

# The Utopian Ideas in Harper Lee's To Kill a Mocking Bird

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i  
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Kristijan Kola

**Utopijske ideje u romanu *Ubiti pticu rugalicu* Harper Lee**

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Mentorica: izv. prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

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## **Abstract**

“Man is by nature a political animal. He who is without a city through nature rather than chance is either a mean sort or superior to man” (9) is one of the most famous quotations by the ancient Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle. Aristotle implied that social behavior lies within human nature itself and that has been proven to be true ever since the first emergence of the Homo sapiens species that formed and lived in hunter-gatherer societies. Due to human’s tendency of exemplifying social behavior, the first civilizations were created, one of which was Mesopotamia. Rules were required to keep peace among the people living in Mesopotamia, which resulted in the creation of the first recorded set of laws, *The Code of Hammurabi*. Such rules of co-existence had been refined and reinvented in pursuit of creating the perfect civilization time and time again throughout history. This implies that the ideas of a utopian civilization were present long before Sir Thomas More coined the term in 1516. In 1960, Harper Lee published her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. One of the novel’s protagonists is Atticus Finch, whom many literary critics consider to be the perfect father figure in American literature. Throughout the novel, Atticus teaches his daughter Jean Louise Finch (nicknamed Scout) valuable life lessons, the purpose of which is to help Scout grow up to be a good person who fights for what is right. Those life lessons can be considered as a set of rules to live one’s life by if one wishes for ideal co-existing within the confines of a society and as such they could be translated into the laws of utopian nature.

**Key words:** Atticus Finch, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee, civilization, human nature, laws, utopia.

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## Introduction

Many people have experienced perceiving themselves or others being subjected to unjust treatment. When they perceive themselves as victims of injustice, this can be attributed to a sense of self-preservation. When they perceive others as subjects of injustice, this can be attributed to empathy. In both instances, the inevitability of questioning of how well taught out the society they find themselves in is arises and as a product of that, many find themselves wishing for a better world, or even a perfect world – utopia.

This paper will focus on analyzing the core meaning and origins of the word ‘utopia’ and utopian thoughts of bygone civilizations, namely ancient Greece and Chinese dynasties. Furthermore, the correlation between ancient utopian thoughts and the life lessons taught by Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* will be explained and expanded upon through juxtaposition. Those lessons can be generalized and categorized in lessons of empathy, lessons of persistence, and the balancing when those lessons find themselves at an impasse. After those lessons have been thoroughly explained, the focus of the paper will shift on psychological studies dealing with empathy, its emergence, and its significance.

The last part of the paper will attempt to categorize the most prominent and interesting characters of the novel according to their ability to empathize, or lack thereof. That will be achieved by analyzing their actions, statements, and the circumstances those characters were in while doing or stating what they did.



# 1. The History and Philosophy of Utopianism

Sir Thomas More created the term 'utopia' to give an appropriate name to his socio-political satire book. The same term is also used to describe the fictional island in that book whose inhabitants are "better governed and living happier" (More 60) than the rest of the civilized world. He did so by combining "the Greek 'ou,' used to express a general negative and transliterated into the Latin 'u,' with the Greek 'topos,' place or region, to build Utopia" (Manuel 1). Through the combination of a generalizing negative prefix and the Greek word for region, More implied that a place such as Utopia does not and cannot exist. The term 'utopianism' is directly derived from More's neologism and it describes the belief in or the pursuit of utopia. Even though Sir Thomas More created that term in England during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, utopian ideas were not bound to only that period of time and/or geographical location.

Fantasies about a perfect world have been present in many cultures throughout the ages, or as George Orwell eloquently elaborates: "The dream of a just society ... seems to haunt the human imagination ineradicably and, in all ages, whether it is called the Kingdom of Heaven or the classless society, or whether it is thought of as a Golden Age which once existed in the past and from which we have degenerated" (1). Orwell mentions the Kingdom of Heaven, the Christian utopia after the earthly life, which was first described in the second part of the Christian biblical canon called the *New Testament*. It is believed to date back as far as the first century AD. This is an example of utopian ideas from a different geographical region than England. Even though the teachings of the Bible were paramount for the evolution of today's Western society, Christianity originated from the Roman Empire in Jerusalem as a modification of Hellenistic Judaism.

