

## Mirroring Atticus: A Text-Complexity Circle Highlights Unconventional Heroes

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### Abstract

This article outlines the arrangement of a text circle in an eighth-grade English language arts class around the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The author first provides rationale for examining Atticus Finch as a non-traditional hero for his going against the status quo despite consequence to do what's right. The author then establishes that mirror neurons allow student readers to experience literature and emotionally put themselves into situations they might not otherwise experience; and therefore, Atticus is worthy of direct character study. Ancillary texts to support Atticus' heroic example are shared, including the films *Gandhi*, *High Noon*, and *12 Angry Men* as well as the song "I Won't Back Down." Finally, excerpts from student responses comparing and contrasting characters in the various texts demonstrate a deeper understanding of the fulcrum text (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) as well as personal thematic connection by students.

### Keywords

*To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch, text-complexity circle, text set, unconventional heroes, literature, unit plan, empathy

### Introduction

We're the safest folks in the world... We're so rarely called upon to be Christians, but when we are, we've got men like Atticus to go for us... I thought, Atticus Finch won't win, he can't win, but he's the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that. And I thought to myself, well, we're making a step—it's just a baby step, but it's a step. (Lee, 1960, p. 246)

Addressing Jem's disappointment at Tom Robinson's conviction in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Miss Maudie explains the significance of Atticus Finch being appointed to defend Tom. While many of us would claim to follow a moral code, when the same is put to the test, only a select few like Atticus are willing to practice it. Atticus Finch is a beloved character in literature because of his dogged obligation to doing what's right, even though it is not easy. Atticus challenges readers to step up to the moral high ground, despite its exposure to critics in the status quo. In this way, Atticus is a veritable role model for young readers.

Because of his unflinching sense of personal ethics, his willingness to stand up for Tom against the wishes of his community, and his non-violent penchant for turning the other cheek, critics have written about Atticus being too idealistic a character. For example, within his critique, Barra (2010) called Atticus, "the only saint in a courtroom of the weak" (para. 6) and "a repository of cracker-barrel epigrams" (para. 8). However, such analyses miss Atticus' clear flaws. At times, he doubts his abilities as a father. He's often reclusive, ignoring the social functions of the town. It could even be argued that he doesn't fight hard enough. Malcolm Gladwell (2009) writes, "Finch will stand up to racists. He'll use his moral authority to shame them into silence...What he will not do is look at the problem of racism outside the immediate context of... the island community of Maycomb, Alabama" (para. 16).

Gladwell argues that Atticus should have been outraged at Tom's verdict; that he makes excuses for his racist neighbors despite their inexcusable behavior; that he prefers to view humanity as basically good with a tainted perspective rather than acknowledging some aspects of human nature, like violence spawned from racism, as just plain evil.

Gladwell makes an interesting point, but it's possible that he's mischaracterizing and even overstating Atticus's kind of heroism, which is subtle, even reluctant. In fact, Atticus's defining heroic quality may simply be his avoidance of what Zimbardo calls the "evil of inaction" (qtd. in Brockman, 2005). Representing Tom Robinson isn't a grand heroic gesture on Atticus's part (since it's Tom's life that's on the line), but it's what he can reasonably do in his capacity as a lawyer. Though he can't single-handedly save Tom from a corrupt system, he doesn't turn a blind eye and stand by as the injustice unfolds, as do most of his neighbors. Atticus's limitations humanize him, make him more plausible, and make his willingness to do the right thing even more remarkable because he sets an achievable example of how not to fall into the trap of a passive bystander.

This practical heroism makes Atticus a perfect character for adolescent readers to study in detail. Ciardiello (2010) writes about the importance of learning democratic practices including "acts of social justice and empathy. Children need training in these democratic acts... Literacy can play a role as a resource for cultivating civic responsibility and social justice" (p. 464). While *To Kill a Mockingbird* is certainly a fantastic text for plot study and other academic uses, it also provides a model and an experience for readers to develop empathy and social responsibility, thanks in no small part to Atticus. In this way, Atticus and *To Kill a Mockingbird* help to "serve a broader purpose, the nurturing of men and women capable of building a fully democratic society" (Rosenblatt, 2005, p.19).

