

Parenting Types as a Viewed theme in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Dr. Hend T. Al-Sudairy

Associate Professor
Princess Noura University
Art Collage/ English Department
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Abstract: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is a novel that is concerned with the parent-child's relationship. One of the things that strikes the reader the most is the bond shared by Atticus, a single parent, and his children Scout and Jim. Most of the lines from this novel are memorable and express a lot about parenting in a very simple style. It states that true parenting is about sharing a bond that provides the right amount of affection and love unconditionally and teaches a sense of responsibility and humanity in children. It also emphasises respecting the children and at the same time teaching them the basics of life without being pedantic. It is to be the child's friend and mentor without one role overpowering the other. Parenting is one of the most fulfilling tasks in life, yet one of the most difficult ones. Every parent deals with his/her child in their own different way, still most of the parenting types can be categorized into some specific types of parenting. This paper will discuss the commonly found parenting types, their advantages and disadvantages. That are: the Authoritarian, democratic, permissive, desmissive, and abusive types. Two of these types will be discussed in this paper: the democratic and the abusive types as they are the subject of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The moral-philosophical approach will be implied as the most suitable approach to the novel.

Many books, fiction and non-fiction, have been written on parenthood and child's psychology. There is an increasing trend in literature to write for and about the children as Alston remarks:

The central position of the child in the family remained important, and even increased in importance, during the course of the twentieth century. Children's literature has exploded, with thousands of titles being published and millions of copies being bought every year; advertisements are now aimed at children (21).

This centrality of the child in the family is the focus of the writers of children literature. Some books tend to advise and lecture and therefore the reader deserts them but some are not. *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1960) is one of the interesting books but it surpasses all other books with its insight into child inner thought and impulse. This novel takes the reader into the child's world and it enables him/her to feel the child's struggle to understand life and to learn how to make decisions. It also deals with the heavy issue of parenthood.

Moreover, it shows and emphasizes the importance of having good parenting methods to help the child comes over life's difficulties without suffering much pain and sacrifices. This novel's focus is the types of parenthood and how that would effect the children growing up process. Parenting is not an easy task, it includes a number of dimensions: sensitivity to a child's needs, social communication, emotional expressiveness and disciplinary control (Rutter 600). They also should set an example for their children and that is very important in shaping the child's personality. The child is encouraged to follow his father's steps either good or bad (Rutherford, 757)

The novel is highly evaluated and considered an American classic. Critics were and still are interested in this novel and many essays have been written about it. The most recurring theme of these essays is the theme of racism. However, what attracted my attention in this novel is not the treatment of racism, though that is very important, but the parenthood theme. The way Atticus, the single father, is presented and how he sets himself as an example for his children. It is amazing how he encourages them to learn from their own mistakes.

The novel is an exploration of human morality and how it is transferred to children through different the types of parenthood. Atticus Finch plays an integral role as a single parent. He believes that people are not wholly good or evil but a mixture of both and that good will prevail at the end. The novel classic status is rooted in its moral message and ability to move the reader's sympathy as much today as when it was written in 1960. The novel enables the reader to enter the child's world easily. That is accomplished by narrating the story from a child point of view, using "I" and "me" to describe the events of the novel. The narrator is an adult, Scout Finch, who looks back to her childhood but the perspective is limited to what she saw and felt as a child. Of course, Scout the six-year child does not understand the full picture of what she witnesses.

To Kill a Mocking Bird is set in the American south during the period of 1930s. The events take place in a small town called Alabama; the core of Scout's story is her father's determination as a lawyer and a believer of man's right to defend

a Negro, Tom Robinson, who is accused of raping a white young woman. The issue of racism towards black is a major issue in the south at that time. The surface of the story is Scout's games, mischief, fighting with her older brother, Jem, troubles at school. The two children are happy, brought up in a healthy environment by their widowed father and his black housekeeper, Calpurnia. The story starts when she was six years old and her brother is about to enter the 5th grade and they meet a young boy named Dill. The three children's adventures fill the book and transferred the reader there to live that time with them. The reader observes how the father is installing moral values within his children and how the children are responding to his advices through the events that Scout writes.