## 1.1. The Utopian Ideas in Ancient Greece

In his *Critical Essays*, Orwell also mentions the Golden Age, which in Greek mythology is the first of the five Ages of Man. They were pioneered by the poet Hesiod in his poem “Works and Days” in approximately 700 BC. The Golden Age was yet another utopia in which men

lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things. (Evelyn-White 3).

According to the myth, the Golden Age was presided over by the titan Cronus, titans being the progenitors of gods in Greek mythology.

Similar to the Christian belief in the utopian Kingdom of Heaven, the Golden Age is established to have close ties to divinity. To break that conception, a few centuries after Hesiod laid the groundwork for utopianism in ancient Greece, the philosopher Plato wrote the *Republic*, which is widely regarded as one of the world’s most influential works on philosophy and political theory. Even Sir Thomas More admitted that Plato’s *Republic* inspired the creation of *Utopia*. The *Republic* describes the hypothetical city-state Kallipolis, which requires no divine intervention or influence because it is governed by an ideal ruler whom Plato named the philosopher king. According to Plato, the philosopher king, being an ideal ruler, would rule Kallipolis without mistakes, thereby making it a utopian city-state.

## 1.2. The Utopian Ideas in Chinese Dynasties

In his writings, Orwell also speaks of the classless society as a utopian construct. The first thing that comes to mind is the social organization in which all property is owned by the community, more commonly referred to as communism. Communism has had the irrefutable influence on the development of Chinese society. Even in this day and age, China is governed by the Communist Party of China. The ideas of Chinese communism can be dated back as far as the Zhou dynasty, the evidence of which can be found in the *Book of Rites* or *Liji*, a collection of written texts describing the social forms, ceremonial rites, and administration of the Zhou dynasty. The *Book of Rites* introduces the concept of the *datong* or the Great Unity. The *datong* is described as “the most imaginative utopian construct in Chinese intellectual history” (Hsiao 500). Albert H.Y. Chen thus states that “the philosophy of *datong* may be understood as a Chinese contribution to universal thinking about the common good” (15). The common good can only be achieved if “human pursuits are directed to the common good of all rather than to the satisfaction of selfish or private desires” (Chen 15). Following that logic, the *Book of Rites* sets compassion and cooperation as a foundation of a hypothetical utopian civilization.

Another Chinese text that deals with the topic of utopia is the fable “Peach Blossom Spring” written by Tao Yuanming in 421 CE. Since then, “Peach Blossom Spring” has become synonymous with the concept of utopia in China. The fable describes a fisherman who finds a narrow river and follows it upstream. At the end of it, he discovers a utopic hidden village that has remained unchanged since the times of the Qin dynasty. Such nostalgic views of utopias seem to be a recurring topic throughout many old cultures, starting with ancient Greece and their Golden Age and even in America.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The bygone time of the Wild West is considered to be the time when the six basic American cultural values, self-reliance, individual freedom, equality of opportunity, competition, hard work and lastly the American Dream, were in their purest form. Therefore, many Americans consider the Wild West to have been far more utopian than the current state of American society.

## 2. The Utopian Ideas in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird*

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a Bildungsroman and, as such, it deals with the spiritual education of Jean Louise Finch in her formative years. She learns a plethora of valuable life lessons through the course of the novel. Some of the life lessons she learns through her own experience and others have been taught to her by her father Atticus. Atticus Finch is a righteous and compassionate single father and as such he is regarded the best father in all American literature. His job as a lawyer does not impede him in demonstrating how to be a decent adult being to his children. Many of the lessons Jean (nicknamed Scout) learns from him resemble the preconditions of a utopian civilization that were established in ancient Greece or bygone Chinese dynasties and later adopted into the Christian dogma.