One engaging format for this kind of character study, which I have used with my 8th grade classes, is what Sarah Brown Wessling calls a reading complexity circle.

### Reading Complexity Circles

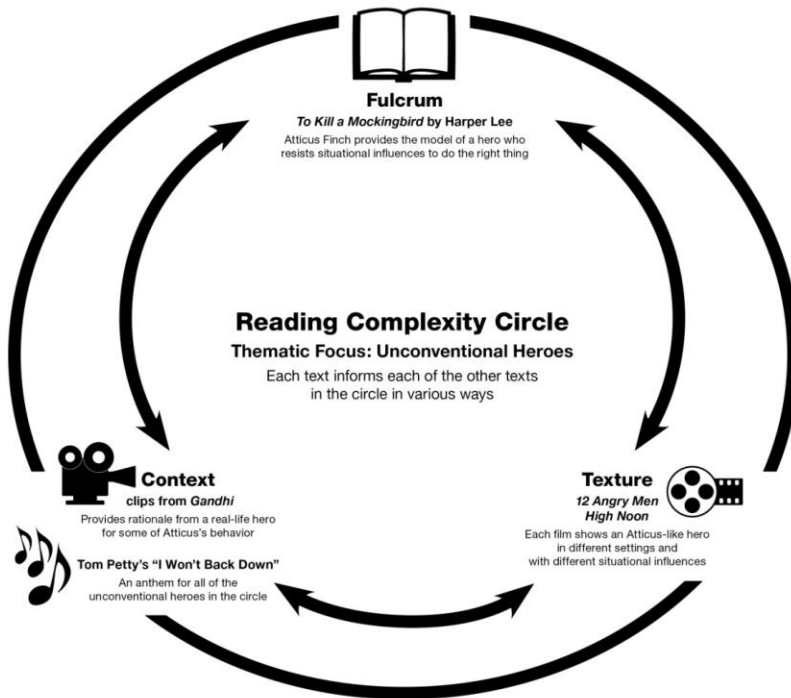
Wessling (2011) writes:

Reading, especially complex reading, doesn't occur in isolation. In imagining a reading experience that is scaffolded by design, that resists reading in isolation, and welcomes a situation in which texts 'talk' to each other [Wessling uses] a concept to design instruction that deliberately layers the reading of texts by way of conceptual reading circles. (p. 24)

In this type of circle, *To Kill a Mockingbird* would become the fulcrum text which is the "centerpiece of any unit of study" and "offers distinct layers of meaning and complexity for the reader" (Wessling, 2011, p. 24) with other texts offering texture and context. Unlike literature circles, which are often focused on small groups of students reading and meaningfully discussing a singular, self-selected text, a reading complexity circle is more about grouping a variety of meaningfully related texts. The circle, in the latter case, is more about the thematic connections between various content, but some goals of both approaches overlap. Regarding literature circles, Daniels (1994) writes, "Any work of literature is always a confrontation, a collaboration, between a reader's prior experience and the worlds of an author" (p. 34). By using full-length films, film clips, and songs to support a fulcrum text in a reading complexity circle, students have multiple avenues of connection between their experience and the worlds of several authors, and an opportunity to deepen meaning beyond a single text.

Figure 1 shows a visual representation of a text complexity circle built around the theme of unconventional heroes and using *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a fulcrum text.

Figure 1: Reading Complexity Circle: Unconventional Heroes



Before further exploring the significance of and relationship between these specific texts used to support *To Kill a Mockingbird*, it's important to consider in more detail what Atticus has to offer to young readers through this thematic text set.

### Adolescents, Situational Influence, and the Importance of Heroes

Adolescents of every generation have it tough. It's no easy task to carve out one's identity while developing physically and emotionally. Social pressures add even more of a challenge, not to mention the hyper-expansion of the digital realm. Today's teenagers have more opportunities than ever to connect positively through social media and smart phones, but they are also more exposed to peer pressure, cyber-bullying, and the judgments of those around them. Those pressures are the same as they've always been, but developing digital mediums have given 24-hour access to their influence. Because of these continuing challenges, it's important to remind young people of the power and responsibility of the individual.

