

The loss of innocence
and maturity in to kill
a mockingbird



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Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* details the life and experiences of two children in a small town of Alabama. It describes how a series of events shakes their innocence, shaping their character and teaching them about human nature. In her novel, Lee demonstrates how these children learn about the essentiality of good and evil and the existence of injustice and racism in the Deep South during the 1930s. She describes the conscience and the loss of innocence that the two children experience and also details their individual development to maturity.

Jem Finch, one of the children in the story, realizes the unfairness that exists around him and loses his faith in humanity as he makes the transition of child to man. On the other hand, the protagonist and narrator of the story, Scout Finch, becomes aware of her social roles and expectations in society while also learning about the good that exists within certain individuals. As the story unfolds, both of these characters display signs of maturity and awareness of their surroundings. Jem is one of the characters that exhibits instances of change throughout the story.

Although a well-educated and well-mannered son, Jem proves to be an innocent character at the beginning of the novel. This innocence is destroyed, however, as Jem starts to grow into a young man. One example that portrays such transition is presented in Chapter 10 as he alters his view of Atticus, his father. The beginning of this chapter indicates Jem's perception of Atticus and it describes how Jem, as well as Scout, think of their father as a man who does not do " anything that could possibly arouse the admiration of anyone" (102). They consider Atticus an old and feeble character who just sits in the living room and reads.

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This perception changes towards the end of the chapter, however, as Atticus shows his skill as a shooter by hitting a mad dog with his first shot despite his considerable distance. After this incident, Jem recognizes the talent that his father possesses and the humbleness that he displays. He says to Scout, “ Atticus is real old, but I wouldn’t care if he couldn’t do anything—I wouldn’t care if he couldn’t do a blessed thing... Atticus is a gentleman, just like me! ” (113). Jem realizes that a gentleman is not one who brags about his talents or achievements, but one who knows when and how to put those talents in use.

He understands that apart from anything, Atticus has dignity, respect, and honor, which are values that make him a true gentleman different from the rest. Consequently, after perceiving his father’s modesty, Jem starts developing a feeling of admiration for him, which clearly indicates a progress to maturity. Another instance that illustrates Jem’s loss of innocence is presented in Chapter 11 as he learns about the goodness in Mrs. Dubose. Due to the constant insults and racist remarks delivered by Mrs. Dubose, Jem loses his temper and, taking Scout’s baton, destroys the tops of Mrs. Dubose camellias.

As a result, he is forced to go to her house everyday for a month and read to her, which unfortunately only increases Jem’s hatred for the old lady. A little more than a month after Jem’s punishment ends, however, Mrs. Dubose dies, leaving the boy a box containing a single white camellia. At first, Jem explodes in anger due to the irony of the gift, but then, through Atticus, he learns to appreciate it. He tells Jem: I wanted you to see something about her—I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea of <https://assignbuster.com/the-loss-of-innocence-and-maturity-in-to-kill-a-mockingbird/>

courage is a man with a gun in his hand... According to her views, she died beholden to nothing and nobody.

She was the bravest person I even met. (128) Through his father, Jem realizes that Mrs. Dubose's disease was the mere reason for her violent, verbal attacks. He discovers that not all the people are what they seem and, in the case of Mrs. Dubose, he learns that she was a genuinely good, kind-hearted person who was only forced to act in a negative way due to her health conditions. Through the character of Mrs. Dubose therefore, Jem begins to understand the value of tolerance, empathy, and courage.

Jem displays yet another instance of maturity towards the middle of the story when he finds Dill hiding under Scout's bed after running away from home because his mother and new father would not pay enough attention to him. Amazed and concerned about Dill's actions, Jem shows a sign of growth and maturity by informing his father about the situation. Although both Dill and Scout see Jem as a "traitor" for telling Atticus, the young man recognizes that he did the right thing. He says, "Dill, I had to tell him... You can't run three hundred miles off without your mother knowin'" (161).

Consequently, by alerting Atticus and seeking help from a grown-up, Jem proves to be a more mature character. He clearly puts adult notions of what is right before child ones. Towards the end of the book, Jem loses his innocence almost entirely by understanding the reality of Maycomb. He realizes that his hometown is not the ideal place he thought it was, where everyone is good and friendly, but instead, he learns that racism and prejudice exist. For instance, when Jem discovers that Tom Robinson is

wrongfully declared guilty for raping Bob Ewell's daughter, Mayella, he immediately comprehends the injustice that subsists in his society.

He discovers the evil of racism during and after Tom's trial, losing his faith in integrity and humanity. Consequently, through the trial, Jem learns that injustice and corruption are inevitable parts of society. In an commendable way to prove his loss his innocence, he uses Boo Radley to explain the evil that surrounds Maycomb. He declares to Scout: " I think I'm beginning to understand something. I think I'm beginning to understand why Boo Radley's stayed shut up in the house all this time... it's because he wants to stay inside" (260).