The most important lessons are the lessons of empathy, the lessons of persistence, and the balancing of those two through compromises. The Chinese *Book of Rites* offered empathy as a means of the betterment of society. Empathy is being preached by many religious and spiritual dogmas through various texts and dialogues, the most recognizable for people brought up in a westernized culture would be 'love thy neighbor.' The reason for empathy being emphasized by all those dogmas is because it is of outstanding importance for peaceful co-existence, as it sets up the fundamentals of cooperation, understanding, and equality. Eastern philosophers also offer a symbol that signifies the importance of balance. That symbol is the taichi, more commonly referred to as 'yin and yang.' The taichi shows how seemingly opposite phenomena are interdependent. A popular example for that is the fact that the brighter light is, the darker the shadow it casts gets.

Plato's contribution to the Greek interpretations of utopian societies asserts that an ideal society requires an ideal ruler or ideal rulesets. It is arguable whether *To Kill a Mockingbird* contains a ruler, as Atticus Finch can be considered the ruler of his own family and Mr. Tate, the sheriff, can be interpreted as the ruler of Maycomb. However, the existence of a ruleset is irrefutable and that ruleset is the law, which proves its flawed nature time and time again.

## 2.1. The Lesson of Empathy in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*

Atticus Finch performs many acts of compassion, offering a helping hand to those who need it. In the first chapter of the novel, Atticus is portrayed as a man who values family because “during his first five years in Maycomb, Atticus practiced economy more than anything; for several years thereafter he invested his earnings in his brother’s education” (Lee 5). The Finch family is financially poor, but they do not need much. Even Atticus’ office in the courthouse is said to have “contained little more than a hat rack, a spittoon, a checkerboard and an unsullied Code of Alabama” (Lee 5). Being content with small things in life certainly helps Atticus decide to represent poverty-stricken individuals in court. Since those clients do not have much they could offer as compensations, Atticus would accept sacks of produce or even lumber as payment for being their attorney. He would even put himself in harm’s way by accepting African-Americans clients as racism was prevalent in Maycomb and the surrounding area. Witnessing her father’s deeds of generosity, Scout has learned that everybody deserves help, regardless of their skin color, gender, financial status or reclusive behavioral patterns, the latter of which were embodied by the character Arthur “Boo” Radley.

Atticus’ expressed compassion and selflessness and the appreciation and practice of modesty are in accord with the teachings of the Chinese *Book of Rites*, as he puts the common good before his own monetary needs. Because the *Book of Rites* is established to be of utopian nature, the lessons of empathy that Atticus teaches to his children can be viewed as utopian as well. He tries to make his community a better place by being understanding and unyielding when it comes to instances of injustice. By doing that, he is bringing the fictional town Maycomb one step closer to being a better place and one step closer to becoming utopia. It is evident that Scout has absorbed those lessons when she proclaims “Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them” (Lee 283) and realizes that this form of empathy has brought her closer to being a better person.

The most prominent lesson, after which the novel is titled, is to never kill mockingbirds. Lee even supplies an explanation why Atticus considers killing mockingbirds a sin. As Miss Maudie Atkinson explains “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” (Lee 93).

This lesson can be interpreted in multiple ways. An interesting interpretation is to never push away people who enrich your life. With mockingbirds un-shot, everyday life is filled with their cheerful songs, but if one shoots them, all that person would be left with is silence. The same goes for people who enrich one's life, except the example provided will not be shooting them, as it is a felony, but rather isolating them from one's company, which ultimately leaves us lonely. Therefore, the second interpretation is similar to the saying 'don't bite the hand that feeds you,' which an empathetic person would never do.

The second and most in-depth analysis of the lesson to not kill mockingbirds is to leave a child's innocence intact. The comparison of mockingbirds and children should not seem too far-fetched, because both, mockingbirds and children, are, generally speaking, innocent beings who just imitate what they see and hear from others. Children imitate the behavior of adults, mostly their parents, and mockingbirds imitate the songs and mating calls of other songbirds. Once one shoots a mockingbird, it is gone forever and the same statement sounds true for the innocence of any child. For that reason, Atticus tries to protect and brace his children for the evils and the imperfections they will inevitably face during their lifetime. He shields them through empathy and braces them teaching the persistence.