Thus, the novel is concerned with the relationship between father and children. One of the most things that will strike the reader the most is the bond shared by Atticus and his children Scout and Jem. True parenting is having a bond that offers the right amount of affection and love and establishes a sense of responsibility and humanity in children. It is respecting the children, valuing them, and teaching them the essentials of life in a way that does not seem didactic. It means to become the child's friend and mentor. Each parent has his own individual way of dealing with his children. Yet we can categorize most parenting types into four obvious ones:

- 1- Authoritarian parenting type: In this type of parenting, the parents do their best to be in control of the children. Usually they try to practice rigid rules and restrictions on their children in order to keep the good behavior. Such parents tend to believe that children should not show any negative emotions like protesting or anger. Consequently, children with authoritarian parents usually struggle to be up to their parents' expectations but they usually have a weak child-parent bond. Moreover, children of authoritarian parents mostly have trouble in becoming independent individuals and lack trust in their own judgment. They grow up feeling lonely and have difficulties in learning new concept and getting along with their colleagues.
- 2- Permissive parenting type: the parents have 'let alone policy' attitude that give their children unlimited freedom and options and without considering whether the children are capable of handling the responsibility of their choices and if the choices made are the right ones to take. And they practice little control on their lives. Permissive parents rarely set rules for their children and if there are any then not all are applied on the children. In this type, parents tend to give their children unlimited options
- 3- Dismissive parenting: it is the most harmful type of parenting. Parents of this type show no interest or love for their children. They do not participate in any of the children activities; they only provide them with the basic needs of life. Their children's problems raise no interest in them to solve. Consequently, children grow up rebellious, reckless, and may have psychological distress.
- 4- Democratic parenting type: it is probably the most balanced type of parenting for it encourages the children to make decisions on their own and take responsibility for their choices. It differs from other types of parenting in the way they teach their children to differentiate between good and bad without imposing the parents' choice on the child. They usually have clear and reasonable expectations from their children and make it clear to their children why they want them to behave in a certain way. They monitor their children with love and care and the children's mistakes are pointed out and corrected in away to teach the child not to punish him.

Of course, this categorization of the parenting types is not always clear-cut. Some parents might also demonstrate treats of more than one type.

Parenting is not an easy task especially for a single parent where taking care of a child is a challenge and need to be 'Good Enough' as S. Scott puts it as the minimum amount of care needed so as not to cause harm to a child:

if a parent is faced by adversity (such as being single, poor or depressed) but the quality of parenting behaviour is still adequate, the outcome for the child should not be compromised. It is the quality of the immediate moment-to-moment behaviour of the parent towards the child that is the major influence on the child's wellbeing (91-2).

The essence of parenting then is the child's psycho and how to promote the good side of the child; and if we compare this extract with the four types of parenting, we find the democratic type the most suitable one that takes into consideration the child's safety psychologically and physically.

However, many factors effect parenthood and child rearing practices as Woodcock states:

Parenting occurs within a relationship that is affected by a wide variety of factors. The interaction of these 'determining factors' in relation to increasing risk or acting as compensatory buffers' is crucial to understanding the parenting process (106)

the most important factors are:

- a- social factor which has a connection with how people act and live in a society and how do they behave and interact.
- b- political factor and it is concerned with changing legislations and its effect on parenting and child up bringing.
- c- cultural factor where concepts and customs in a particular society effect parent-child bond.

The most obvious factor in *To Kill a Mocking Bird* is the cultural factor. Many examples are in the novel where the reader sees Atticus acting differently from what his society expects of him. For example, he does not confirm to the society's view of a girl's dress code as when the aunt insisted that Scout should wear dresses not pants (p.81) while Atticus does not mind that. He even tries to explain to his sister his idea of the girl's dress. In addition, the rumors that are spread about Bob Bradley and why he keeps himself within the house, Atticus does not encourage his children to crave such idea about the man.

Moreover, in 1930s it was not acceptable from a white man to defend a black one convicted of raping a white woman. Atticus was appointed to do that mission. He did his best to help the convicted Tom Robinson. His attitude is a challenge to the town's custom and his children pay for that. They were under a sever attack at school for their father's defense of a "black man". Atticus is appointed to defend Robinson who is accused of raping Mayella Ewell. The Ewell family is known as troublemakers and was not favorable among the town's people. Though they are not liked but Atticus's defense of Robinson is not accepted in the white community. Atticus strives to enroot moral values and principles in his children. He sets a good parenting example for his children in taking the right side and standing by the weak. And he explains the importance of this trial to his children when Scout asks why he is defending Tom Robinson

"For a number of reasons... The main one is, if I didn't I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent this county in the legislature ... I could never ask you to mind me again. Scout, simply by the nature of the work, every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. This one's mine, I guess. You might hear some ugly talk about it at school, but do one thing for me if you will: you just hold your head high and keep those fists down. No matter what anybody says to you, don't you let 'em get your goat. Try fighting with your head for a change... it's a good one, even if it does resist learning." (75)

