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Teaching Empathy: The Value of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* for Young Teens

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Abstract: In recent years, book bans in the United States have risen sharply, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains one of the most frequently challenged novels. Although the reasons for objection have evolved—from concerns about profanity in the 1960s to issues of race, white saviorism, and student well-being in the 2000s and 2020s—the controversy surrounding the book underscores its continued relevance in education. This research examines how Harper Lee's novel fosters empathy and how removing it from school curricula deprives students of a valuable opportunity to understand racism through lived human experiences. From a literary perspective, the analysis focuses on three forms of empathy: empathy for victims of racism (Tom Robinson), empathy toward those who cause harm (Mayella Ewell), and empathy developed through the innocent perspectives of children (Scout and Jem). These narrative moments reveal that the novel generates meaningful discomfort and invites discussion from multiple viewpoints. *To Kill a Mockingbird* enables young readers to feel the confusion, emotional tension, and moral complexity that accompany racial injustice—dimensions that history textbooks alone cannot convey. Ultimately, the novel deserves its place in classrooms because it teaches students how racism is learned, internalized, and emotionally experienced. When schools remove this text, they also remove a crucial chance for students to confront America's history through the empathetic lens of literature. The enduring debates surrounding the book demonstrate that discomfort is not a flaw but its greatest pedagogical strength. Instead of shielding students from difficult emotions by banning the book, educators should embrace it as a powerful tool to help students challenge injustice and recognize the moral courage required to resist it.

Keywords: teaching empathy; young teens; Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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1. History of the Banning of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

1.1. Early Bans and Moral Concerns (1960s-1970s)

The earliest documented attempt to ban *To Kill a Mockingbird* occurred in 1966, when a school board in Hanover County, Virginia, voted to remove the novel from classrooms. The primary objection centered on its references to sexual assault, and the book was labeled "immoral" by those advocating its removal [1]. At this time, concerns about literature in schools often revolved around perceived threats to students' moral development. Books that addressed adult themes such as sexual assault, family conflict, or other social taboos were frequently scrutinized for their suitability in educational settings.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, debates around the novel often reflected broader societal anxieties regarding changing cultural norms. Educators and administrators had to navigate between the desire to provide students with meaningful literary experiences and the perceived need to protect them from mature or uncomfortable content. *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s frank portrayal of difficult topics, such as racial prejudice and violence, placed it squarely at the center of these debates, illustrating how literature could provoke strong emotional and moral responses even decades after its publication.

Despite these early challenges, many educators defended the novel, emphasizing its educational value in fostering empathy, critical thinking, and ethical reflection. Teachers argued that shielding students from difficult content could ultimately limit their understanding of social realities. This early period of controversy set the stage for the novel's ongoing role as both a literary classic and a subject of public debate.

1.2. Racial Controversies and Evolving Objections (1980s-1990s)

By the 1980s, objections to *To Kill a Mockingbird* increasingly centered on the novel's racial content. In 1981, schools in Warren Township, Indiana, reported the first challenges specifically citing race as a concern [2]. Parents and school boards questioned whether the book's depiction of racism, combined with its use of racial slurs, was appropriate for young readers. These debates reflected a growing sensitivity to the ways literature could influence students' understanding of race and social inequality.

In 1984 and 1985, similar challenges emerged in school districts from Illinois to Missouri. Critics highlighted the novel's use of profanity and language considered racially offensive [3]. At the same time, librarians and educators pointed out that these discussions presented a valuable opportunity for students to confront uncomfortable truths about American history. Rather than avoiding the topic, proponents argued, students could benefit from guided discussions that contextualized the novel's language and themes.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, *To Kill a Mockingbird* consistently appeared on the American Library Association's list of the most frequently challenged books. The persistence of these challenges demonstrated the ongoing tension between protecting students from perceived harm and providing access to literature that explores complex social realities. This period highlighted the ways in which literature could serve as a mirror to societal issues while simultaneously provoking debate over its appropriateness in school curricula.

1.3. Contemporary Debates and Student Well-Being (2000s-2020s)

In the 2000s, objections to the novel became more focused on student representation and well-being. In 2004 and 2005, school boards in Illinois and North Carolina debated whether the novel's use of racial slurs could be harmful or degrading to African American students [4]. Parents raised concerns about their children being exposed to emotionally challenging content without sufficient support or context, emphasizing the importance of educational guidance in interpreting the novel.

