C9-5

Growth in Spirit

Harper Lee’s Pulitzer Prize winning *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains a core element in the American national English curriculum. This inclusion is largely due to the many themes that make up its composition which still exist in today’s society. The notion of growing up presents itself not only in *To Kill a Mockingbird,* but is something every person has, or will experience. Aunt Alexandra’s slow evolution in the novel illustrates people do not have to be children to grow up. The children’s ability to judge people without prejudice represented alongside adult’s biased analysis of people in Maycomb, exhibits the negative aspects of growth. From these examples, one can draw varied perspectives and understandings of the same topic, growing up. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is about growing up and reflects how exposure to the actualities of the real world results in newfound understandings and maturity.

After coming in contact with the people of Maycomb and with Scout, Alexandra learns that some principles have a gray area. Her first words upon entry were, “’Put my bag in the front room, Calpurnia,’ [and] ‘Jean Louise, stop scratching your head.’” (p. 140) Alexandra’s bold and disrespectful greeting shows the reader she believes black people and nonconforming people are below her. Alexandra’s primary involvement in the plot serves as a voice that informs the reader of the societal norms and structure of the time period. Uncompromising and a slave to the opinions of her peers, Alexandra’s nature in her introduction varies greatly from that of her nature later in the novel. When Alexandra learns of Tom’s death, she, “[sits] quite still; she [is] so quiet [Scout] wondered if she would faint.” (p. 315+316) This severe reaction to the death of a black person differs from Alexandra’s initial actions toward Calpurnia. Her transition from ordering someone around because she thinks they are below her to almost weeping over the death of a black person occurs because of Alexandra’s exposure to her brother’s family. Aunt Alexandra’s crusade against Scout to make her a proper lady illustrates the differences people face when growing up based on their gender. Her tireless effort includes Scout’s clothing, but shortly after Scout’s near death experience with Mr. Ewell, “She [brings Scout] something to put on… Aunty [brings Scout her] overalls.” (p. 354) Preceding this event, Aunt Alexandra berated Scout for wearing overalls because they were not lady-like and showed everybody that the Finches were nonconformists. After seeing how that night could have been Scout’s last, Alexandra realizes life is too short to adhere so strictly to society’s standards. Although Aunt Alexandra is an adult, her contact with the people in Maycomb shows that a person is never too old for change.

As people age, exposure to society’s biases affect their assessments of people or situations to a greater degree than when they were children. Atticus directly states this in saying, “So far nothing in your life has interfered with your reasoning process,” to Scout, Jem, and Dill (295). Children speak and reason because they are not yet influenced by the prejudices adults have. Subjection to adult’s stereotypical comments based on prejudices and making a broad determination about a group after witnessing few people from that group’s behavior affects one’s impartiality. Overtime, people’s negative experiences may cause them to judge unfairly more as they mature, and this results in a biases. People also notice ignorance more when they mature. Atticus states this in saying, “The older you grow the more of it you’ll see.” (p. 295) The understandings adults present children during their upbringing affects children’s views. Exposure to prejudice causes the exposed to think that is the truth. Scout, Jem and Dill are much more affected by Tom’s conviction than the adults of Maycomb, and they are so upset they react with tears. Before the trial, Scout was not sensitive to the word n\*\*\*\*r and was unaware of the oppression black people faced, but the trial deeply affects Scout. Atticus exhibits this in saying, “When they do it- seems that only children weep.” (p. 217) Children judge the situation fairly and are upset because they know of Tom’s innocence, but adults who are biased against black people do not react as severely. An aspect of children’s innocence is impartiality and they lose this when they develop biased opinions as they grow up.

When children lose or drift from someone close to them they understand the fragility of life and relationship and learn to value their loved ones more. Something as minimal as, “Dill… becoming something of a trial… following Jem about,” (p. 55) and spending less time with Scout can be upsetting. Scout overcomes this by accepting that she cannot control some things and cherishes her time spent with Dill. Closer relationships with someone who used to want to spend all of their time with you that drift are more difficult to accept. Scout seeks outside help when Jem, “told [her] so many times to stop pestering him [that she] consulted Atticus.” (pg. 153) Relationships change and she has to deal with that. She learns patience and to stay hopeful in a time like that because time heals wounds. Scout matures in gaining the ability to read people and to sympathize with other people’s pain. In regards to losing her mother, “I did not miss her, but I think Jem did. He remembered her clearly, and sometimes in the middle of a game he would sigh at length, then go off and play by himself behind the car-house. When he was like that, I knew not to bother him.” (pg. 7) People gain the ability to draw inferences from situations and to wait out difficult times, and this shows a high level of maturity. People are uncertain and coping with uncertainties that don’t end in your favor is mature.

Many aspects of life are focused on the future. People focus on their future and acting their age, but people gain maturity from their experiences, not their time alive. Growing up is often associated with bodies aging, but Lee proves physical development does not drive maturing. People of all ages can reach new understandings and those understandings may not be positive. Humans learn how to cope with unwanted outcomes and to not feel helpless when things are out of their control. Contact with different people’s opinions creates biases just as much as it can destroy them, and growing up can only occur when one’s contact to events in real life and can happen at any time.