Thus, he teaches his children the meaning of life. And how to distinguish right from wrong not by telling and instructing them but through their own experiences. He only advices the children to use reason instead of physical power. Both children learned a lot from Robinson's trial and realized that life is not always fair. The father helps them as when the children attend the trial, Atticus sees them but does not bid them to leave. He wants them to experience and witness the real life with all its prejudice. Not only that but he believes in his children's ability as when he: „after supper, Atticus sat down with paper and called, 'readey to read?'"(29). These lines show Atticus's encouragement of his daughter to read at a very young age which in return pushes her to read and succeed. Atticus Finch is a successful father because he has raised, with the help of Calpurnia, two young children. He has helped them deal with their own emotions not only that but also he helped them stand in another person's shoes. Atticus teaches Scout how to be understandable of others:

„First of all," he said, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—, „Sir?" „—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it (30).

he tries here to make Scout feels for others and be more reflective. The social bond between Atticus and Scout is very strong and he teaches her many things about the world, people and society as when he advices her to understand people before she judges them

In another occasion, he sets a good example as when he goes to the jail to protect Tom Robinson against the mob headed by Walter Cunningham. „Get aside from the door, Mr Finch.“ „You can turn around and go home Walter“ said Atticus pleasantly“ (p 151). In this example he goes beyond bravery because he takes care of the whole thing without anger or violence.

Sometimes he is stern when the occasion demands that as when he scolds his children for making fun of others:

""So that's what you were doing, wasn't it?"
'Makin' fun of him?'
'No," said Atticus, "Putting his life's history on display for the edification of the neighborhood.'
Jem seemed to swell a little. 'I didn't say we were doin' that, I didn't say it!'
Atticus grinned dryly. 'You just told me,' he said. 'You stop this nonsense right now, every one of you.'" (49)

As the reader has seen, Atticus is shown as a decent man with good morals and intentions representing the democratic type. In contrast, Bob Ewell is presented in a weak light as the bad representation of fathers. He embodies the dismissive parent category. The Ewell are not liked by many people due to their dirty state and lack of hygiene and unhealthy habits: "no public officer could free them from congenital diseases" (170) which shows the father's neglect of his duty as a guide for his children. Their house is described as:

The cabin's plank walls were supplemented with sheets of

corrugated iron, its general shape suggested it's original design: square, with four tiny rooms opening onto a shotgun hall, the cabin rested uneasily upon four irregular lumps of limestone. Its windows were merely open spaces in the walls, which in the summer were covered with greasy strips of cheese cloth (p170).

This description tells the reader a bit about the Ewells family. It is obvious that they took very little pride in their home and its appearance. Moreover, "the varmints had a lean of it, for the Ewells gave the dump a through gleaning everyday" (p 170). The reader is informed that the Ewells main source of revenue is from the town dump. In addition, this is not a way to feed one's family but it is expected from unemployed alcoholic man like Mr. Ewell.

Thus, the children are not taking care of or of their education:" Nobody was quite sure how many children were on the place . . . there were always several dirty-faced ones at the windows when any one passed by" (171). Mayella, the eldest, did not get much education because she has to take care of her siblings, and she does not have time for friends and she has none. Their living circumstance explain why Mayella lied under oath and was afraid to tell the truth because she has been living with abusive father all her life and could not imagine other wise. Mr. Ewell hates Atticus during Robinson's trial because he destroyed his reputation. This proves him concerned about his reputation more than his children and how they view him which emphasizes his neglect of his children. His child Burris is a very dirty child:"he had a dark gray neck, the backs of his hands were rusty, and his finger nails were black deep into the quick" (27). Not only that but he denies his children to go to school: „They (his children) didn't have to go to school, for one thing" (31). This sentence emphasizes the lack of empathy between the father and his children and it is against parenting responsibility. In addition, it will affect the children in a bad way as Donald mentions:

Lack of parental empathy is associated with poorer outcomes for children. . . . Thus a key requirement of the parenting role is a parent's capacity to empathise with their child and set aside their own needs in order to meet those of their children (16)

but the reader does not see this empathy in Mr. Ewell who is a self centered person. Consequently, the children will be a copy of the father as he set an example for them and society will be populated with irresponsible people. Children are keen observers of their eldest and they respond according to how they are treated. Studies prove that aggressive behavior increases when the children witness it within their families (Patterson 5)

Here the reader sees two different types of parents. Atticus Finch is presented in agreeable light. He is a loving father and decent person with high morals. On the other hand, Bob Ewell is on the contrary, he is careless and sets a bad example for his children as unemployed alcoholic man. It is clear the condemnation of the parent neglect of the child and ignoring the intellectual bond. This neglect is exemplified in Mr. Ewell's treatment of his children. It also shed the light on the outcome of this parenting type. And how it will affect the whole society through the individuals.

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