Daniel Goleman (1995) writes in *Emotional Intelligence* that:

By late childhood the most advanced level of empathy emerges... At this point [children] can feel for the plight of an entire group, such as the poor, the oppressed, the outcast. That understanding, in adolescence, can buttress moral convictions centered on wanting to alleviate misfortune and injustice. (p. 105)

Goleman suggests that students are more than capable of empathizing with others and even feeling a responsibility to address social problems. This is evident in many schools where students organize charitable clubs and drives to benefit the less fortunate. However, other students choose to do nothing, content to fade into the crowd, perhaps not being willing to risk the exposure which comes with distinguishing themselves against their peers.

Psychologist Phillip Zimbardo labels this kind of bystander passivity as "the evil of inaction" (qtd. In Brockman, 2005). Zimbardo is best known as the architect of the notorious Stanford

Prison Experiment during the 1970's when he divided college students into the roles of guards and prisoners in a mock penitentiary. Zimbardo was forced to end the experiment early because of hostility between the groups, and his subsequent findings have centered on how situational influences can drive people to do things they normally wouldn't. He has also addressed the role of bystanders.

In an interview, Zimbardo states:

If you watch [an unethical event] happening and you don't say, "This is wrong! Stop it! This is awful!" you give tacit approval. You are the silent majority who makes something acceptable. If I get in a cab in New York and the cab driver starts telling me a racist or sexist joke and I don't stop him, that means he will now tell that joke over and over again, thinking that his passengers like it. He takes my silence as approval of his racism. There is not only the evil of inaction among all those people in that prison, but also the people in society in general who observe evil and allow it to continue by not opposing it. (Brockman, 2005, para. 37)

Zimbardo places a sizable burden of responsibility on society by suggesting that it's not only the perpetrators of evil who are guilty but also, to an extent, the bystanders. Consider this for students in situations like bullying; according to Zimbardo, those who would watch a bully and a victim without interfering are partially complicit by not voicing their discontent. Such a theory places Atticus as the ideal; one who stands up for another regardless of the social consequences.

According to Zimbardo, Atticus is heroic: "The hero is somebody who somehow has the inner qualities, inner resources, character, strength, or virtue... to resist those situational pressures" (Brockman, 2005). In these terms, a hero is not the stereotype from an action film with bulging muscles and a cunning sense of wit. Nor is a hero a charismatic orator or one who demonstrates feats of strength or physical bravery. Zimbardo's hero is simply one, like Atticus, who's willing to stand out from the crowd to do what's right in situations where it's necessary.

There's evidence in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as to the source of Atticus' inner resources: being a good role model for his children. After being taunted by her classmates because Atticus is defending Tom, Scout asks,

"[I]f you shouldn't be defendin' him, then why are you doin' it?"

"For a number of reasons," says Atticus. "The main one is, if I didn't, I couldn't hold my head up in town, I couldn't represent this county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again."

"You mean if you didn't defend that man, Jem and me wouldn't have to mind you anymore?"

"That's about right." (Lee, 1960, p. 86)

Thanks to the enduring significance of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, not only does Atticus provide a positive role model for his children and neighbors but also for the generations of young readers who continue to discover this novel. As a fulcrum text, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is less about Atticus than it is about his brand of heroism. Atticus provides a model of an unconventional hero which students can also explore in other texts. Highlighting these types of heroes is one way to use literature to help students develop the kind of empathy and responsibility that Rosenblatt and Ciardiello mention.

Furthermore, there's an argument that, through literature, students can access experiences that they don't get to have in their own lives. One of Atticus's most famous lines from the novel is when he advises Scout that, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb in his skin and walk around in it" (Lee, 1960, p. 36). Mirror neurons may explain how readers can figuratively climb into Atticus's skin and walk around in his experiences.

### Considering Mirror Neurons and the Influence of Literature

Literature is a powerful vessel for providing students with experiences concerning morality, and neurology may explain why. The PBS science program *NOVA* (2005) claims that empathy is one of humanity's finer traits, and the reason that watching sports, video games, dances, etc., can be evocative is because of the presence of what are referred to as mirror neurons: "Watching someone do something is just like doing it yourself... you can share the experience" (Cort, 2005). The program suggested that observing an action, even one that's recorded on video, causes neurons to fire in the brain of the observer in the same way that they fire in the actor. So, an audience would feel similar emotional sensations as would those engaged in the observed activity. This explains why we get nervous watching others carry heavy packages or cry while watching a character endure heartbreak during movies. Furthermore, mirror neurons may react to others' feelings in direct interaction. We can "read another's mind" by adopting that person's point of view.

