

Isolation and Empathy in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

The overriding theme of *To Kill a Mockingbird* comes through the novel's idea of empathy. Can one man respect another – even if he is different? Or are we inevitably selfish? *To Kill a Mockingbird* approaches this question by dramatizing Scout's growth from childhood ignorance to maturity through her experiences with a pair of outsiders – Tom Robinson and Boo Radley.

Two children grow up in Maycomb, Alabama during the Depression. Like other neighborhood children, they harass and pursue a strange man – probably autistic – who lives in isolation, locked in his parents' prison of a home. The cruelty of this teasing is not at first evident, until the kids witness the terrible trial of a man – Tom Robinson – falsely accused of an unspeakable crime. Watching their father work tirelessly to defend justice against bigotry, Scout and Jem come to learn the importance of sympathy and respect for those who differ from us.

Two stories develop in this book, and each serves to highlight the same important theme. First, we watch as Scout and Jem grow from teasing an outsider – Boo Radley – to respecting him. Second, we watch as Atticus defends another outsider – Tom Robinson – from the bigotry working to destroy him. The children learn from the parent. Moving from innocence to understanding, the young protagonists begin to accept and finally appreciate that other outsider – Boo Radley. This appreciation is what Atticus Finch calls “the ability get inside another person's skin, to walk around in his shoes, and see the world from his point of view.” It is what we call “empathy,” and it stands at the thematic center of this story.

The moral voice of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is Atticus Finch, a man who can understand prejudice and evil without losing his faith in humanity. His defense of Tom Robinson displays this faith, and it teaches a moral lesson to Scout, Jem, Dill, and all the people of Maycomb. Scout's emotional progress throughout the novel is defined by her coming to understanding Atticus's lessons. In the end, Scout appreciates Boo Radley as a human being, and her newfound ability to view the world from *his* point of view ensures that she will mature into a true human being.

In the end, Boo Radley proves himself a hero to the children who once feared him. This is his victory. And this victory of friendship bringing *To Kill a Mockingbird* to a close is proof of the idea that you never get to know another human being until you have experienced the world through his eyes and his heart. It is what carries Jem and Scout (and all of us) us from isolation to empathy.