

EXAMPLE INFORMATIVE THEME: CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Prompt: Choose one of the characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Also choose at least three qualities that this character represents. Using examples from the novel and quotations, illustrate how the character represents each quality. Use the APA style, and include references and in-text citations.

TITLE OF PAPER: Atticus Finch: A Civilized Man

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Atticus Finch: A Civilized Man

Atticus Finch is the intriguing protagonist in Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. At first, he appears to be a "Casper Milquetoast" kind of guy. He is a middle-aged widower who lives in a fictional Alabama town during the Depression in the 1930s (Lee, 1960, p. 274). He has two children, including his son, Jem, and his daughter, Scout. They live in a house with their African American maid, Calpurnia. He is an attorney who walks to his office in the courthouse on the town green each morning and walks home each evening. In fact, Scout thinks he's pretty unremarkable. She reports that, "Our father didn't do anything. He worked in an office, not in a drugstore. Atticus did not drive a dump-truck for the county, he was not the sheriff, he did not farm, work in a garage, or do anything that could possibly arouse the admiration of anyone" (Lee, 1960, p. 118). In reality, though, Atticus turns out to be a remarkable person because of the ways he treats people as a father, a neighbor, and a citizen of the county.

Within his own home, Atticus is a wonderful father. First, he tries to be a good model for his children. He states, "Before Jem looks at anyone else, he looks at me, and I've tried to live so that I can look squarely back at him...and the day I can't do that I'll know that I've lost him" (Lee, 1960, p. 366). Second, when his children misbehave, instead of punishing them physically or verbally, he teaches them lessons on how to behave. When Scout wants to beat up her friends because they are calling Atticus a "nigger lover," Atticus asks her to hold her head up, put away her fists, and fight with her brain. When the children make fun of someone who is different, he asks them to stand in that person's shoes for a while. When the children don't understand another person's ideas, he asks them to respect the other person's beliefs even if they are different from their own beliefs. They are not to harm the other person in any way. Third, Atticus believes that a parent should be honest with his children. If they ask him a question, he believes that he should

tell them the answer. He tells his brother, Jack, “When a child asks you something, answer him, for goodness’ sake... Children are children, but they can spot an evasion quicker than adults” (Lee, 1960, p. 116). Fourth, Atticus knows when to say something and when to say nothing. For example, when Scout uses swear words, he knows that she is going through a stage that she will grow out of. He tells Jack not to worry about her language. For another example, when the children sneak into a neighbor’s yard at night, he does not mention that he knows they did it; he knows that they will worry more if he says nothing.

Outside of their home and within the Finch family’s neighborhood, Atticus is a very good neighbor in several ways. When their neighbor, Mr. Radley, is dying, Atticus is concerned that he be allowed to die in peace. Scout reports that “Atticus told us he’d wear us out if we made any noise in the yard and commissioned Calpurnia to serve in his absence if she heard a sound out of us” (Lee, 1960, p. 15). When the children create plays about neighbor Boo Radley’s life, Atticus remarks that they are “...putting his life’s history on display to the edification of the neighborhood” (Lee, 1960, p. 65). He tells them to stop. When Miss Maudie’s house is burning across the street from their home, Atticus risks his life to take her furniture out of the house. He also makes sure to choose her favorite furniture, like her rocking chair. When a sick dog terrorizes the neighborhood, Atticus stands with the sheriff in the middle of the street to stop him. Although he hasn’t shot a gun in 30 years, Atticus takes the shot which kills the dog. When another neighbor, Mrs. Dubose, is dying and wants to break her habit of taking pain killers before she dies, Atticus insists that his children read to her while, unbeknownst to them, she is going through detoxification. After she dies, Atticus tells the children that he wanted them “to see what real courage is” and calls Mrs. Dubose a “great lady” (Lee, 1960, p. 149). Clearly, he knows his neighbors deeper than on a surface level.

Still outside of their home but within the broader community, Atticus is a very conscientious citizen; he represents other people and protects them. Not surprisingly, he is well respected by the people in Maycomb County. They have elected him to represent them in the state legislature several times, and he is their current representative. When Judge Taylor appoints Atticus as defense attorney for Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman, Atticus accepts the appointment. He knows that he could have made an excuse of some sort to get out of the responsibility, but he chooses not to do so. In fact, much to the consternation of the prejudiced people around him, he defends Tom Robinson with all of his skills and knowledge. He does that knowing that he will likely fail. He tells Scout, “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...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” (Lee, 1960, p. 139-140). Further, when Atticus hears that a mob of men is planning to descend on the jail one evening to possibly kill Tom, he sits outside, blocking the jailhouse door without a weapon. He is intent on making sure that Tom is safe. With the help of his children, he talks the men into going home.

To summarize, although his children may think Atticus is not a very special person at the beginning of the novel, they come to believe that he is an outstanding father, neighbor, and citizen. Throughout the novel, various characters make comments about Atticus’s strengths. For example, Miss Maudie calls him “civilized in his heart” (Lee, 1960, p. 130) when Scout wonders why he does not go hunting or brag about his talent even though he is such a gifted marksman. Miss Maudie tells the children that “People in their right minds never take pride in their talents” (Lee, 1960, 130). She hypothesizes that “...maybe he put his gun down when he realized that

God had given him an unfair advantage over most living things” (Lee, 1960, p. 130). Miss Maudie also remarks that Atticus is a genuine person stating that he “...is the same in his house as he is on the public streets” (Lee, 1960, p. 130). Even Jem remarks that “Atticus is a gentleman, just like me!” (Lee, 1960, p. 130). At the end of the trial, everyone in the courtroom, even Tom Robinson’s friends who just saw Tom convicted of a crime he did not do, stood up as a sign of respect as Atticus walked by them and left the courtroom. Clearly, Atticus is a figure worth respecting and emulating.

Reference

Lee, H. (1960). *To kill a mockingbird*. New York: Grand Central Publishing.