By the 2010s and early 2020s, the nature of challenges evolved further, reflecting broader cultural conversations about race, privilege, and the role of education. In 2018, the book was removed from schools in Biloxi, Mississippi, after a parent expressed concern that her child was uncomfortable with the language used in the text. A similar case in Wisconsin in 2019 involved a parent questioning the portrayal of Atticus Finch as a white savior figure [5]. These instances show how contemporary debates often balance literary value with attention to students' emotional responses and social perspectives.

Despite the evolving criticisms, the enduring debates surrounding *To Kill a Mockingbird* reinforce its relevance and importance in the classroom. Rather than presenting a biased or harmful narrative, the novel challenges readers to confront complex issues of race, justice, and empathy. By prompting meaningful discomfort and encouraging multi-perspective discussion, it continues to serve as a vital educational tool that prepares students to engage thoughtfully with historical and social realities.

2. Empathy in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

2.1. Empathy for the Victims of Racism

At the heart of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a profound lesson about empathy, particularly toward those who suffer from systemic injustice. Harper Lee's novel provides readers with the opportunity to witness the experiences of African Americans living under pervasive racial prejudice. By portraying Tom Robinson's trial and ultimate fate, the novel humanizes the abstract concept of injustice, allowing students to perceive the emotional and social consequences of racism in a deeply personal way. Unlike history textbooks, which often describe events in terms of statistics and dates, literature engages readers' emotions, enabling them to see the world through the eyes of others.

The narrative structure ensures that readers experience confusion, anger, and sorrow alongside the victims. Scout and Jem's observations of courtroom proceedings, neighborhood interactions, and personal injustices allow young readers to feel the tension and helplessness that the characters experience. In doing so, the novel fosters a sense of moral responsibility and encourages students to reflect on the ethical implications of racial bias.

Moreover, the story emphasizes that empathy toward victims is not instantaneous; it is a gradual process of observation, reflection, and engagement. By illustrating the challenges faced by Tom Robinson and the limitations of justice within his community, the novel provides students with a safe yet meaningful space to confront the complexities of racial inequality. This approach underscores the unique pedagogical value of literature in developing empathetic understanding.

2.2. Empathy Toward Those Who Commit Harm

In addition to cultivating empathy for victims, the novel also encourages readers to consider the perspectives of those who commit harm, such as Mayella Ewell. Lee portrays Mayella not merely as a villain but as a product of her social environment-shaped by poverty, isolation, and limited access to moral guidance. By presenting her actions within a broader social context, the novel invites readers to explore how harmful behaviors can arise from systemic and familial pressures rather than innate malice.

This dual perspective complicates readers' moral judgments, highlighting that understanding human behavior requires considering both actions and underlying circumstances. Empathizing with those who commit harm does not excuse their behavior; instead, it fosters critical thinking and moral reflection. Students learn to recognize the interplay between individual choices and societal forces, gaining a nuanced understanding of accountability, complicity, and structural inequality.

Through these examples, the novel demonstrates that empathy is multidimensional. Students are prompted to analyze the motivations behind characters' actions, discerning the complexity of human behavior. This approach equips young readers with the analytical and emotional tools necessary to navigate ethically challenging situations in both literature and real life.

2.3. Empathy Through the Child's Perspective

Finally, *To Kill a Mockingbird* uniquely develops empathy by presenting events through the eyes of children, particularly Scout and Jem. Their limited understanding of social norms and moral reasoning mirrors the experiences of the novel's young readers, allowing them to relate closely to the narrative. As Scout observes injustice and questions societal values, readers experience the shock, confusion, and gradual comprehension that accompanies exposure to prejudice.

This child-centered perspective emphasizes learning through lived experience. Readers witness Scout and Jem grappling with contradictions between their father's moral guidance and the community's biased actions. By following the characters' emotional journeys, students gain insight into the process of internalizing ethical principles and

forming their own moral judgments. Literature thus functions as an immersive classroom, where readers practice empathetic reasoning in parallel with the characters.

