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# Atticus the Man

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### Atticus is the Man

What makes a man, a man? One could argue biology and physical appearance. One could say a certain age determines manhood, or his independence, success in the world, power or achievements. However, masculinity is not fixed, but rather fluid; it is a social construct and what it entails to achieve manhood differs according to culture (Motl). Lee comments on the roles of race and gender dynamics in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century South throughout her novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. American stereotypes of masculinity include, but are not limited to: competition, power, aggression, and stoicism. Furthermore, manhood is often considered merely the opposite of everything that is feminine. Atticus Finch, the southern, 1930's, lawyer presents a unique example of manhood. No reader can deny the masculinity of Finch. However, he does not fit the standard of manliness as defined by the town of Maycomb or even America during that time. He even displays qualities that can be deemed feminine such as diplomacy, tenderness, and the ability to nurture. The combination of these qualities displayed in the character of Atticus make him a literary father figure that readers strive to emulate. Atticus Finch stands as the epitome of a man of character in *To Kill a Mockingbird* through his display of courage, sympathy for the well-being of others, and resolve to do what is right despite the hardships those choices may bring.

It is vital to display this type of manhood in literature. Modern literature and pop culture have shifted away from the portrayal of strong male characters, specifically father figures.

Instead, fathers are often portrayed as laughable, irresponsible, abusive or absent. This portrayal of a “bumbling dad” has become a trope commonly present in the media. A fitting example of this would be Homer Simpson. While he is an iconic father figure, he is also portrayed as lazy, dumb, and someone his children do not respect (TVtropes). The idea of the “bumbling dad” is the antithesis of father figures like Andy Griffith and Ward Cleaver portrayed earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This noticeable shift in culture is not a helpful one for society; rather it emasculates men and leaves an absence of men to look up to in the media and in literature.

Issues with fathers, absent or present, are prevalent in modern-day culture and this is reflected in today’s literature. With this in mind, strong, respectable, father figures are necessary in literature because of the example that they set. Chris Crowe, a high school English teacher, wrote an article pertaining to the importance of these loving, father figures. As a teacher, he witnesses many students with absent or abusive fathers, and realizes the importance of having an example of a good, loving father even if it is just a fictional character in a book. Crowe mentions the reality that while so many young men lack good fathers, many of them will eventually become fathers, so literary examples of manhood and fatherhood are necessary (Crowe 119).

For this reason characters like Atticus Finch are essential and readers of this portrayal of a white lawyer defending an innocent, black man amidst the racial tension so prevalent in the South can hardly attempt to deny Atticus’ masculinity. The real question that presents itself is what qualities does Atticus possess that set him as an example of manhood to be imitated? First, he is a father and he provides a father figure in literature worth striving to be like. Second, he respects everything around him, whether that be people or social systems, such as the law. Third, he displays strength. This strength is not a stereotypical kind of outward brawn, but rather the inner strength and willingness to take a stand on one’s convictions. Fourth and finally,

Atticus Finch not only displays what it means to be a man, but also a hero. He is the hero of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and American Literature.

Nevertheless, Scout does not begin the book with this view of her father. Instead, her opinion of Atticus' manhood develops over the course of the book. She begins the novel, doubting his masculinity, holding the same, stereotypical views of the people of Maycomb in regards to what it means to be a man. "Atticus was feeble: he was nearly fifty...our father didn't do anything" (118). Scout goes on to list activities such as hunting, fishing, and playing football that she believes define success and masculinity in the eyes of the Maycomb community. She does not believe that her father possesses any of these admiral qualities. Instead, he sits inside, reads, and defends Tom Robinson, activities she at the time does not deem noteworthy. Scout's observations and statements reflect a cultural shift that occurred in the United States during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and carried over into the 20<sup>th</sup>. This shift placed an emphasis on man's identity being wrapped up in his activities outside of the workplace. A man's occupation no longer defined his manhood, but rather his activities, appearance, toughness, and athletic skill; these traits were emphasized more than they had ever been in centuries past (Rotundo 6). Atticus fails to fit this cultural standard of masculinity that has been set and the reader can hear Scout's critical tone when she says, "When Jem and I asked him why he was so old, he said he got started late, which we felt reflected upon his abilities and manliness" (118). This quote displays the correlation that exists between stature, physical abilities, achievements and society's definition of being a real man.