The third and most evident metaphorical meaning of the lesson is the expression of the delusion of racism, which many inhabitants of Maycomb harbor in their minds. This can be seen when the African-American fellow Tom Robinson gets charged with rape even though he did not commit it. He was convicted on account of his skin color and just as Atticus wants to protect mockingbirds, he wanted to protect Tom Robinson as well because neither Tom nor mockingbirds cause any harm.

## **2.2. The Lesson of Persistence in *To Kill a Mockingbird***

Atticus did a great job with his defense of Tom Robinson in court, explaining the impossibility of Tom being the perpetrator. Yet, Tom was convicted anyway because a Caucasian judge was not going to acquit an African-American man. Atticus was aware of this outcome beforehand, but he did not give up and kept fighting against all odds. This was supposed to teach his children that the world has its imperfections, and more importantly, to be persistent even in face of adversity.

Another instance of imperfection is presented later in the novel. Arthur “Boo” Radley witnessed Bob Ewell’s attack on Atticus’ children. Arthur wanted to protect Scout and Jem, so he rushed out and confronted Bob Ewell. A fight between the two adults broke out and it ended with Bob Ewell getting stabbed. Shortly after the fight, Ewell succumbed to his wounds. The sheriff got wind of what had happened and offered to sweep the whole incident under the rug. He explained that Arthur acted not only in self-defense, but also in trying to protect innocent children. Nothing bad would happen to him, he would be celebrated. Yet, knowing Arthur Radley’s reclusive behavior, the sheriff knew that Arthur would not appreciate such attention, hence the suggestion of sweeping the incident under the rug. Atticus agreed reluctantly with a disgruntled look on his face. Lying and breaking the law in such ways was not what he wanted to teach to his children. He was visibly agitated and wondered whether Scout could possibly understand that sometimes the best course of action is dishonesty; problems in an imperfect world require imperfect solutions. At that moment, the student became the teacher. Scout comforted Atticus and replied to his inquiry that abiding the law and telling the truth in the given scenario would be “sort of like shootin’ a mockingbird” (Lee 280). That comment marked an important evolution in Scout as a person, she had learned the lesson of persistence and when one should persist in their actions. Scout demonstrated her newly gained knowledge/wisdom just at the moment, the moment being when Atticus seemed to have forgotten the lesson he intended to teach.

### **2.3. The Lesson of Balance in *To Kill a Mockingbird***

Scout's reply to Atticus' concerns did not only demonstrate her learning the lesson of persistence, but also that she learned the lesson of empathy and the balancing of those two. Persisting in trying to tell the truth about the incident would not have been the right course of action, which is evident to anyone who manages to stand in Arthur Radley's shoes and walk around in them, in other words, to anyone who is capable of demonstrating empathy towards Boo Radley.

Scout demonstrated yet another instance of putting aside her persistence way before Bob Ewell's demise. It was when Scout's classmate Walter Cunningham joined her family for dinner and according to Scout had "drowned his dinner in syrup" (Lee 24), which in return Scout criticized. After her remarks, she was called into the kitchen and scolded by their housekeeper Calpurnia. Scout reluctantly realized that being verbally aggressive towards Walter was a mistake and therefore she agreed to finish her dinner isolated in the kitchen. Scout realizes her mistake when she says: "I retrieved my plate and finished dinner in the kitchen, thankful, though, that I was spared the humiliation of facing them again" (25) as humiliation can only be felt when someone feels inadequate or regretful about their wrongdoings. That was the bedrock of Scout learning to be empathetic.

What Scout learns about empathy and persistence is that persisting is important, giving up should not be an option unless one is bound to bring harm to another through their persistence. This realization stands to show that empathy might be the most important quality a person within a flawed society can have and as such it should be encouraged and taught to children.