In conclusion, *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s treatment of empathy operates on multiple levels: understanding the suffering of victims, recognizing the social context of harm, and internalizing lessons through the lens of children. Removing the novel from school curricula deprives students of these opportunities for reflective engagement, moral growth, and emotional understanding. The novel's enduring relevance lies in its ability to teach empathy not as an abstract concept but as an experiential process that prepares readers to engage thoughtfully with injustice.

3. Empathy for the Perpetrators of Racism

Harper Lee introduces a nuanced form of empathy through the character of Mayella Ewell. Although she plays the role of an oppressor, Mayella is simultaneously a victim of poverty, abuse, and social marginalization. Her actions, particularly her false testimony against Tom Robinson, are motivated less by personal hatred toward African Americans than by a desperate need to conform to the rigid racial and social hierarchies of her environment. By presenting Mayella in this dual role, the novel challenges readers to consider the complex factors that drive harmful behavior and encourages reflection on the social conditions that perpetuate injustice.

Atticus Finch explains to Scout and Jem that Mayella should not be viewed as inherently evil. He frames her behavior as a consequence of societal pressures and environmental constraints:

"She has committed no crime; she has merely broken a rigid and time-honored code of our society, a code so severe that whoever breaks it is hounded from our midst as unfit to live with. She is the victim of cruel poverty and ignorance." This perspective emphasizes that moral failure is often intertwined with social disadvantage, highlighting the interplay between individual choices and systemic oppression.

By portraying Mayella as both oppressor and oppressed, Lee demonstrates that racism is sustained not solely through personal bigotry but also through poverty, fear, and societal expectations. Students reading the novel gain insight into how structural inequalities and social conditioning can produce harmful actions, illustrating the intricate moral landscape of human behavior. Understanding this complexity helps students develop critical thinking skills, as they learn to evaluate actions within broader social and historical contexts rather than viewing them in isolation.

Without access to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students lose the opportunity to grapple with these multifaceted moral lessons. Literature offers a unique space to explore the humanity of those who commit wrongs while recognizing the systemic forces that shape behavior. By engaging with characters like Mayella, readers can cultivate a deeper understanding of ethical ambiguity, empathy for flawed individuals, and awareness of how social structures can perpetuate injustice. Such lessons are crucial for fostering thoughtful and morally reflective citizens.

4. Empathy Through the Lens of Children

To Kill a Mockingbird uniquely fosters empathy by narrating events through the eyes of Scout and Jem Finch. By presenting the story from a child's perspective, Harper Lee allows readers to experience the loss of innocence alongside the characters. The children approach the trial of Tom Robinson with a strong belief in justice, trusting in the clarity of Atticus Finch's evidence. Jem's initial confidence—"Don't fret, we've won it... Don't see how any jury could convict on what we heard"—is shattered when the jury convicts Robinson, reflecting the harsh reality of systemic injustice. This narrative choice immerses readers in the emotional impact of the trial, highlighting how children perceive fairness and morality in a flawed world.

The children's reactions serve as a bridge for young readers, enabling them to experience moral confusion, shock, and disillusionment. Jem's breakdown after the verdict, along with Scout's observations of her brother's struggle to process injustice, provide an empathetic lens for readers to explore the emotional consequences of prejudice. The novel thus demonstrates that empathy is not merely intellectual comprehension but a lived emotional experience, particularly for those encountering injustice for the first time.

By centering the narrative on Scout and Jem, the novel emphasizes gradual moral and emotional development. Readers witness the complexity of ethical growth as the children reconcile their personal beliefs with societal realities. This immersive perspective equips students with tools to understand not only the existence of systemic racism but also the human feelings—confusion, anger, and helplessness—that accompany it. In doing so, the novel transforms abstract historical knowledge into a visceral, emotionally resonant experience.

5. Empathy for the Victim of Racism

Tom Robinson's story exemplifies the novel's most direct engagement with empathy for those oppressed by systemic injustice. Robinson, an honest, diligent, and morally upright man, becomes the target of racial prejudice within a judicial system that is deeply biased against African Americans. His trial, and the events leading up to it, provide readers with a visceral encounter with the consequences of entrenched discrimination, highlighting how societal structures can distort justice and diminish human dignity. Through Robinson's narrative, students are confronted with the stark reality that racial bias is not merely a personal failing but a systemic issue embedded in institutions, cultural norms, and everyday interactions.