Despite his lack of participation in activities deemed manly by Maycomb society, Atticus is a man. His manhood just presents itself in a way that differs from societal norms. The first obvious display of his manhood is his embodiment of what it means to be a good father. This is

evident in the kind way he treats his children and the respect he receives from them because of this. One scene that captures the essence of Atticus as a father figure is located in Chapter 3 following Scout's first day at school. Atticus previously taught Scout how to read which proves to be problematic on the first day of school in Scout's dealings with the inexperienced Miss Caroline. After stating that Atticus does not know how to teach, Miss Caroline demands that Scout stop reading at home and learn by the system the school uses. This causes great distress for Scout, and the interaction between her and Atticus that evening displays his various characteristics as a loving father. He can tell she is upset, so rather than focus on his own reading and let her walk away hurt, he follows her to the porch. Atticus chooses to be engaged, rather than passive. Once she relays her problems to him, he does not laugh or think they are petty, but rather intentionally listens. Atticus shows no frustration or anger when Scout relays the report that his teaching and parenting have been called into question by Miss Caroline. Rather than view this as an attack on his adequacy, manhood, or role as a parent, Atticus instead listens calmly to everything Scout tells him. He then gives advice on how to deal with the situation without belittling anyone involved or lashing out.

Atticus encourages Scout to think about Miss Caroline and to "learn a simple trick...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" (Lee 39). Atticus teaches Scout this lesson of empathy and she takes it to heart, putting it into action throughout the novel as she attempts to see others through an accurate and understanding perspective. This particular chapter ends with the sentence, "Atticus was right" (42). This type of respect and assuredness in her father's character prevails throughout the entire novel. Atticus earns the admiration of Scout because he treats her with respect even though she is a child and he possesses great power over her. Since Atticus

does not abuse the power he has over Scout and treats her courteously, she in turn obeys his commands, even when she does not agree with them. Scout and Jem both look to Atticus as their father, and view him as someone they wish to follow. He is aware of this and owns up to the responsibility it places on him by saying, “Before Jem looks at anyone else he looks at me, and I’ve tried to live so I can look squarely back at him...if they don’t trust me they won’t trust anybody” (366-367).

The respect that Atticus shows in his relationship with his children carries over in his interactions with everyone around him, specifically women. Every female character in the book that Atticus comes into contact with is treated with kindness and respect by him no matter the age, race, background, or personality from Mrs. Dubose, Alexandra, Calpurnia, Miss Caroline to Mayella Ewell. The respect he shows towards the women around him does not downplay his own masculinity, but instead further proves that he is a man of true character. Overpowering or being aggressive towards women should not correlate with being manly, despite the common American misconception that men can be considered effeminate if they do not exhibit qualities of aggression or domination (Jenks 24).

One of many striking examples of the graciousness Atticus shows towards women is displayed in his interaction with Mrs. Dubose. Despite her vicious behavior, hateful words, and old age, Atticus treats her respectfully and demands the same of his children. As Mrs. Dubose continues this behavior it infuriates Jem. Instead of encouraging Jem to stand up for himself, “man up”, or retaliate in any way, Atticus admonishes Jem by saying, “You just hold your head high and be a gentleman. Whatever she says to you, it’s your job not to let her make you mad” (Lee 133). Scout describes one scene where Atticus wishes Mrs. Dubose to have a good day and compliments her appearance while respectfully lifting his hat to her. In response to her

father's exhibit of grace and kindness towards the old, hateful woman, Scout states, "it was times like these when I thought my father, who hated guns and had never been to any wars, was the bravest man who ever lived" (134). It is the respect Atticus shows others that begins to define his courage and manhood in the eyes of his daughter. She begins to formulate her own idea of what an admirable man looks like rather than merely accepting Maycomb's view of what manhood is.

However, being a good man is complex and goes deeper than society's definition. Atticus seeks to explain this to Jem and does this by emphasizing content of character rather than what society has deemed manly, and this is evident in his discussion with Jem concerning Mrs. Dubose. Atticus explains his reasoning behind having Jem read to Mrs. Dubose. She fought her addiction and she left the world free from it; in Atticus' eyes that was the most courageous decision she could have made. In response to this display of bravery, Atticus tells Jem, "I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do" (149). First, it is interesting to note that rather than picking a brave, strong, soldier or athlete to demonstrate courage to Jem, Atticus instead picks a frail, bitter, old lady. In order for Jem to grow up and be a good man, Atticus demonstrates that he must possess more than society's characteristics of manhood, and rather strive to exhibit the character traits of adulthood.

This conversation follows the chapter where Atticus shoots the rabid dog. He had kept his shooting abilities secret from his children, and this humility sparks a further admiration in Jem's heart for Atticus. This is shown in his conversation with Scout when he says, "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” (Lee 131). It is here that Jem begins to realize that the greatness of his father lies not in his ability to shoot, but rather in the content of his character.