### 3. Empathy: Studies and Facts

In the biological sense, evolution is a phenomenon through which life is preserved. Charles Darwin explained that a species can only persevere if it develops the ability to accommodate to the ever-shifting changes in the environment. Such adaptation predominantly occurs through random mutations in the genepool of a species. Before the Homo sapiens graced the Earth with their existence, many other species roamed on the planet. They lacked the cognitive capabilities of modern humans and relied on instinct alone. Once the progenitors of modern human appeared, they were here to stay. They were not the strongest, fastest or biggest predators that walked the earth, but they did have one advantage – their intelligence. It is believed that intelligence is a step beyond instinct and/or intuition. It helped our far ancestors think further ahead of any other species that lived or went extinct. They learned to forge weapons, make clothing, create traps and many other things, which helped them to accommodate to most environments they found themselves in.

Nowadays, most humans live isolated from most dangers nature has to offer. We use our intelligence for different purposes than mere survival. Most of us do not require the knowledge of crafting weapons, setting traps and similar. Such knowledge is far too often used to bring harm to other people, which perhaps would not be the case if they learned what Scout has learned in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Those who use weaponry to aggravate conflict and create wars do so with the goal of ending human life under the guise of various ideologies. Even though sometimes taking another's life is necessary when one must choose the lesser evil for the purpose of saving the many, it is rarely the case at the sole beginning of a conflict. Actions of purposeless eradication of members of one's own species can only be interpreted as a violation against the laws of evolution, which allow a species to persevere.

Isolated from nature, we now live in societies brimming with humans, as opposed to our ancestors who lived and died among beasts. Yet even so, we have not escaped evolution by fleeing into the secure arms of cities, towns, and villages. We have merely changed the environment we live in and we have to accommodate to it as the theory of evolution predicts. The new skill dictated by our new environment humanity should acquire could be empathy, as it can help in avoiding conflict and saving lives. Empathy could be to intelligence, what intelligence is to instinct, a step beyond. This part of the paper will deal with two studies that analyze the characteristics of and the definitions of empathy.

### **3.1. The Science of Empathy**

The importance of empathy for society is explained by Helen Riess in her paper titled “The Science of Empathy.” She states that “if we are to move in the direction of a more empathic society and a more compassionate world, it is clear that working to enhance our native capacities to empathize is critical to strengthening individual, community, national, and international bonds” (1). She explains that empathy is important to strengthen all bonds, from individual to international and therefore it is important for all of humanity. Helen Riess further explains that empathy has had a vital role in the evolution of humanity: “If human existence was simply the result of ‘survival of the fittest,’ we would be wired solely to dominate others, not to respond to their suffering” (2). Furthermore, she adds that “The survival of our species depends on mutual aid, and providing it reduces our own distress” (2). According to her views, empathy is not only used for restraining oneself from criticizing other’s table manners or deciding to withhold the truth of Bob Ewell’s death from the general public, it is important for tearing down the barrier set up by ideologies promoting racial, or gender-based, inequality. For Atticus, those barriers carry no meaning. After being called out and criticized for empathizing with the struggles of African-Americans, he states that “nigger-lover is just one of those terms that don’t mean anything—like snot-nose” (Lee 112). The term he was described with does not mean anything to him just as race does not mean anything to individuals who have the ability to feel empathy for people of different racial backgrounds than their own. He even goes as far as to compare it to the term snot-nose, which is an insult mostly used by and used for describing children, therefore it can be concluded that he considers racism as an immature trait.

### **3.2. The Empathetic Characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird***

Mutual aid, as a form of empathy, has existed since the earliest realizations of mankind’s social behavior, which were tribes. From thereon, it has taken part in molding society into what it is today. Modern humans arguably partake in a larger scale of mutual aid through thousands of organizations that specialize in helping those in need. The pioneer of helping people in need in Lee’s novel is once again Atticus as he represents underprivileged and poverty-stricken individuals in court, defending

Calpurnia's position as their maid against his own sister by saying that she is "a faithful member of this family" (Lee 138), agreeing to preserve Arthur Radley's privacy, et cetera. In contrast to Atticus, there is Scout's aunt Alexandra. While she cares about her family in her own way, always having "a way of declaring What Is Best For The Family" (Lee 130), she fails to see things from other people's perspectives. In more instances than one she tried to force Scout to take up more lady-like behavior. She even went as far as to criticize her clothes of choice: "Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of my attire. I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches" (Lee 83).

