

TO KILL A MOCKING BIRD

Harper Lee

“In the courts, all men are created equal.”

I. Description

The quoted passage above is one of the lines of Atticus Finch – a defense lawyer of a Negro accused of rape in the novel *To Kill A Mocking Bird* written by Harper Lee. The story was set in Maycomb Country in Alabama sometime in 1935 when “white” population despise “colored-people” thru chronic racism. A nine (9) year old girl named Jean Louise Finch is the main character of the story. She narrated how his father Atticus taught her and her brother Jem on how to stand up for what’s right even though the stakes are high.

This book was originally published in 1960. It is composed of 31 untitled chapters. It won a Pulitzer Prize, and regarded as a masterpiece of American literature as claimed by the lower cover of the paper back. Likewise, the novel was described as a “compassionate, dramatic and deeply moving novel that takes the readers to the roots of human behavior – to innocence and experience, kindness and cruelty, love and hatred, and humor and pathos.”

However, the aim of this book review is not to cite, copy or plagiarize hundreds of reviews available online, but to dissect whether the author’s thesis or argument is met all throughout the literature.

II. Critical Analysis

Title

One of the most important insight to note about the book is the title itself.

It is misleading to assume that the book is about killing a mockingbird literally, when in fact, nowhere in the book will one find an instruction on how to indeed kill a mockingbird.

In law, there is a well-settled Latin maxim *ratio legis est anima*, which basically means that the words (of the Constitution) should be interpreted in accordance with the intent of its

framers. This well-settled maxim applies in the understanding of the book. Chapter 10 of the book describes the author's intent in choosing the title:

Atticus said to Jem one day, "I'd rather you shot at tin cans in the back yard, but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."

That was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something, and I asked Miss Maudie about it.

"Your father's right," she said. "**Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.**"

Basically, according to the author, killing a mockingbird is inherently wrong, since "mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy." Applying the maxim to the novel, the mockingbird represents the innocence, not only of the Negro who was accused of rape, but by Scout who witnessed the judgment against a man just because of the color of his skin.

Writing Style

It is an accepted theory that authors, no matter how great they are, leave traces of their personality into their piece. The author of the book being reviewed is no exception. In fact, Ms. Harper Lee is a daughter of a former newspaper editor, proprietor and lawyer. The plot and characters of the novel is based solely on her childhood observations of her family and neighbors, as well as on an event that occurred near her hometown.¹ It can be gleaned from the novel that the words chosen by the author are relatively simple and easy to read, since it is written in a point-of-view of a child.

Likewise, the author elaborated the usual understanding of Scout of the acceptable norms in her country, like spitting in one hand, which means a time-honored method of sealing a contract, and "bought cotton," which means a polite term in doing nothing in Maycomb Country, among others.

Target Reader

Based from the writing style of Ms. Harper Lee, it is practical to note that the target reader of the book may vary from lawyer to non-lawyer, young or old, and white or black. The simplicity of the book structure, the arrangement of thoughts chronologically and logically will allow any reader to relate to the progress of the story.

The author rarely used legal terms. And when she mentioned one, she made it sure to define the terms for the reader to understand its meaning.

Objective of the Book

The book has two (2) objectives. The first objective is to open the eyes of the readers that, although some people are born gifted beyond the normal scope of most men, in the eyes of the court, all men are created equal. However, due to racial discrimination, the fair treatment of the law is not attained. The second objective of the book is to tell men to stand up for what's right even though the stakes are high.

However, there are claims that instead of emphasizing anti-racism thought, the book merely suggest the superiority of "whites" as more educated or knowledgeable compared to "colored folks" who needs salvation from these superior men. Either way, the book achieved its over-all purpose.

Weakness

The only weakness that came to my attention while reading the novel was the unrelated chapters right after the trial. About two (2) or three (3) chapters are unrelated which, in my humble opinion, may be deleted in its entirety without affecting the plot of the story. Aside from this flaw, in which other authors are also guilty of, no other weaknesses are noticed.

Personal Response

Reading the novel from a layman's perspective is a different experience compared to my current understanding of the novel as a law student.

Several years ago, the book merely narrates to me a story of a young girl whose father is a lawyer, which lawfully tried to save a life of a man accused of rape. Reading it closely now, it evolves around the legal system of the United States that provides for the 'jury system' which influences the decision of the courts in assessing matters of fact.

In the Philippines, our legal system provides for the concept "generality" which means that the laws shall be binding on all person who live or sojourn in the Philippines **regardless of nationality, gender or other personal circumstance.**

Meaning to say, our laws does not tolerate racism. It does not matter what nationality, gender or personal circumstances you have, for as long as you violated Philippine laws, you will ultimately be liable.

III. Evaluation

Overview

Jean Louise Finch or "Scout" for short, a nine (9) year old girl, lives in a sleepy southern town of Maycomb in Alabama. Sometime in 1935, in the era of racial discrimination, the sleepiness of the country was awakened by an allegation of rape purportedly committed by a Negro against a 19 year old woman. In the case, Atticus Finch, Scout's father, worked as a defending counsel for the accused.

Scout and her older brother Jem watched the whole trial progress. In the trial, Atticus did his best to show that the Negro was innocent, and that all is fair in the eyes of the law. However, no matter how much Atticus showed to the jury that his client was innocent, the eyes of the jury were already infected with Maycomb's usual disease – racism. Eventually, his client was convicted.

Thesis

The book *To Kill A Mockingbird* written by Harper Lee is a valuable book to remind lawyers and even non-lawyers of two things: (1) all men are created equal; and (2) stand up for what's right even though the stakes are high. Thus, it is important to note this passage from the book:

“Thomas Jefferson once said that all men are created equal. xxx

“We know all men are not created equal in the sense some people would have us believe—some people are smarter than others, some people have more opportunity because they’re born with it, some men make more money than others, some ladies make better cakes than others—some people are born gifted beyond the normal scope of most men.

“But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal—there is one human institution that makes a pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein, and the ignorant man the equal of any college president. That institution, gentlemen, is a court. xxx but in this country our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts all men are created equal.”

In the novel, it will be difficult to pinpoint the scenario on how law become fair, since the defending lawyer failed to win the case. As an effect, an innocent man was put on jail merely because of his social status.

However, the objective of the author is still met, not through the lines of the book, but through the effect of the book on its readers. Through the worldwide publication of the book, societies in the new generation will be able to tell what basically racism is.

The book also shows the courage of lawyers against the social acceptability of the cases they handle. Atticus Finch stressed to his children that real courage is not a man with a gun in his hand. He also taught his children that every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. But no matter what they hear from others, they just have to hold their head high and keep those fists down. That is the real essence of courage.

Conclusion

Being a lawyer is a privilege vested with public interest. He is bound within the lawyer’s oath to do things within the best of his knowledge and discretion, with all good fidelity to the courts as well as to the client. That is the very reason why Mr. Finch did everything within the bounds of the law to protect the life of his client.

I can say that Atticus Finch instill in his children how to be fair, hold their heads up high and do something that would change the perception of fairness and equality among different social status.

At the end of the day, the only thing that the people had to fear is fear itself. The fear that one day, when “white’ and “black” are on equal footing, the privileges that the “whites” are receiving will be put to naught.