Guns are not synonymous with power and neither is manhood with the ability to shoot and Atticus wishes to instill that mindset into Jem, as well as the importance of being courageous and listening to one’s conscience. He realizes that while power is a quality associated with being masculine, it is damaging to society if abused. This is evident in how Bob Ewell uses his power to beat his own daughter, and his power as a white man to unjustly convict Tom Robinson. The innate power that comes with the concept of masculinity proves to be extremely dangerous if it is used in the wrong way.

Likewise, while Atticus refers to Mrs. Dubose in his quote discussing courage with Jem, it is Atticus who serves as the primary example of courage and resolve to do the right thing. He may be feeble externally, but Atticus possesses an inner strength in his determination to act upon his convictions. It is this inner strength that makes him more of a man than playing the game of football ever could. Atticus chooses to defend Tom Robinson because it is the right thing to do. Tom Robinson’s employer, Link Deas, states the general consensus of the community when he says, “you’ve got everything to lose from this, Atticus, I mean everything” (195). Atticus is fully aware of this and chooses to defend the truth regardless of the risks which include, losing his comfort, pride and reputation. It is this display of courage and dignity that makes Atticus Finch a literary figure worth emulating. It is his strength to act upon his moral convictions that makes him a great man.

Finally, Atticus Finch is the hero of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. American culture is fascinated with the concept of heroism and Marie Failinger discusses why this is the case. “A



hero goes beyond himself. There is something extraordinary about his effort. There is more in what he does than what we can see ourselves doing” (Faulkner 303). Atticus seems to be an unlikely hero for a novel criticizing racial prejudice in the South, since he is a white, middle class, southern lawyer. However, it is the fact that he goes against what the majority of other white people in the community believe that makes him stand out. It is one thing for a man to go to war and risk his life on the battlefield; that undoubtedly takes an extreme amount of courage. However, another aspect of courage that may be even more difficult is taking a stand and doing what one believes is the right thing to do when everyone else seems think differently.

Essentially, it is this factor that makes Finch extraordinary; it is his willingness to take a stand for truth and fight against what he sees as wrong in society. Faulkner’s article goes on to explain that because of their exceptional abilities to do what we as a society wish we could, there is something about the hero that “both attracts and repels us to him” (306). This is evident in Finch’s relationship with the people of Maycomb County. Obviously, readers respect him, as well as his family, the black community of Maycomb, and a few people in between such as Miss Maudie. However, even those who do not necessarily agree with Atticus Finch and are repelled by his beliefs are forced to stop and contemplate what he stands for and what he is doing by defending Tom Robinson. The lengthy time that the jury spends debating upon the conviction sentence is a testament to that. Miss Maudie’s description of Atticus’ attempt at justice illustrates this point well, “We’re so rarely called on to be Christians, but when we are, we’ve got men like Atticus to go for us...Atticus Finch won’t win, he can’t win, but he’s the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that...it’s just a baby-step, but it’s a step” (Lee 288-289). Atticus’ attempt may be futile, but it’s the futility of the situation that makes his attempt heroic. Heroes compel us to strive for greatness, to achieve what seems

unbelievable, “they make it possible for us to believe there is another way to live, that we CAN live it” (Failing 307).

Atticus Finch makes it possible for readers to view manhood in a different way. He is a character that is undeniably masculine, but who does not necessarily fit the mold of masculinity created by Maycomb society. Rather, he exhibits qualities that are both feminine and masculine in order to demonstrate that to be a great man, one has to be a man of character and virtue. He is a loving and nurturing father, who fills the role of a single parent to the best of his ability. He is a courageous lawyer, who goes to battle against the injustice of racism in the 1930's South. He is a respectful and courteous neighbor and ultimately, a hero that readers, girls and boys, men and women, can look up to and strive to be like. Atticus Finch demonstrates that manhood can be more than one's hobbies, physical stature, competition, and power. So although he reads, is described as old and feeble, loses the case, and never overpowers anyone, Atticus serves as an example of a great man by showing respect to everyone around him: man or woman. He is lacking some of what Maycomb and 20<sup>th</sup> century America would describe as vital masculine traits. It is because of this, however, that Atticus makes it possible to reconcile society's gender constructs in a beneficial way. Highly structured masculine stereotypes prove to be harmful to men. These stereotypes encourage men to suppress aspects of their character that may be deemed less manly, but these characteristics such as connection, diplomacy, and tenderness have the power to make them greater men. As shown in Finch's character, the reconciliation of these qualities is needed for the good of society and to benefit the family unit (Rotundo 291-293).

Atticus Finch stands as a figure in literature that people can look up to as an example of a man of character and a good father and that is what makes Atticus the man.

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