The nobility of empathy can hardly be refuted, but empathy does not always occur with the same intensity. Helen Riess' study shows that "Individuals tend to have the most empathy for others who look or act like them, for others who have suffered in a similar way, or for those who share a common goal" (4). This proves that we as a species have an easier time empathizing with those we can relate to and this could be a proof of empathy being still underdeveloped, or primitive, in the minds of humans. Hypothetically, if evolution ever pushes empathy to the level of humans feeling empathy for brother and stranger alike, perhaps then wars will only be a relic of history. Scout Finch does that by comforting her neighbor, the scary "Boo" Radley, when he shows signs of fear. She truly learned to love thy neighbor. Atticus expresses his empathy by protecting African-Americans, Calpurnia does it when defending the penniless Walter Cunningham, and Miss Maudie does it by treating children as she would treat anybody else. Even Scout says that Miss Maudie "had never told on us, had never played cat-and-mouse with us, she was not at all interested in our private lives" (Lee 45). However, Miss Maudie has an interesting opinion about race. She once voices the arguably most empathetic string of words in the whole novel:

The handful of people in this town who say that fair play is not marked White Only; the handful of people who say a fair trial is for everybody, not just us; the handful of people with enough humility to think, when they look at a Negro, there but for the Lord's kindness am I.  
(Lee 240)

Her statement should not be misunderstood. While it seems incredibly racially insensitive to thank God for not being of African descent, she only did so because she understood the daily struggles which African-Americans had to go through in Maycomb. Through their deeds and statements, Atticus, Scout, Calpurnia, and Miss Maudie succeeded in showing empathy to others regardless of age, race, gender, financial status, or behavior.

### **3.3. The Characters That Lack Empathy in *To Kill a Mockingbird***

Early psychologists, like Freud, theorized that children are too egocentric to feel empathy and because of that they should be taught to express empathy by their parents. Freud's theory is backed by Atticus as a father and his statement that compared racism to immaturity from the previous chapter. Atticus Finch teaches his children empathy throughout Lee's novel by being a role model, reading them bedtime stories, comforting Jem when Mrs. Dubose died, and even by being strict towards them, like when he forced Scout to apologize to her Aunt Alexandra for talking back. Yet, not all characters in the novel seem to have been taught empathy. The first character that should come to mind when accusations of a lack of empathy are being thrown out is the antagonist of the story, Bob Ewell. As a father, Bob is the direct antithesis of Atticus. Atticus was caring towards his children whereas Bob abused his own daughter Mayella. However, Bob's misdeeds were not confined to family matters. He knowingly accused an innocent man of abusing his daughter to avoid repercussions for his own sins. Furthermore, he was growing more aggressive in each subsequent chapter leading to the scene when he "stopped Atticus on the post office corner, spat in his face, and told him he'd get him if it took the rest of his life" (Lee 221). And to top it all off, his quest for getting revenge drove him as far as to attempt to murder Atticus' children, which was thankfully stopped by Arthur Radley.

Arthur Radley is portrayed as a monster in the first few chapters of the novel and, traditionally, monsters feel no empathy, but at the end of the story it was more than evident that he was not an emotionless creature. Those who considered him a monster and even nicknamed him 'Boo Radley' were Scout, Jem and their childhood friend Dill Harris. Those three are inexperienced children at that point in the novel and they lack the ability to empathize with Arthur, just as the previous psychological study claimed that children cannot be expected to have a developed sense of empathy unless raised well, which at the very least Scout and Jem eventually were.