The consideration of mirror neurons is powerful in connection with Zimbardo's "evil of inaction" as it establishes that one who would stand by and do nothing while another is victimized would be well-aware of the feelings of the victim. In today's voyeuristic society, it certainly seems that English Language Arts teachers should be engaging students with literary examples, such as Atticus and Tom, to help them develop their sense of moral obligation, but does reading literature create the same neurological response that visual examples do?

Literacy Integration Specialist Alana Morris (2010) states that while visual examples are most powerful, "Mirror neurons simulate the actions described in the novels we read." This seems accurate considering how often literature evokes emotion strong enough to provoke physical reaction such as laughter or an increased heart rate. To enhance the reading experience of Tom's verdict, I have taken my eighth-grade students to our local county courthouse, which was built in the mid-1800's and is fortunately only a half mile walk from our middle school, and we have placed student readers throughout the courtroom. Every year without fail, thanks no doubt to our physical setting, when I read Judge Taylor polling the jury and each "guilty" verdict aloud, I get choked up, and there are audible gasps and protests from the student audience.

Burke (2013) writes, "We read both to grow our minds and heal our hearts... we need books that... take us to places where we can meet people and do things we would never dare to do in real life" (p. 146). If mirror neurons are engaged while reading, it stands to reason that literature can allow readers to experience a multitude of ethical scenarios and moral dilemmas which they might never otherwise encounter. Stepping into his point of view or "mirroring Atticus" allows readers to directly experience his experiences. Considering that Atticus does not stand alone in his heroic qualities, students could be more fully engaged through multiple texts in a reading complexity circle.

For the first layer of context beyond the fulcrum text, I draw from a dramatization of a real-life event featuring a well-known historical figure.

### Establishing Plausibility through Non-Fiction: *Gandhi*

It is easy for my eighth-graders, or any skeptical readers, to dismiss the actions of a fictional character like Atticus if they don't consider his or her actions likely in reality. For example, would a lawyer really stand guard, unarmed, to protect a client from an angry lynch mob, as Atticus does for Tom? Following this scene, while explaining his motives to Jem, who questions how a so-called friend like Walter Cunningham could have possibly killed his father, Atticus concedes:

He might have hurt me a little... but son, you'll understand folks a little better when you're older. A mob's always made up of people, no matter what. Mr. Cunningham was part of a mob last night, but he was still a man... you children last night made Walter Cunningham stand in my shoes for a minute. That was enough. (Lee, 1960, p. 180)

Atticus recognizes that if Walter's gang had attacked an unarmed neighbor, it would clearly display their behavior as wrong. Because Scout, Jem, and Dill showed up, Walter empathized with Atticus's position as a father, and violence was avoided. Many of my students struggle with this scene; they argue that Atticus should have gone with a gun considering his talent as the best shot in Maycomb County. To help establish Atticus's strategy as not only honorable but also plausible, I call on non-fiction.

While Gandhi may be an almost impossible human ideal, he was flesh and blood, and he did gain moral authority by placing himself in harm's way to showcase the brutality of India's British occupiers. Perhaps more impressive than what Gandhi did himself was what he inspired others to do. After Gandhi's famous march to the sea to make salt, he was imprisoned. In protest, his unarmed supporters marched against the guards of the Dharsana Salt Work even after being warned they'd be beaten:

... The officers ordered [the protestors] to retreat but they continued to step forward. Suddenly... scores of native policemen rushed upon the advancing marchers and rained blows on their heads with their steel-shod lathis (staves). Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like ten pins. (Fischer, 1954, p. 101)

To help my students conceptualize Atticus's strategy of nonviolent resistance, I show them the Dharsana Salt Works Scene from Richard Attenborough's Oscar-winning 1982 biopic. As the protestors are beaten in rows and rows, my students cringe, and then Martin Sheen (playing an American journalist) shouts his summation of the event with chill-inducing inflection into a telephone:

