-esteem, motivation, life skills and even how they parent the next generation of children. These characteristics are an integral part of our society.

When future world leaders, innovators, mothers and fathers come from today's children, good parenting now will prepare us for bright outcomes down the road.