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Movie Paper – *To Kill a Mockingbird*: A Case Study of Atticus Finch

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### Introduction

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the devotion of Atticus Finch to the principles of justice and respect for all place him and his family in danger. Although Atticus, as he is called by his children, probably exhibits characteristics that are developed further in the works Michael Fullan, Thich Nhat Hahn, and Howard Gardner, Atticus probably best exemplifies two particular traits – “moral purpose” and “relationship building” by Fullan.

### A Leadership Profile of Atticus Finch

Atticus possesses a strong sense of moral purpose. In Fullan’s work, moral purpose is necessary for leaders to act “with the intention of making a positive difference in the lives of employees, customers, and society as a whole” (Fullan, 2001, p. 3). In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus first shows this quality when Judge Taylor visits the family home after Jem and Scout have been put to bed one evening. The viewer senses that there is a special reason for the judge’s visit, otherwise why would he not choose to speak with Atticus during the day, in his office, in town when others might be around and might hear the conversation? After briefly discussing the case of Tom Robinson, Judge Taylor tells Atticus that he is considering asking him to defend the accused man. After a short pause, Atticus agrees to take the case knowing the full implications. Tom is a black man accused of raping a white girl at a time when society still considers blacks inferior to whites. In addition, the story is set in Macomb County, Alabama, part of the Deep South, poor, and rural during a time period in American history when people suffered terribly due to the events of the New York Stock Market crash and the subsequent Great Depression. As portrayed in the film, less-informed (and possibly, less-educated) whites only barely tolerated black individuals and many social taboos existed. Different races were absolutely not permitted to mix in the realms of love and marriage. A rape case involving a

black man and a white woman would be considered scandalous and surely would be watched with great interest by every citizen in sleepy Macomb.

An additional way that Atticus demonstrates his commitment to his moral purpose is through his resolute attitude towards everyone who questions his resolve to provide Tom with the best defense possible instead of simply providing him with less than what he deserves simply because he is a black man. When Bob Ewell asks Atticus if he believes Tom's story, Atticus calmly responds that he was appointed to defend Tom Robinson and that is what he intends to do. He does not entertain Ewell's racial inferences either at that time or later, when he goes to visit Tom's wife to advise her about the proceedings of the Tom's trial. When an obviously drunk Ewell appears lurking around Atticus' car, Jem asks some of Tom's family to retrieve Atticus. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, when Atticus comes out of the Robinson family home, Ewell accosts Atticus, calling him, "You Nigger lover" (Mulligan, 1962) before skulking off into the darkness. Although Atticus says nothing to Ewell personally, he reassures Jem after the incident, telling him that there are many ugly things in the world and that he wishes he could keep them all from him and his sister. When Scott later gets into a fight with Cecil Jacobs at school regarding Atticus' defense of Tom as people in town have begun to talk about Atticus taking the high profile case, he explains to Scout (who was found curled up in a ball on the family stoop ashamed because she got into another fight after Atticus had previously disciplined her for the behavior), that some of the people believe that he (Atticus) should not put much effort into defending Tom. Atticus tells Scout that if he did not provide Tom with the best defense that he possibly could then he would not be able to hold his head up in town and if he did that he believed that he would not have the power to tell neither Jem nor Scout not to do something.

Finally, Atticus reveals moral purpose when he goes to the jail on the eve of the trial to guard Tom. He hears from Heck Tate that there may be some trouble from the group from Old Sarum. As Tom's lawyer, Atticus believes that it is his duty to ensure that his client make it to his trial and the fact that Tom spent the weeks before the trial in the Abbotsville jail was an indicator of the tensions that were developing and exist in Maycomb about the case. When the group of men arrives from Old Sarum in their vehicles and carrying their weapons, Atticus does not run from them but patiently sits in front of the jail window with a book and an extra lamp that he has brought from home. He holds no weapon. He is simply there to guard Tom and seems to have no intention there but to talk to any man who wants to disturb that purpose. Despite Atticus' sense of purpose, the scene is stolen by Jem, Scout, and Dill who follow Atticus out of a feeling of concern and compassion. When the men from Old Sarum become slightly aggressive in regards to Tom and the children's presence, Atticus orders Jem to take the other children home. The boy refuses. While Jem and Atticus are at a temporary standstill, Scout manages to use a child's charm and innocence to make one man, Walter Cunningham, realize that the purpose the men came for, taking Tom from his cell, would not be satisfied that night. The men leave and Atticus manages to get the children to go home leaving him to his solitary task of guarding his client on his final night.