They walked, both Hindu and Muslim alike with heads held high without any hope of escape from injury or death. It went on and on into the night. Women carried the wounded and broken bodies from the road until they dropped from exhaustion. But still, it went on and on. Whatever moral ascendancy the West held was lost here today. India is free for she has taken all that steel and cruelty has to give, and she has neither cringed nor retreated. (Attenborough, 1982)

The Dharsana Salt Works scene gives students a historical allusion and adds weight to Atticus's intended strategy. Because the British were so one-sidedly violent, it established the Indians on the moral high ground and left the British less able to defend their occupation of India internationally. This scene also demonstrates real-life heroism in the terms that Zimbardo describes. Fittingly, the American Film Institute ranks Atticus Finch (played by Gregory Peck in the film version) as number one and Mahatma Gandhi (played by Sir Ben Kingsley) as number twenty-one on its list of the greatest film heroes of all time.

In the reading complexity circle, this clip from *Gandhi* adds context to Atticus's heroic fulcrum by making clear his motive. It also engaged my students emotionally. I asked students to write their reactions after watching the clips. One answered, "I felt angry. Gandhi's followers are innocent and they're getting hit for no reason." Another student wrote, "I feel disgusted by the way these people are treated for being peaceful." At least one student put a hopeful spin on the scene by writing, "This film clip clearly depicts inspiration. The men continue to walk knowing they'll be beaten. This is heroic."

I also asked students if they could act as the protesters had for a cause they felt passionate about. One responded hopefully, "I could get beaten for something I believe in. There are plenty of people who have not just been beaten but have also been martyrs for their faith." Others were more pragmatic: "Personally, if I was in that situation, I believe I would not be strong enough. This shows how strong-minded the protestors were." Some recognized that they couldn't be like Gandhi's supporters for other reasons, "I could not stay. I have a very bad temper and would want to kick all of their butts." While there's no way to truly tell how individuals would react until they're

in certain situations, students at least got a chance to consider their reactions, and they were exposed to another heroic example through the film clip.

Besides the context of *Gandhi*, I also included two full-length classic films for texture.

### **Full-length Features: *High Noon* and *12 Angry Men***

Wessling (2011) writes that, "Texture texts do just that: add texture to reading and thinking through their juxtaposition... These texts may contradict another work, may focus on one aspect of another work, or may illuminate another work in some fashion" (p. 25). The western *High Noon* and the film adaptation of the jury play *12 Angry Men* portray Atticus-like heroes in different settings and with different situational influences.

The idea of using *High Noon* with *To Kill a Mockingbird* came from Raif Esquith's *Teach Like your Hair's on Fire* (2007). Esquith included an appendix of films he shows to his students along with an explanation of each film's value. For *High Noon*, Esquith writes, "The film reinforces the importance of a personal moral code—even in situations where no one else seems to have one" (p. 167), which reminded me of Atticus. As further evidence of connection, AFI (2003) ranks *High Noon* protagonist Marshal Will Kane at number five among its greatest film heroes.

Kane offers an interesting contrast to Atticus's pacifism, considering his role as an Old West sheriff, but their values in regards to doing the right thing are both heroic in Zimbardo's terms. In the film, Kane is about to retire from his duties as marshal and leave town in deference to his new bride's pacifistic (Quaker) faith when he receives a telegram that his nemesis, murderer Frank Miller, has been pardoned and is returning to town on the noon train. Kane's sense of personal ethics compels him to stay and face Miller even as the rest of the town proceeds to turn its back on the situation, and Kane's new bride threatens to leave him. As it gets closer to the high noon showdown, Kane stands alone.

This rising action creates a sense of desperation that readers don't experience with Atticus. While Atticus may lose his reputation, it is Tom's life that's on the line. Kane creates a situation where his sense of personal ethics could spell his own demise. *High Noon* provides potent examples of the evil of inaction as the town is willing to sacrifice Kane to Miller, and despite those situational influences, Kane remains to fight the good fight. After two scenes where Kane implores townspeople for help, the first in a bar and the second in a church, I asked students how they'd feel to be rejected as Kane is. One wrote, "I would be very upset because I always help people when they need it, and if no one helped me, I would be hurt." Another acknowledged the difficulty of such a request with, "I would feel really nervous asking complete strangers for help and if they laughed at me, I'd be angry." Perhaps the student who most closely mirrored Kane's own thoughts wrote, "This is a town of people who don't even care. I would've felt betrayed." Following the pattern of individual responsibility, *12 Angry Men* is another useful film depicting another facet of the unconventional hero.

