Grade 8 Language Arts **To Kill a Mockingbird**

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Day 3 assignment

Read the article attached entitled, *Seeing Mockingbird through my Black Students' Eyes"*

1. Why does the author believe we read novels?

2. Why did the author question whether she had the right to teach To Kill a Mockingbird?

3. Explain the following quote: "To Kill a Mockingbird is a timeless portrait of the human condition."

4. When the teacher's students read To Kill a Mockingbird, what "different set of eyes" did they bring to the experience?

5. How were the experiences of the Black students different from that of the white students and the teacher?

6. Do you agree or disagree with the underlined portion in paragraph 13? Explain

7. Reread paragraph 14. Summarize the author's main point.

Grade 8
Language Arts

OPINION EXCHANGE

Counterpoint: Seeing 'Mockingbird' through my black students' eyes

Before my first year of teaching English in Mississippi, I debated whether I had a right to present the book.

By Katherine Raths | FEBRUARY 23, 2018 — 6:32PM

1. When I was 5, my mother read "To Kill a Mockingbird" to my 10-year-old brother and me. I listened to the book with a Scout-like innocence. But I do remember asking: "Why doesn't Scout have a mother? What did Mr. Cunningham want to do at the jail that night? Why did Tom Robinson go to jail?"

2. My mother, a native Texan and a high school teacher, and my father, an attorney, answered my questions patiently. My brother, much like Jem, dismissed my immaturity and wrote "Boo Radley, the best person I know," "Tom Robinson is better" and "I like Atticus" on the last page, all as he processed a world that differed from our southwest Minneapolis community.

3. Over time, I refined my questions, and — like Jem and my older brother Justin — I viewed the novel in effect through a different set of eyes. I pondered why Boo Radley went out that fateful night. I reread Reverend Sykes' words: "Miss Jean Louise stand up, your father's passing." And, as D.J. Tice wrote (http://www.startribune.com/mockingbird-huck-finn-at-least-keep-these-two-books-as-part-of-your-personal-curriculum/474346533/), I saw the "dignity in such characters as Tom, the field hand falsely accused of rape."

4. I have reread the novel over a dozen times, and each time I read it, I have a new set of experiences that force me to ask different questions. Most recently, I noted the many times when, after Scout asks Atticus a sincere but also humorous question, he turns and walks away, presumably to think, but more likely to stifle his laughter.

5. After all, isn't this why we read? To learn, to question and to find connections with characters?

6. While some might argue, as the Duluth School District has, that "To Kill a Mockingbird" should be removed as required reading, I suggest they teach the novel to a group of 25 10th-grade African-American students in the rural Mississippi Delta.

7. Before my first year of teaching English in Mississippi, I debated whether I had a right to teach "To Kill a Mockingbird." I am a white woman, and I questioned whether I would be able to answer all of my students' questions. I also recognized that for some students, as Tice wrote, "the wounding portraits of historic African-American oppression and subjugation painted in these books could be more demoralizing than enlightening."

8. I talked to several other teachers and a few of my students who had already read the novel. They gave me the go-ahead to introduce it, and as Tice said, we all found that "To Kill a Mockingbird" is not only about "the gussied-up lynch law that prevailed under Jim Crow," but is a "timeless portrait of the human condition."

9. When my students read the book that spring semester, they saw Atticus, Scout, Tom, Bob Ewell and the rest of the characters through a different set of eyes: My students grew up in a segregated school system, knew that the KKK remained active in their area and recognized that the judicial system had not changed as much as we would like to think it has.

10. When Atticus relates how Tom Robinson was shot trying to run away from prison, my students did not respond the way my brother and I had to this emotional scene; instead, one student raised his hand and said, "Ms. Raths. Of course, the black man dies. The black man always dies."

My students understood on a deeper level than I ever could that, as Harper Lee writes, "Atticus had used every tool available to free men to save Tom Robinson, but in the secret courts of men's hearts Atticus had no case." They mourned the failure of the judicial system, but unlike many white students forced to confront white supremacy for the first time, my students already knew it existed and lived its toxic presence.

But just like my brother and me, just like countless others since 1960 who have read "To Kill a Mockingbird," they asked questions: "Why did Boo Radley leave Jem and Scout presents? What is the meaning of the rabid dog Atticus shoots?"

One student noted that Atticus did not care about integrating Scout's world, as explored in Lee's second novel, "Go Set a Watchman." Atticus was a product of his community and his time: He firmly believed in upholding constitutional rights and the court system, but he didn't question established social norms.

If a teacher only focuses on the white savior mentality, or the language used, or seeing the story through one set of eyes without acknowledging its diversity, then that is what students will glean from the novel. But finding ways to make the novel relevant for all students will allow them to grasp the story on different levels.

For example, when Trayvon Martin was killed that spring, my students made connections between the judicial system in Lee's fictional Maycomb, Ala., Emmett Till's real-world lynching in Money, Miss., in 1955 and the U.S. legal system in 2012.

Are there other works, by authors of color, that explore different themes and provoke different reactions that would serve students well? Absolutely. I wanted students to have the most well-rounded curriculum, and that year it included "Mockingbird."

I hope that, while the novel is no longer required reading in Duluth, schools will still urge students, and their families, to read and even reread it through a different set of eyes, always looking to question their previous assumptions about our world.

Katherine Raths lives in Minneapolis.