Education and Morality

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." Just as Nelson Mandella uses these words to change the world, Atticus Finch uses his education to change his world in the classic tale, *To Kill a Mockingbird.* Harper Lee’s historical fiction novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is the story of one man standing up for a cause nobody else in his small town had the courage to stand up for. One of the main messages in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is the importance of education.,which Lee shows through the social classes of Maycomb, Atticus’ persistence when teaching Scout to read, and the significance of the book ending with *The Grey Ghost.* Harper Lee uses these aspects of the story to prove that education is the most important tool to a moral life.

Social hierarchy is used by Harper Lee to show that education is the most important tool to a moral life. As one of the protagonist, Jem, mentions in the book, ”There’s four kinds of folks in the world. The ordinary, like us and the neighbors, the Cunninghams, the Ewell’s, and the Negroes” (302). As Jem references, the Finch’s are on top of Maycomb’s social class, followed by the Cunninghams, then the Ewells, and, finally, the negroes. All negroes are on the bottom because of segregation laws, however the Finch’s, Cunninghams, and Ewells are all caucasian. What separates these families between their classes are their levels of education. Just like the social class system, the Finch’s are the most educated, followed by the Cunninghams, and the Ewells. With this in mind, Lee also shows how the more educated families treat the lower classes with more respect. Calpurnia, the Finch’s housemaid, tells Scout, “Yo’ folks might be better’n the Cunninghams but it don’t count for nothin’ the way you’re disgracin’ ‘em” (33). Calpurnia is telling the children they are the smartest kids of Maycomb and need to act like it; because they are smarter, it would be more noble of them to treat lower classes with more honor.

Not only is social hierarchy used to prove education leads to morality, Atticus’ persistence to teach Scout to read demonstrates Lee’s message as well. On Scout’s first day of school, Miss Caroline, her first grade teacher, tells her, “Now you tell your father not to teach you any more… You tell him I’ll take over from here” (23). Miss Caroline does not want Scout to read because she feels Scout was not taught correctly. However, after Scouts first day of school, Atticus mentions to Scout, “If you’ll concede the necessity of going to school, we’ll go on reading every night just as we always have” (41). Atticus makes this bargain with Scout because he knows how fundamental Scout’s education is. In addition to Scout going to school everyday, she will also be getting better educated by practicing her reading every night. Atticus knows Scout will be a better person with an education, so he makes her go to school, as well as insidiously giving her more of an education by reading each night.

The final way Lee shows how education leads to moral lives is the significance of the book ending with the reading of *The Grey Ghost.* When Scout asks why Atticus chose to read *The Grey Ghost,* Atticus replies with, “Just picked it up. One of the few things I haven’t read” (375). What Lee is saying to the reader here, through Atticus, is ‘Now that you’ve finished a book, pick up another one and keep reading’. As shown throughout the book, reading is used to promote education and improving education levels. In addition to choosing *The Grey Goose*, Scout gives a summary of the book. During that summary, she mentions that the protagonist was “real nice” (376). Atticus, in turn, replies, “Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them” (376). Atticus is referring to Boo Radley, the Finch’s neighbor and neighborhood mystery. Atticus knows Boo is nice because he is wiser and has more moral justice. This is because Atticus has a higher level of education.

To sum up, Harper Lee proves that education is the best weapon against moral injustice. She convinces the reader of her message by using the social hierarchy of Maycomb, the persistence of Atticus teaching Scout to read, and the significance of ending the story with the reading of *The Grey Ghost.* Harper Lee has something in common with one of the greatest, most moral man to ever live. She, as well as Nelson Mandela, both believe education is the best way to change the world and eliminate moral injustices.