



Cognitive Advantages of Reading – A Study of Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's 'to Kill a Mocking Bird'

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ABSTRACT

Cognition is the mental processing that includes the attention of working memory, language comprehension, reasoning, etc. Reading is a basic and essential skill and has its own set of cognitive advantages which includes; the ability to empathize, reduction in stress levels, better analytical skills, etc. In the novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, Atticus Finch is a character who indulges in the seraphic pleasure of reading. The paper aims at bringing out how reading visibly impacts his character, as he stands juxtaposed in myriads of arenas, to the people of his race. Scientists have conducted a detailed research and have declared that reading has the following advantages.

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Introduction

Reduces stress levels

Oxford dictionary defines the word stress as pressures or worries that affect a person's life.

Atticus Finch was a lawyer who tried to defend Tom Robinson, a black man, who was accused of having raped a white girl, as he was sure of Tom Robinson's innocence. However, he had to face strong opposition from the society and his own children, as their prejudiced minds believed that every black man was a criminal.

Despite living under the threat of being ostracized even by his children, Atticus was unperturbed and managed to control his emotions and thereby, his stress. He remained focused on the course of actions that he had to undertake, instead of being mortified about its consequences.

Increases Empathy

The reader can leave his own consciousness and pass over into the consciousness of another person, in another age, and another culture. "Passing over", a term used by the theologian John Dunne, describes the process by which reading enables the person to try, identify with and ultimately enter for a brief time, the wholly differed perspective of another person's consciousness. The reader understands how a knight thinks, how a slave feels, how a heroine behaves and how an evildoer can regret or deny wrongdoing, and he never returns quite the same; sometimes the reader is inspired, sometimes saddened, but are always enriched. Through this exposure one learns both the commonality and the uniqueness of one's thoughts – that they are individuals, but not alone. (On Reading, Proust)

Atticus is the epitome of an empathetic person. He puts himself in the shoes of Tom Robinson and fights his case with great alacrity. He tries to defend him, tooth and nail, despite being a white man. Atticus also felt empathetic towards Mrs. Dubose, a sick woman, although she never left a stone unturned when it came to humiliating him or his

children. Atticus tries everything possible to mitigate the suffering of Mrs. Dubose- the morphine addict.

Atticus taught his children to be tolerant toward the sick. He asked them to put themselves in their shoes, as they had no idea of what they were undergoing. He sends his children to Mrs. Dubose's house to read out to her, in order to distract her from contemplating unpleasant things.

After her death, he commemorated her as 'great lady'. His son Jem was unable to share this viewpoint of Atticus and questioned, 'After all things she said about you, a lady?' (124)

Atticus replied in the affirmative and said that she had her own viewpoints which were very different from his. This incident reveals that Atticus appreciated others thoughts and feelings and this trait of his can be considered as an outcome of his love for reading.

Builds relationship between parents and children

Children and parents who read together enjoy tighter bonds than those who do not, according to research. In the novel, Atticus finch shares a special and beautiful bond with his children, which borders on camaraderie and bonhomie.

Though a wide age gap separates Atticus from his children, he is able to share a very special bond with them. He is portrayed as a single parent, whom they respect, yet do not fear. They are able to voice their opinions without mincing words, in his presence.

The bond shared by them can be attributed to the time that the parent and children spend with each other, reading books.

Stronger Analytical and Thinking Skills

Researchers have found that reading sessions actively engage the sections of the brain responsible for thinking critically.

Atticus proved that he was not bigoted, as he was fighting the case of a black man who was accused of having raped a white girl.

He defends Tom Robinson's case brilliantly in the court, where he exhibits his analytical skills at the best.

He had minutely observed the people involved in the case and declared in the court that the person who hit the white girl, Mayella Ewell, was a left-handed one. He had observed that her father signed with his left hand and therefore, it had to be him. He even throws light on the fact that the only good hand that Tom Robinson possesses is his right one. He therefore arrives at the conclusion that it is the white girl who must have forced herself on Tom Robinson and unable to bear the ignominy, her father would have hit her savagely.

Thus, Atticus proves that he possessed strong analytical and thinking skills which can be attributed to the cognitive advantage that reading offers.

Thus, it is evident from the analysis of the character Atticus that a reading mind is a fortified one. It brings about changes in the way the mind works and bestows the reader with multiple advantages, which in turn makes the reader a better human being, who would enrich the society at large.

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