Another component of Fullan's leadership theory is the idea of relationship building. The people are considered important but it is often the relationships that make the difference. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus is respected by almost everyone in Maycomb. He has the ability to solve problems, smooth things over, and is the one that others come to when they need a difficult task accomplished. This is because Atticus has taken the time to develop and build good relationships with others. The first instance in the film where Atticus' ability to build

relationships is during his exchange with Mrs. Dubose. Mrs. Dubose is an elderly widow in Maycomb that Jem and Scout probably irritate simply by the fact that they are able to do things that she is no longer able to do. Time and age made her bones brittle. She is portrayed in the film as extremely ornery. When the children walk by her house and yard, she yells at Scout for not addressing her properly. Jem says she has a Confederate pistol in her lap under her afghan and she will shoot at will. The children and Mrs. Dubose have distorted images of each other. Despite all this, when Jem, Scout, and Dill go to meet Atticus at the end of the day and he walks past Mrs. Dubose's home with them, he manages to escape her scorn by complimenting her garden and addressing her with the respect he knows she would like to command. She is taken aback by this and does not really know how to react to Atticus. By continually cultivating a relationship with Mrs. Dubose he escapes her wrath and gains her respect instead of her ire.

**Comment [pme1]:** Some of the side events in the story, like this one, are powerful tools to illustrate the Finch character..

A second example of relationship building from *To Kill a Mockingbird* comes from an exchange between Atticus and Scout. On Scout's first day of school, she gets into trouble because the teacher tries to give Walter Cunningham Jr. a nickel. Scout tries to tell the teacher how things work in Maycomb and for this offense she ends up in a fight with Walter. As a result, her first day ends badly. In addition, Scout's teacher informs her that Atticus is teaching her to read incorrectly, a fact that Scout strongly protests. As Atticus tries to calm his daughter down and convince her to return to school the following day, he tells her, "You never really understand things until you consider things from his point of view,...until you get in his skin and walk around in it" (Mulligan, 1962). This advice, along with a compromise that they will continue to read at night, convinces Scout to return to school the following day.

On the same night that Atticus convinces Scout to continue with her education, he also continues to build the relationship with his son, Jem. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Jem and Atticus

have an ongoing argument about when it will be appropriate for Jem to get his first gun. Jem is 12 and wants to learn to shoot. Atticus will not let him have a gun but when Walter (Scout's classmate) tells Jem that he was given a gun at a much younger age, Jem pushes the issue with Atticus. Atticus engages Walter in a discussion about guns for Jem's benefit and education, telling him that his own father told him that he could not point his first gun at anything in the house but could later shoot all of the blue jays he could hit outside. Atticus tells the boys and Scout that his father told him that it was a sin to kill a mockingbird, probably because all a mockingbird does is sing for the benefit of human beings. The symbolism of the mockingbird as an innocent creature that does not harm anyone but only brings happiness to others is later extended to both the characters of Tom, who is innocent of his crime but is later killed while trying to flee and then later to Boo Radley who finally makes himself known to Jem and Scout after defending Jem from an attack by Bob Ewell. At the end of the film, the viewer is left with the impression that a relationship between Boo and the children might be cultivated by Atticus because of the special circumstances.

One final piece of evidence that Atticus has built relationships with various citizens in Maycomb is the respect that he commands. There are three specific examples of this. First, although Atticus loses Tom's trial and Tom receives a guilty verdict, the spectators in the upper gallery (all of the black citizens of Maycomb plus Jem, Scout, and Dill who are sitting with the Reverend) wait until Atticus is finished packing up and leaves before they do. In addition, when Atticus leaves, all of the people in that gallery stand up as a gesture of respect. In their minds, Atticus has built a relationship with this community and they are affording him a gesture of thanks and respect for the service he has done in the case of Tom as they know he has provided him with the best defense possible. The second case is the quote by Maudie to Jem after Atticus

finds out that Tom has been killed. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Maudie tells Jem, “Some men were born to do unpleasant jobs for us. Your father is one of them” (Mulligan, 1962). This shows the trust that others put in Atticus to take care of the things that others cannot or will not do. As a final point, the fact that Heck Tate puts his trust in Atticus to shoot the rabid dog when Atticus says he has not shot a gun in many years shows the relationships that Atticus has cultivated with others in regards to his skill with a gun. His act of using the gun to take down the dangerous animal in front of his son also furthers his own relationship with Jem.

**Comment [pme2]:** Do you think the rabid dog was a metaphor for the disease of racism?

### Conclusions

Although the character of Atticus has been often considered as a literary figure, as a dynamic character, a protagonist, or a foil, it is an interesting exercise to consider him in terms of leadership dimensions. Given more pages, it might be interesting to consider him more deeply in terms of Hahn or Gardner or even flip Atticus around and see how a Machiavellian opening or closing statement might be constructed.

Very good analysis. Another fine paper. 20 points.

References

Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pakula, A. (Producer), Foote, H. (Writer), & Mulligan, R. (Director). (1962). *To kill a mockingbird* [Motion picture]. United States: Universal.