With this statement, Jem comes to the conclusion that the only reason Boo does not leave his house is because of the evil that encircles Maycomb. He concludes that Boo stays home because he fears the dangers and prejudice that exist in society. This conclusion provokes a dramatic change in Jem's character, contributing to his growth. He is not the same innocent boy perceived at the beginning of the story, but now, he proves to be a matured young man who is aware of the cruelty within individuals. The other character that reveals instances of change as the story unfolds is Jem's younger sister, Scout.

At the beginning of the novel, Scout is presented as a naive character that although very intelligent, has a few issues with her conduct; she always gets into fights with boys from her town. Due to her behavior, she is usually considered a tomboy, but as the story progresses, she is able to identify her true character and role in society. She starts to show signs of maturity in

Chapter 5, when her departure from Jem and Dill is evident. Every summer, the three kids would come up with random games, usually involving the Radley house, to entertain themselves.

During this summer, however, Scout's personality starts changing and therefore, she sets herself apart from the two boys. As author Harold Bloom states in his book "Bloom's Guide: To Kill a Mockingbird," Scout departs from the boys and "establishes a friendship with their neighbor Miss Maudie, who, despite her eccentricity, is proud and well-bred in her own way, meriting of people's respect" (25). This change portrays her coming of age and awareness of her social role. It demonstrates how she begins to understand and develop her feminine side while also displaying her progress of maturity by leaving her childish games behind.

As the story progresses, Scout becomes more mature and corrects her behavior. She is able to develop her feminine side even more through the influence of Aunt Alexandra, a strong-willed woman with a fierce devotion to her family. Aunt Alexandra influences Scout's life by acting as a motherly figure; she teaches her how to behave like a lady and makes her wear dresses. Most importantly, she teaches Scout to be prudent. In Chapter 24, for instance, the reader perceives Scout as a young, well-mannered lady participating in Aunt Alexandra's missionary circle of tea.

She listens to the ladies' discussion attentively and proves to be very respectful. Suddenly, when Atticus comes, he takes Aunt Alexandra, Miss Maudie, Calpurnia, and Scout to the kitchen to announce Tom Robinson's death. After hearing the news, however, the ladies, including Scout, go back

to the missionary circle, managing to act as if nothing is wrong. Scout's behavior here only shows another sign of maturity. As analyst Thomas L. Shaffer explains in his essay "Growing up in Good Maycomb," Scout "learns to practice prudence as a lady among ladies. She] learns that among ladies, there is a sisterhood of sympathy and principle that does not operate in dramatic encounters such as the one Atticus has" (116). By interacting with Aunt Alexandra and her friends, Scout develops more lady-like traits and learns to be discreet. These qualities therefore, along with her motivation to become a lady, allow the reader to see her process of maturity. Towards the end of the story, Scout's maturity and loss of innocence is even more evident. After being rescued by Boo Radley from the evil hands of Bob Ewell, Scout realizes the idea of reciprocity.

She says, "He [Boo Radley] gave us two soap dolls, a broken watch and chain, a pair of good-luck pennies, and our lives... We never put back into the tree what we took out of it: we had given him nothing, and it made me sad" (321). She is now able to see Boo as a person, rather than a "malevolent phantom", and as a result, she recognizes and regrets her actions against him. She feels ungrateful, indicating that Boo saved both of their lives, Scout and Jem's, and they did nothing but make fun of him and violate his privacy with their silly games.

In addition, she realizes the good that exists within Boo Radley telling her dad, "Atticus, he was real nice" (323), to which he responds, "Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them" (323). At this point, Scout is mature enough to determine that Boo is in fact, a good-hearted person. She learns not to judge people based on the rumors that go around or their appearance.

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Before, she would think of Boo as a monster that ate squirrels, but now, after “climbing into his skin and walking around in it” (33), she learns that Boo is a noble character and pure symbol of the good that lives within human beings.

Both Jem and Scout are two characters that experience drastic changes in their lives. They both undergo some type of transformation that enables them to become mature and aware of the reality that surrounds them. As analyst Claudia Durst Johnson states in her work “Literary Analysis: Unifying Elements of To Kill a Mockingbird,” during the course of the novel, “the children pass from innocence to knowledge. They begin to realize their own connection with the community’s outsiders, and they observe one man’s heroism in the face of community prejudice” (81).

During their innocent childhood, they assume that every individual in Maycomb is good because they have never been exposed to evil before and consequently, have never experience cruelty in their lives. As they grow up, however, they gain more knowledge about the reality of the world and are able to distinguish between right and wrong. They both realize the injustice that exists in society and develop a broader conscience, changing from ignorant and naive to experienced and more knowledgeable individuals.