

Dean Gladish
English 173, Period 7
Mrs. Middleton
September 4, 2012

In the novel "*To Kill a Mockingbird*", author Harper Lee uses the literary element of point of view effectively to advance the story and its themes about the existence of good and evil, and the misunderstandings that occur between people. The story is told from a first person perspective through the eyes of a young girl named Scout. Scout lives in the sleepy southern town of Maycomb, Alabama during the Great Depression. At the beginning of the novel, she is a five year old girl who experiences the world mostly through her own innocent eyes and those of the other children around her. By the time the events of the novel have concluded, however, Scout is eight years old, and she has been exposed to the darker side of humanity. As a result, the narrator's perspective of the world around her changes as the story unfolds. In addition, by having the narrator recount the events of the story as an adult looking back on her childhood experiences many years later, Harper Lee is also able to add Scout's perspective as an older and wiser adult. Finally, Harper Lee uses Scout's changing perspective as the narrator to introduce the points of view of other characters that play a role in her development.

Atticus, who is Scout's father and a well-respected lawyer in Maycomb, plays the biggest role in Scout's development, and Harper Lee uses his character to present Scout with a more mature perspective on the presence of good and evil in society, and to teach her that in dealing with others, it is important for her to try to understand their point of view. Early in the story, and after Scout has had a bad day at school with her teacher, Atticus explains to Scout that "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it," and that if she can learn "this simple trick", she'll "get along a lot better with folks" (Lee 39). What Atticus means by this is that in order to understand

why a person behaves a certain way and to figure out the best way to deal with them, you must understand that person's circumstances and how those circumstances have shaped their attitudes. This is very evident in Atticus' comments about Mrs. Dubose, an old woman who lives in the Finch's neighborhood and who is very nasty to the children. After she dies from a long illness, Atticus explains to Scout that her difficult personality was due to her refusal to take morphine for her illness, and says that she was "a great lady" and "the bravest person I ever knew" (Lee 149). Also, in preparing Scout for the harsh reaction that the people of Maycomb are having for him acting as Tom Robinson's lawyer, Atticus reminds her that even though "we're fighting our friends", it is important to remember that "no matter how bitter things get, they're still our friends and this is still our home" (Lee 102). These are very important lessons for Scout, and throughout the story, Atticus sets an example for her to follow and helps her to learn to see things from the perspective of others.

The changes in Scout's ability to understand the actions and motives of other people is shown through her experiences with the Boo Radley character. At first, Scout does not see Boo Radley as a person. She and the other children believe that "Inside the house lived a malevolent phantom." (Lee 10). As a result, the children of Maycomb invent mysterious stories about Boo Radley and the Radley place, and try to find a way to make Boo come out of his house. When Atticus catches them and orders them to "stop tormenting that man" by leaving notes in the tree or playing the "Boo Radley" game, and says that "What Mr. Radley did was his own business", he is trying to teach the children the value of respecting the opinions of others (Lee 65). The children's perception of Boo changes over time when they begin to know him as a person who helps both Jem and Scout in life threatening situations. Toward the end of the story, Scout realizes that Boo is a good man. Standing on the Radley's porch, she thinks about how she and

the other children had treated Boo. Boo was their neighbor, and had given them two soap dollars, a broken watch and chain, and their lives. Scout reaches the realization that “We never put back into that tree what we took out of it; we had given him nothing, and it made me sad.” (Lee 373). Scout has realized that by believing the stories about Boo, and not thinking about the situation from his point of view, she had been very unfair to him. By the end of the story, Scout learns from Atticus that many problems in the world arise from people’s misunderstandings of each other. In the final chapter of the novel, Scout tells Atticus about a book he is starting to read to her, called “The Gray Ghost”, in which one of the characters is wrongly accused of doing bad things, but who the other characters eventually realize is actually innocent. She tells Atticus: “When they finally saw him, why he hadn’t done any of those things . . . Atticus, he was real nice. . .” (Lee 376). Atticus responds by telling her that “Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them.” (Lee 376).

The character of Atticus also helps Scout to learn to deal with the evil actions of others in the right manner. This is most apparent when Scout is confronted with the evils of racism following her father’s decision to defend Tom Robinson during his trial for the alleged rape of Mayella Ewell. Because her father chose to defend a black man, Scout and her family are taunted and harassed by various members of the community. At one point, her cousin Francis says that “If Uncle Atticus lets you run around with stray dogs, that’s his own business, like Grandma says, so it ain’t your fault. I guess it ain’t your fault if Uncle Atticus is a nigger-lover besides, but I’m here to tell you it certainly does mortify the rest of the family—” (Lee 110). When Scout asks Atticus about this, he explains that “nigger-lover is just one of those terms that don’t mean anything- like snot-nose. It’s hard to explain- ignorant, trashy people use it when they think somebody’s favoring Negroes over and above themselves. It’s slipped into usage with

some people like ourselves, when they want a common, ugly term to label somebody.” (Lee 144). Atticus then explains that “I do my best to love everybody... I’m hard put, sometimes-baby, it’s never an insult to be called what somebody thinks is a bad name. It just shows you how poor that person is, it doesn’t hurt you.” (Lee 144-145). When Scout first encounters racist taunts, she succumbs to the temptation to lower herself by getting into a fight with her classmate Cecil. Atticus scolds her and tells her to “hold your head up high and keep those fists down. No matter what anybody says to you, don’t you let ‘em get your goat. Try fighting with your head for a change.” (Lee 102). Later, when Scout is tempted to get into a fight with Cecil again over his racist comments to her, she drops her fists and walks away (Lee 102). Scout has learned from her father that in dealing with the evil actions of others, it is better to take the “high road” and behave in a principled manner.

“To Kill a Mockingbird” shows the role that racism played in the South during the early 1900s. The author writes the story with Scout looking back on her experience as a young girl living through a traumatic time for her and her family. The narrator’s point of view in this story is very unique, as it is from the perspective of a child. This unique perspective allows the reader to more easily understand how the author is expressing herself, and to avoid the types of self-censorship that can accompany novels that are written from an adult’s point of view. Scout’s perspective is very different from the perspective of the other characters that are depicted in the book. Scout is a unique character because she is five years old at the beginning of the book, and does not experience the horrible events in the novel with the same jaded view that adults like Mr. Cunningham would portray. Harper Lee’s story is mainly that of a girl growing up in a southern town, and her observations of her father Atticus.

Works Cited

Lee, Harper. "*To Kill A Mockingbird*." New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2012.

Print.