

Grade 9 Unit 3 EA 2  
Writing a Literary Analysis Essay

*To Kill a Mockingbird* Literary Analysis

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* details the life of a brother, Jem, and sister, Scout, who grow up in a time of racial inequality and unrest. Jem Finch is what most would call a typical young boy growing up in the small Alabama town of Maycomb, Alabama, fascinated with sports, guns, and being tough. Yet, his upbringing is different from many of his friends that were into the same hobbies. Harper Lee creates the character of Jem to portray the internal and external conflict many young Americans encounter when their morals and upbringing clash with the cultural norm. Through Jem's voice and characterization, Lee reveals how an impressionable boy can grow into a mature, respectful young man.

While Jem and Scout face many conflicts throughout the novel, Jem's encounter with Mrs. Dubose is one of the most important coming-of-age scenes in the book. Lee paints a despicable picture of Dubose, describing her as so "vicious" that the Finch siblings dread walking by her front porch in fear of "being raked by her wrathful gaze, subjected to ruthless interrogation" and name-calling (103). Jem and Scout become accustomed to hearing insults due to their father, Atticus, defending a black man in court in a predominantly racist town, but Mrs. Dubose is one of the few adults that talked down to the children. In fact, Dubose says something so terribly offensive to Jem that he falls into a blind rage and retaliates by cutting up Mrs. Dubose's prized camellia bushes.

Jem's internal conflict to obey his father's wishes bursts through in his attack on the flowers, which symbolically represent Mrs. Dubose. This action marks a natural reaction, especially from a boy who cannot yet control or even understand his emotions. Out of a perceived good intention of sticking up for his father, he does something destructive and negative. Lee creates this scene to show how hate can easily breed more hate; however, she uses Jem's father and even Mrs. Dubose to illustrate how finding the good in others can lead to a positive end.

Jem's punishment was perplexing and causes the reader to question why Mrs. Dubose would actually want Jem to come visit her. While seemingly ironic, Lee soon reveals that Mrs. Dubose was not necessarily as vicious as first thought. She requests that Jem read to her, and he does – every day for an entire month, plus an added week. The reader sees Dubose for what she really is: frail, sickly, and strict. Jem continues to hate her because she continues to talk down to him; however, he persists. Despite his disgust and hate for Mrs. Dubose, Jem sucks up his feelings and finishes what he started.

When he learns that Mrs. Dubose passed away and left him the camellia flower inside the candy box, his initial reaction was one of confusion and utter emotion. Atticus explains that she was a morphine addict and her hate and ugliness was often caused by her overcoming withdrawals. Jem never knew this, and his sudden insight overwhelm him. What Jem had seen on the surface as bigotry and racism, was just a thin layer of pain covering what Atticus considers more important -- courage. Jem learned that real courage is not a man with a gun in his hand; "it's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what," (115).

Harper Lee created this brief scene to illustrate that coming of age is not always an external force, and she used the most unlikely character to portray what is good in this world. Jem learns that no matter how ugly, how nasty, how horrible a person someone might appear to be, we never know what battles they are facing and should always give people around us respect, no matter how hard it may be. This is one of the hardest lessons a young boy can learn, but Jem was able to use this experience to help him through the rest of the internal and external battles in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.