

Analyzing Atticus Finch

from *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

“If you shouldn’t be defendin’ him, then why are you doin’ it?”

“For a number of reasons,” said Atticus. “The main one is, if I didn’t I couldn’t hold my head up in town, I couldn’t represent this county in the legislature, I couldn’t even tell you or Jem not to do something again.”

“You mean if you didn’t defend that man, Jem and me wouldn’t have to mind you anymore?”

“That’s about right.”

“Why?”

“Because I could never ask you to mind me again. Scout, simply by the nature of the work, every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. This one’s mine, I guess. You might hear some ugly talk about it at school, but do one thing for me if you will: you just hold your head high and keep those fists down. No matter what anybody says to you, don’t let ‘em get your goat. Try fighting with your head for a change...it’s a good one, even if it does resist learning.”

“Atticus, are we going to win it?”

“No, honey.”

“Then why—”

“Simply because we were licked a hundred years before we started is no reason for us not to try to win,” Atticus said. (Chapter 9. 79-80).

Atticus pushed my head under his chin. “It’s not time to worry yet,” he said. “I never thought Jem’d be the one to lose his head over this—thought I’d have more trouble with you.”

I said I didn’t see why we had to keep our heads anyway, that nobody I knew at school had to keep his head about anything.

“Scout,” said Atticus, “when summer comes you’ll have to keep your head about far worse things...it’s not fair for you and Jem, I know that, but sometimes we have to make the best of things, and the way we conduct ourselves when the chips are down—well, all I can say is, when you and Jem are grown, maybe you’ll look back on this with some compassion and some feeling that I didn’t let you down. This case, Tom Robinson’s case, is something that goes to the essence of a man’s conscience—Scout, I couldn’t go to church and worship God if I didn’t try to help that man.”

“Atticus, you must be wrong....”

“How’s that?”

“Well, most folks seem to think they’re right and you’re wrong....”

“They’re certainly entitled to think that, and they’re entitled to full respect for their opinions,” said Atticus, “but before I can live with other folks I’ve got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.” (Chapter 11. 108-109).

We were taking a short cut across the square when four dusty cars came in from the Meridian highway, moving slowly in a line. They went around the square, passed the bank building, and stopped in front of the jail.

Nobody got out. We saw Atticus look up from his newspaper. He closed it, folded it deliberately, dropped it in his lap, and pushed his hat to the back of his head. He seemed to be expecting them.

“Come on,” whispered Jem. We streaked across the square, across the street, until we were in the shelter of the Jitney Jungle door. Jem peeked up the sidewalk. “We can get closer,” he said. We ran to Tyndal’s Hardware door—near enough, at the same time discreet.

In ones and twos, men got out of the cars. Shadows became substance as lights revealed solid shapes moving toward the jail door. Atticus remained where he was. The men hid him from view.

“He in there, Mr. Finch?” a man said.

“He is,” we heard Atticus answer, “and he’s asleep. Don’t wake him up.”

In obedience to my father, there followed what I later realized was a sickeningly comic aspect of an unfunny situation: the men talked in near-whispers.

“You know what we want,” another man said. “Get aside from the door, Mr. Finch.”

“You can turn around and go home again, Walter,” Atticus said pleasantly. “Heck Tate’s around somewhere.”

“The hell he is,” said another man. “Heck’s bunch’s so deep in the woods they won’t get out till mornin’.”

“Indeed? Why so?”

“Called ’em off on a snipe hunt,” was the succinct answer. “Didn’t you think a’that, Mr. Finch?”

“Thought about it, but didn’t believe it. Well then,” my father’s voice was still the same, “that changes things, doesn’t it?”

“It do,” another deep voice said. Its owner was shadow.

“Do you really think so?”

This was the second time I heard Atticus ask that question in two days, and it meant somebody’s man would get jumped. This was too good to miss. I broke away from Jem and ran as fast as I could to Atticus.

Jem shrieked and tried to catch me, but I had a lead on him and Dill. I pushed my way through dark smelly bodies and burst into the circle of light.

“H-ey, Atticus!”

I thought he would have a fine surprise, but his face killed my joy. A flash of plain fear was going out of his eyes, but returned when Dill and Jem wriggled into the light.

There was a smell of stale whiskey and pigpen about, and when I glanced around I discovered that these men were strangers. They were not the people I saw last night. Hot embarrassment shot through me: I had leaped triumphantly into a ring of people I had never seen before.

Atticus got up from his chair, but he was moving slowly, like an old man. He put the newspaper down very carefully, adjusting its creases with lingering fingers. They were trembling a little.

“Go home, Jem,” he said. “Take Scout and Dill home.”

We were accustomed to prompt, if not always cheerful acquiescence to Atticus’s instructions, but from the way he stood Jem was not thinking of budging.

“Go home, I said.”

Jem shook his head. As Atticus’s fists went to his hips, so did Jem’s, and as they faced each other I could see little resemblance between them: Jem’s soft brown hair and eyes, his oval face and snug-fitting ears were our mother’s contrasting oddly with Atticus’s graying black hair and square-cut features, but they were somehow alike. Mutual defiance made them alike. (Chapter 15. 153-155).

“I wish Bob Ewell wouldn’t chew tobacco,” was all Atticus said about it.

According to Miss Stephanie Crawford, however, Atticus was leaving the post office when Mr. Ewell approached him, cursed him, spat on him, and threatened to kill him. Miss Stephanie . . . said Atticus didn’t bat an eye, just took out his handkerchief and wiped his face and stood there and let Mr. Ewell call him names wild horses could not bring her to repeat. . . . “Too proud to fight, you nigger-lovin’ bastard?”

Miss Stephanie said Atticus said, “No, too old,” put his hands in his pockets and strolled on. Miss Stephanie said you had to hand it to Atticus Finch; he could be right dry sometimes.

Jem and I didn’t think it entertaining.

“After all, though,” I said, “he was the deadest shot in the county one time. He could—”

“You know he wouldn’t carry a gun Scout. He ain’t even got one—” said Jem. “You know he didn’t even have one down at the jail that night. He told me havin’ a gun around’s an invitation to somebody to shoot you.”

“This is different,” I said. “We can ask him to borrow one.”

We did, and he said, “Nonsense.” . . .

But when he noticed us dragging around the neighborhood, not eating, taking little interest in our normal pursuits, Atticus discovered how deeply frightened we were. He tempted Jem with a new football magazine one night; when he saw Jem flip the pages and toss it aside, he said, “What’s bothering you, son?”

Jem came to the point: “Mr. Ewell.”

“What has happened?”

“Nothing’s happened. We’re scared for you, and we think you oughta do something about him.”

Atticus smiled wryly. “Do what? Put him under a peace bond?”

“When a man says he’s gonna get you, looks like he means it.”

“He meant it when he said it,” said Atticus. “Jem, see if you can stand in Bob Ewell’s shoes a minute. I destroyed his last shred of credibility at that trial, if he had any to begin with. The man had to have some kind of comeback, his kind always does. So if spitting in my face and threatening me saved Mayella Ewell one extra beating, that’s something I’ll gladly take. He had to take it out on somebody and I’d rather it be me than that houseful of children out there. You understand?”

Jem nodded. (Chapter 23. 220-221)

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: Popular Library, 1960.