As the jury takes their initial vote in *12 Angry Men*, Juror #8 (played by Henry Fonda) is identified as the lone "not guilty" vote, and sarcastic Juror #10 shook his head and muttered, "Boy oh boy, there's always one" (Fonda, 1957). The same quote could easily be directed towards Atticus, Gandhi, or Will Kane. Teachers frequently pair Lumet's seminal film with *To Kill a Mockingbird* to showcase how a jury, like Tom's, might work, as well as the dangers of profiling and harboring prejudices against a defendant. In my reading complexity circle, protagonist Juror #8 offers another layer of comparison for Atticus' heroism- just one more example of one who would do right in the face of many who would not.

In an interestingly subtle scene which takes place in the restroom on a break between deliberations, even-tempered Juror #6 said to Juror #8, "Nice bunch of guys, eh?" to which Juror #8 responds, "Oh, they're about the same as anywhere else" establishing the jury as a cross-section

of average society (Fonda, 1957). As the jurors deliberate, I asked my students to consider which of the juror's personalities is most similar to their own and whether or not they think this situation is plausible. I also shared an anecdote from my father who was randomly voted jury foreman of a civil case involving a tractor trailer in a traffic accident. My father shared with me how many of the jurors simply wanted to vote whichever way would get them out of deliberations the quickest, and how one juror wanted to vote in whichever way would cause the most financial pain to truck drivers, since he claimed to hate truck drivers. My father's anecdote generates the plausibility of the jurors voting without direct consideration of the facts and in light of their own biases as is showcased in *12 Angry Men*. My father's story also demonstrates the need for real-life heroes like Juror #8 and Atticus.

Since Juror 8 must face an uncomfortable crowd of opposition as the initial lone not guilty vote, I asked students for their reaction. One responded, "I have felt the same way as Juror 8 before, and it was difficult to stand up for what I really feel. Often times, I go along with what everyone else feels, but if it truly affects me, I'll stand up for my opinion." Another also recognized the difficulty of standing alone: "If I were to vote with this jury, I don't know if could stand up for the kid with everyone staring me down like that. It would be very difficult to be the first to vote innocent."

Each of the texts in this circle demonstrate a hero positively influencing others; with Atticus, it's providing a role-model for his children; with Gandhi, it's inspiring the protestors to demonstrate non-violence on a massive scale; with Will Kane, it's inspiring his wife to save his life during *High Noon*'s climax. In one of my favorite scenes from *12 Angry Men*, Juror #8 helps Juror #3 put on his coat as the men leave the jury room. As Juror #3 was the final "guilty" vote to be converted, Juror #8's action shows empathy between the only two jurors who ever stood truly alone during the deliberation. Perhaps Juror #8's kindness would provoke more thoughtful consideration from Juror #3 in the future. More importantly, perhaps Juror #8's example would inspire my students to be those who stand up for due process should they find themselves in a real-life jury situation as did my father.

In order to connect the context, texture, and fulcrum texts back to the overarching theme of unconventional heroes, it's effective to close this text set with a theme song, of sorts, and an examination of notable Common Core standards addressed in this unit.

### **Tying it all Together with Tom Petty and the Common Core**

In *The Comprehension Experience* (2011), one of Hammond and Nessel's essential ideas to inform reading instruction is that comprehension is a dynamic process: "Effective readers... move easily towards the text, dive inside it, interact with it, and are changed by the process. They do so to the extent that they are allowed and encouraged to be active participants and are made to feel comfortable in their attempts at personal discovery" (p. 28). Using film examples with *To Kill a Mockingbird* allows students to experience true heroism, as defined by Zimbardo and demonstrated by Atticus, more fully through multiple levels of texture and context.

