

# Handout 7.1 Responses to *To Kill a Mockingbird*

## 1. From the *Washington Post*, July 3, 1960:

A hundred pounds of sermons on tolerance, or an equal measure of invective deploring the lack of it, will weigh far less in the scale of enlightenment than a mere 18 ounces of new fiction bearing the title *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Harper Lee, the talented 34-year-old expatriate Southerner who makes her literary debut with this engrossing novel, carefully eschews preaching, from either side of the Mason-Dixon line, about the grave issues which confront her native South. What she does, more adroitly than any recent novelist, is present in dramatic terms just how it feels to be a Southerner, with all that it entails of pride, pleasure, anxiety and shame . . .

The result is an unusually accurate rendering of attitudes that must be reckoned with in any solution to the South's contemporary problems. And yet, though so pertinent, the novel is not itself contemporary. There were no sit-in strikes during the depression years when Jean Louise (alias Scout) Finch and her brother, Jem, began to observe the human landscape of Maycomb County, Ala. No protests at all—but the seeds for them were being planted.

Her street is the world to Scout, a restless and ingratiating 6 at the outset. This world is bounded by grouchy Mrs. Dubose on the north, by the haunted Radley house on the south, and in winter, by the school yard just around the corner. Within these narrow limits occur the important small dramas of childhood, which as interpreted by Atticus Finch, the children's admirable father, become lessons in fair play, courage, and love.

"You never really understand a person until you climb into his skin and walk around in it," is his patient, oft-repeated advice, which really sums up the purpose and achievement of this novel.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. From the *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1, 1960:

The book's setting is a small town in Alabama, and the action behind Scout's tale is her father's determination, as a lawyer, liberal, and honest man, to

<sup>1</sup> Glendy Culligan, "Listen to That Mockingbird," *Washington Post*, July 3, 1960, E6.

defend a Negro accused of raping a white girl. What happens is, naturally, never seen directly by the narrator. The surface of the story is an Alcottish filigree of games, mischief, squabbles with an older brother, troubles at school, and the like. None of it is painful, for Scout and Jem are happy children, brought up with angelic cleverness by their father and his old Negro housekeeper. Nothing fazes them much or long. Even the new first-grade teacher, a devotee of the “Dewey decimal system” who is outraged to discover that Scout can already read and write, proves enduring in the long run.

A variety of adults, mostly eccentric in Scout’s judgment, and a continual bubble of incident make *To Kill a Mockingbird* pleasant, undemanding reading.<sup>2</sup>

3. From “On Reading *To Kill A Mockingbird* Fifty Years Later” by professor of English Angela Shaw-Thornburg:

It is one thing to teach a novel that students might be resistant to reading, and quite another to teach a novel that I find *myself* deeply resistant to reading, much less teaching. Unfortunately for me (African American *and* an Americanist), I often find myself in this position when I am preparing to teach a novel or work that represents African Americans as peripheral, incapable of self-representation, monumentally passive, and positively grateful for the small compensation of white guilt over injustices done to African Americans. It is not that I naïvely expect the black citizens of 1935 Maycomb to endorse strategies that would not begin to gain traction in Alabama or other southern states for many decades after that. It is not that I expect Atticus Finch to suddenly acknowledge the degree to which he is complicit in the racism that undergirds the legal system in Alabama. That is not the root of my resistance at all.

What gets me are those moments of struggle or, even worse, dreadful silence when we read *Huckleberry Finn* or even a novel like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was certainly seen as progressive in its day, when students who are people of color try to figure out why they feel unvoiced by the literature they are reading, or ask why we are reading *this* stuff . . . .

When I begin my course prep for *To Kill a Mockingbird* by reading the novel, I finish up with a profound sense of alienation, a sense of bewilderment that Lee decentered the story of Tom Robinson so utterly. Because of that aftertaste, I only read such works because I am expected to teach them . . . .<sup>3</sup>

2 Phoebe Lou Adams, “*To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee” (review), *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1960, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1960/08/to-kill-a-mockingbird-by-harper-lee/306456/>.

3 Angela Shaw-Thornburg, “On Reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Fifty Years Later,” in *Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird: New Essays*, ed. Michael J. Meyer (Lanham, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 114–115.

4. From Attorney General Eric Holder's speech commemorating the 50th anniversary of *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

This story—of Scout's painful education, of Tom Robinson's shameful trial, of Boo Radley's unexpected heroism, and of the prejudices, passions and values that can split apart communities—became our story. It became America's story. With the new issues and fears that now confront us, it remains our story. And it remains an essential teaching tool for students and educators, for advocates and policymakers, for law enforcement officers and judges, for the American people and—of course—for the countless attorneys whose professional paths were first inspired by a small-town Alabama lawyer named Atticus Finch.

So many of us will never forget the goose bumps we felt when Atticus decided to represent Tom; or the image of him—in a chair outside Tom's jail cell—keeping watch against the mob he's sure will soon come clamoring for blood, and keeping faith with his belief that every person—regardless of race or creed or the crime he committed—deserves what Atticus called a “square deal . . . in a courtroom.”

For the last five decades, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has reminded us that, in the work of ensuring justice, one person can make a difference. Individual actions count. And those who are willing to stand up for a principle, to take even one step toward progress, or, simply, to take a seat—be it outside a jailhouse, in a courthouse or a classroom, at a lunch counter or the front of a bus—can help to change the world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Holder, “Remarks as Prepared for Delivery by Attorney General Eric Holder at the University of Alabama: *To Kill a Mockingbird* Anniversary Event,” speech presented at University of Alabama, September 21, 2010, available at <http://www.mainjustice.com/2010/09/21/holder-echoes-atticus-finch-at-to-kill-a-mockingbird-commemoration/>.