The injustice of Robinson's conviction, despite overwhelming evidence proving his innocence, illustrates how systemic racism can corrupt even institutions theoretically designed to uphold fairness. The courtroom becomes a microcosm of societal prejudice, where appearances, social status, and entrenched stereotypes outweigh truth and morality. This allows students to explore the mechanisms by which structural racism operates, encouraging them to critically examine the ways in which legal, social, and cultural systems may perpetuate inequality. Moreover, Robinson's suffering is not limited to the legal consequences; it permeates his personal life and his family, underscoring the intergenerational and communal impact of racial injustice.

Lee's portrayal of Robinson also emphasizes the emotional dimension of empathy, showing that understanding injustice requires more than recognizing facts—it requires emotionally engaging with the lived experiences of those affected. Students witnessing Robinson's trials and the responses of the community learn that empathy involves both affective and cognitive components: one must feel compassion while also intellectually grasping the societal forces that contribute to oppression. By internalizing Robinson's plight, readers develop a nuanced comprehension of the psychological and social burdens imposed by systemic discrimination, cultivating both moral reflection and social consciousness.

Furthermore, Robinson's story highlights that empathy is inherently active and ethical, not passive. True empathy requires acknowledging structural inequities, questioning one's assumptions, and contemplating the ethical responsibility individuals and communities have toward mitigating injustice. In classroom discussions, Robinson's experiences can serve as a springboard for exploring contemporary social issues, such as racial profiling, mass incarceration, and educational inequities, helping students draw parallels between historical injustices and modern systemic oppression. This approach enables learners to see empathy not merely as personal sentiment but as a framework for understanding societal dynamics, motivating critical thinking, civic engagement, and advocacy for fairness.

Ultimately, Tom Robinson's narrative demonstrates that empathy for victims of racism is both a moral and educational imperative. Through his story, students learn that confronting injustice is inseparable from recognizing the humanity of those affected, understanding the social mechanisms of oppression, and cultivating an ethical response to inequity. By engaging with Robinson's experiences, learners are encouraged to develop the moral imagination necessary to appreciate the profound human cost of systemic injustice and the responsibility to act against it in both personal and societal contexts.

6. The Educational Value of Discomfort

The novel demonstrates that empathy and discomfort are inseparable. The experiences of Mayella Ewell, Scout and Jem, and Tom Robinson collectively illustrate the moral complexities of human behavior and the coexistence of good intentions, ignorance, and prejudice. Each scene of injustice compels readers to experience emotional unease, prompting reflection on ethical and social issues that might otherwise remain abstract or unnoticed.

This discomfort is precisely what gives the novel its educational significance. By confronting students with unsettling truths about racism, literature creates a safe space for critical reflection and emotional engagement. Educators can use these moments to facilitate discussions on ethical reasoning, moral courage, and the societal roots of prejudice. Removing such narratives denies students the opportunity to develop nuanced understanding, critical thinking, and emotional resilience—skills essential for engaging with complex social realities.

Ultimately, the educational value of *To Kill a Mockingbird* lies in its ability to combine factual awareness with emotional comprehension. Students learn not only about historical injustice but also about the human responses it elicits, cultivating empathy, ethical reasoning, and a willingness to challenge societal wrongs. Discomfort, in this context, is not a flaw; it is a pedagogical tool that drives moral and emotional growth.

7. Conclusion

To Kill a Mockingbird maintains a vital role in American literature and education because it challenges readers to develop empathy even when it is uncomfortable. Through the perspectives of victims, perpetrators, and children, Harper Lee illustrates how prejudice is normalized and perpetuated within society, while simultaneously exposing the emotional toll of injustice. The novel allows students to observe the un-fairy-tale consequences of systemic racism through the Finch children's eyes, emphasizing the fragility of moral understanding in the face of societal failure.

By removing the novel from schools, educators deny students the opportunity to confront historical realities through literature's emotional lens. The book's enduring controversies reveal that discomfort is not a weakness but its greatest strength, as it compels reflection, dialogue, and moral engagement. Rather than shielding students from challenging content, educators can use *To Kill a Mockingbird* to cultivate empathy, encourage critical inquiry, and demonstrate the courage required to confront injustice in the real world.

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