Besides helping students to develop a sense of personal responsibility and true heroism, this reading complexity circle also relates to several Common Core State Standards. In general, the Common Core stresses close reading, and the variety of texts (which also vary in modality and complexity) in the circle allows students to approach *To Kill a Mockingbird* from a broader contextual standpoint. More specifically, the two most apparent Common Core connections are in the Anchor Standards in the Integration of Knowledge and Ideas category. These standards ask students to "integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media formats including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words" (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.7) and to "analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take" (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.9). The reading complexity circle format



easily allows texts of multiple modalities to be integrated around a common theme for students to analyze with the added benefit of allowing them to comprehensively experience the literature, engage their mirror neurons, and develop empathy and social responsibility in the process.

Tom Petty's "I Won't Back Down" is the final contextual text in this reading complexity circle as it provides an anthem for each of the featured heroes. Another Common Core standard asks students to "draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research" (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.9). After reading the novel and watching the films, I asked students how "I Won't Back Down" relates to Atticus Finch, Juror 8, and Will Kane? After listening to Petty's song and specifically the lines, "Well I know what's right, I got just one life. In a world that keeps on pushin' me around, but I'll stand my ground. And I won't back down," a student responded, "It relates because no matter what people tell them, they stand up for what they believe and they won't back down."

I also asked students: "What theme and characteristics do Atticus Finch, Juror #8, and Marshall Will Kane have in common?" One answered, "They share the theme of perseverance. All three are doing something they believe in when no one is on their side. They are all courageous, stubborn, and they stand up for what they believe." A second student considered similar qualities by writing, "They show perseverance in the face of adversity. None of them were willing to back down even when everyone is against them. They are all unorthodox, clever, and have something to do with the law (sheriff, prosecutor, juror)." Finally, a student recognized the sacrifices made by each character with, "Even though the right thing to do is hard, the three men give everything they have to do it."

A final question I presented to my students engaged their judgment (and was perhaps unfair to Juror #8 considering that he was relatively safe when compared with Atticus and Kane) was, "Which character demonstrates the most courage?" The students were generally split between Atticus and Will Kane. One wrote, "Will Kane is the most courageous because if he hadn't stayed, who knows what would have happened to the town. He could have lost his wife and his life, but he stayed and fought." Another countered with "Atticus faces the whole town and society throughout his court case which caused opinions to become public and a general dislike for Atticus. He also stood up to a lynch mob unarmed."

A third student thoughtfully considered all parties before settling on Kane, "Will Kane was the only one whose life was at stake, and he had to stand up to all of his friends because they wanted him to leave. Atticus Finch's life was never truly at risk, and Juror 8 had nothing to gain or lose from standing up to strangers." And a fourth student simply concluded, "Atticus demonstrates the most courage because he stands up to everyone with no violence." While the character who was most courageous is debatable, my students gained greater comprehension of *To Kill a Mockingbird* through the texture of the films and song as well as a more complete experience of the kind of heroism that Atticus demonstrates.

The reading complexity circle format and their engaged mirror neurons allowed students to mirror Atticus, march in Gandhi's shoes, experience being an outnumbered juror, and walk the lonely, dusty streets of the Old West. No doubt the combination of heroic examples has also offered these students the chance to consider and develop their own moral codes and heroic characters. While connecting to a classic novel like *To Kill a Mockingbird* on a deeper level is a worthy goal in itself (especially while addressing Common Core Standards), perhaps an even higher hope is that this literary experience will allow students an opportunity to avoid the evil of inaction in their own lives by doing what's right even if it's not easy.

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## Author Biography

Jason Griffith is a Teaching Associate and Ph.D. Student (English Education) at Arizona State University. A National Board Certified Teacher and Fellow of the National Writing Project, Jason taught middle school and high school English for 12 years in Carlisle, PA. In 2012, Jason received NCTE's Outstanding Middle Level Educator Award, and he currently serves on NCTE's Middle

Level Section Steering Committee. Griffith has presented at national conferences including NCTE, SXSWedu, CEE, and the Educator Collaborative's Gathering, and his work has been published in the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* along with edited volumes by Rowman and Littlefield and the ISTE. In Fall 2016, Routledge published Griffith's first book *From Me to We: Using Narrative Nonfiction to Broaden Student Perspectives*, which features critical reading and writing strategies for creative nonfiction in secondary English class. He can be reached at [Jason.J.Griffith@asu.edu](mailto:Jason.J.Griffith@asu.edu).