Raising children properly is not only the duty of parents, but of teachers as well. Miss Caroline Fisher, Scout's first grade teacher, did not excel at being a role model to the children she taught. She scolded Scout for knowing how to read as a first grader and accused her of trying to make a mockery of her classes. Scout even describes Miss Fisher physically hurting her: Miss Fisher "hauled [her] up to the front of the room and patted the palm of [her] hand with a ruler, then made [her] stand in the corner until noon" (Lee 16). Keeping in mind that mild physical punishment used to be a standard

teaching technique in a teacher's arsenal, it is still an unethical deed and far away from the course of action which an empathetic teacher would take.

Aggressive fathers, children, and inexperienced teachers are not the only types of characters in Lee's novel that lack empathy. Another interesting character that can be categorized as unempathetic is the elderly woman Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose. The inhabitants of Maycomb seem to unanimously agree that Mrs. Dubose was not fun to be around, as "neighborhood opinion was unanimous that Mrs. Dubose was the meanest old woman who ever lived" (Lee 35). She was the one who insensitively accused Atticus of having a racial bias towards African-Americans. Once when Jem was furious at Mrs. Dubose, he decided to destroy her camellia bushes. As a punishment, Mrs. Dubose forced him to read her stories on a monthly basis. After her eventual demise, Harper Lee proves us once more that you should not judge a book by its cover, as she did with Arthur Radley. In her will, Mrs. Dubose left a candy box containing a "white, waxy, perfect camellia" (Lee 115) to Jem, for reading to her every month. Visually agitated by that, he trashed the box, but later "picked up the camellia, and when I went off to bed I saw him fingering the wide petals" (Lee 116). Jem learned an invaluable lesson about endurance and bravery from Mrs. Dubose, as he learned of her morphine addiction, terminal illness and self-betterment, and that arguably makes Mrs. Dubose a better teacher than Miss Fisher.

## Conclusion

The idea of a perfect society has been present in the human mind since ancient times. Many attempts were made with the goal of creating such a society, reaching from communism to capitalism. Pioneered by China, communism in theory puts the common good above the good of the individual, whereas the western idea of capitalism teaches to be persistent and fight one's way to the top of the social food chain. Atticus Finch teaches both those lessons to his children – to be empathetic and to be persistent.

During the times of greater moral conflict, empathy appears to take the higher priority. Multiple psychological studies have proven that a higher sense for empathy results in strengthening bonds between individuals and groups and the product of that is the betterment of society as a whole. Other studies have laid out the fact that humans are born with an innate ability to empathize with others, but to reach its full potential, empathy is a skill that has to be nurtured from a young age.

Scout and Jem were not the most empathetic children, but they were taught empathy, and by the end of the novel they turned out to be better people. They have outgrown their childish fear of Arthur Radley and started accepting him. Calpurnia also demonstrated her ability to empathize by being a better motherly figure to Scout and Jem than even their Aunt Alexandra. While Aunt Alexandra bears no ill intent, her ability to empathize is severely obstructed by her blind admiration for tradition. Miss Caroline Fisher also falls into the category of characters whose empathy is limited by tradition, or rather, traditional teaching methods. A much clearer example for not having empathy is Bob Ewell, who is not shown showing empathy throughout the entire novel. Finally, the elderly Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose is clearly depicted as a racist and unwelcoming woman, but considering the circumstances of her illness and addiction, one could hardly expect her to be a joy to be around.

Ultimately, deciding which characters are empathetic and which are not may seem easy at first glance, especially when comparing the two polar opposites that are Atticus Finch and Bob Ewell, but the further one analyzes a character the more difficult it becomes. In addition, not showing as much empathy as Atticus does hardly makes most other characters bad or evil. Aunt Alexandra still cared for her family and Mrs. Dubose cared for Jem, but they did it in their own way. The only unquestionable certainty is that shooting mockingbirds is a fruitless endeavor. If nobody ever shot

mockingbirds, society would not automatically become an empathetic utopia, but at the very least their cheerful tunes would follow us through good times and bad times alike.

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