
Courage In To Kill A Mockingbird By Harper Lee

“It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.” Harper Lee uses her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* to show what courage really is. The theme of the true meaning of courage is presented in many ways throughout the novel, and its use in this classic supports the story extensively, even providing as the major bridge between the two parts of the novel. Scout sees the world through a child’s eyes and she sees numerous examples of what courage is, and even examples of what courage isn’t. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the author Harper Lee shows that this necessary trait doesn’t require the typical manly version of courage, but rather the ability to take a stand, no matter the odds, when defending what one believes. At the beginning of the novel, Scout is immediately exposed to the type of courage that normally comes to mind when thinking of courage.

After being dared to touch the scary Radley house, Jem initially refuses, causing Dill to accuse him of being scared. After being taunted, Jem feels forced to do overcome this fear, through an action that the reader can interpret as stupidity. When “Jem threw open the gate and sped to the side of the house, slapping it with his palm and ran back past us, not waiting to see if his foray was successful,” we see that this act of “courage” is not really so (Lee 18). Jem’s actions reflect childish foolishness rather than courage, setting up an immediate contradiction to the idea of courage that is typically thought of, an important use to note as this quote is in the first chapter. This immediate exposure to the theme of courage sets it up to be reevaluated later, providing a base to the reader. Later in the novel, we see an example of courage that fits its true meaning through Atticus, who serves as the major role model for Scout throughout the novel. Atticus, as a lawyer, has taken on the case of defending the accused rapist Tom Robinson. Since the novel is set 1933 Alabama, Maycomb as a whole has adopted a racist mindset, as evidenced by the community’s reaction when Atticus accepts the case. Scout experiences this backlash personally when she tells Cecil Jacobs that, “You can just take that back, boy!” and she notes that, “My fists were clenched and I was ready to let fly.” (Lee 99). This is her reaction to the fact that, “He had announced in the schoolyard the day before that Scout Finch’s daddy defended niggers,” and it shows her fighting to defend her father (Lee 99). When being questioned about this, Atticus tells Scout that, “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,” (Lee 101). This is once again a contradiction to what the accepted meaning of courage is and gives the reader and Scout an example of the true meaning of courage. He shows Scout that courage is not fighting with fists, something that even Scout describes a childish thing, but rather keeping one’s cool while defending beliefs. This example of the theme carries through the rest of the chapter where Scout is punished by Uncle Jack for cursing at Francis after he insulted her father.

Scout realizes her mistake and after telling Uncle Jack the truth she asks him to remain quiet or Atticus will punish her as well. These two examples within a single chapter highlight the importance of this theme. The next two chapters also significantly show the theme of the true meaning of courage. Just as many of the other examples of this theme. We see an example of courage in its “normal form” and it is directly contradicted by soon after. In chapter 10, Atticus is the man with the gun, and Miss Maudie tells the children “Atticus Finch was the dearest shot in Maycomb County in his time. [...] didn’t you know his nickname was Ol’ One-Shot when he

was a boy?” (Lee 129). This is yet another example of the manly version of courage. However, it is noted by Miss Maudie that Atticus is, “civilized in his heart,” the reason for not hunting anymore, and Jem tells Scout, “I reckon if he’d wanted us to know it, he’d told us. If he was proud of it, he’d told us.” (Lee 130). These comments show that though Atticus has this “Macho-Man” version of courage, he is not willing to show that, especially to his kids because of the lesson he wishes to instill in them.

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