



# Psychosocial Development: A Study of Developmental Psychology in Harper Lee's Novels *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*

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## Abstract

*The main focus of this paper is to elucidate how the novels To Kill a Mockingbird and Go Set a Watchman by Harper Lee reflect the notions of Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. Erikson has stated that the social surroundings of a person are vital for his growth, adaptation and development of self-identity. This paper elucidates the various aspects that lead to positive and negative psychosocial developments in the characters using certain social situations in the novel. The characters who experience favourable psychosocial developments display an industrious nature, a strong sense of identity, productivity and the ability to form meaningful relationships. However, some characters show negative psychosocial developments resulting in inferiority, unproductiveness, lack of identity and an inability to form meaningful relationships. The aims and objectives of this research are to show the importance of parenting in the development of positive behaviour in children, to understand the psyche of children and adults using literature to solve problems like inferiority, loneliness and lack of identity. Finally, the result shows that the child characters are influenced by their parents and teachers in acquiring positive and negative developments. The teenage characters who explore the world develop a strong sense of identity. The young adult characters who manage to make meaningful relationships evade loneliness, and the adult characters who are hardworking and productive reflect a sense of generativity.*

**Keywords:** psychosocial development, Erikson, children, teenagers, young adults, adults

## Introduction

The novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee revolves around the lives of Scout, her brother Jem, their friend Dill and their father Atticus Finch. The children try to make their neighbour, Boo Radley, who never stepped out of his house, come out of the house.

Moreover, Atticus Finch, a lawyer, tries to defend a Black man against the false accusations of sexual assault from a White girl. The novel *Go Set a Watchman* is a sequel by Harper Lee which

introduces Scout's development as a teenager and as a young adult. Contradictory to the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch is seen to hold racist views against the Blacks of the town. This paper seeks to broadly analyse the novels based on Erikson's theory of psychosocial development.

## Methodology

Erikson was a sociologist who categorized his psychosocial development theory into eight stages.



They are trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus role confusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation and integrity versus despair (Cherry). This study uses only four stages such as industry versus inferiority, identity versus role confusion, intimacy versus isolation and generativity versus stagnation to analyse the characters of the novels. Other developmental theories are Kohlberg's stages of moral development and Piaget's stages of cognitive development. This study uses Erikson's theory of psychosocial development for the research.

### **Analysis**

#### **Industry versus Inferiority**

Industry versus inferiority is about children of school age who try to exhibit their talents. If the child is encouraged, he develops the emotional capacity to be industrious and to achieve his dreams. If parents and teachers restrict him, he becomes demotivated with self-doubt to pursue his talents and can feel inferior (Erikson 227).

Children between the ages of five and twelve fall under this stage (McLeod). The child characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird* belong to this stage. It is seen that Jem develops a talent for playing football and Atticus, his father, encourages him by playing football with him. However, Scout develops feelings of inferiority and does not want to go to school when her teacher Ms. Caroline is indifferent to her talent to read and write better than other kids of her class. Further, Burris Ewell, who has stayed in the first grade for three years develops an inferior nature due to the bad upbringing of his drunkard father.

To prevent inferiority among children, the care and encouragement of both parents and teachers are crucial (Cherry). In Scout's case, her father Atticus is there to motivate and persuade her to go to school. Hence encouragement and appreciation from parents and teachers are indispensable for the development of an industrious nature in children.

#### **Identity versus Role Confusion**

This is a stage where teenagers explore different activities and decide which group they want to socialize with (Erikson 227). If their parents prevent

them from exploring different identities, they might experience role confusion and identity crises, resulting in worse mental health (Gross 47). Boo Radley's mental health deteriorated after his father locked him up in the house without letting him explore the outside world after a small mistake he had committed when he was a teenager. However, Jean Louise from *Go Set a Watchman* develops a firm sense of identity and knowledge of what she wants as Atticus allows her to explore her town, take part in her high school dance party and go through other teenage experiences. Hence it is crucial for teenagers to explore and discover different identities, and socialize with their peers in order to find out their unique identity.

#### **Intimacy versus Isolation**

This stage takes place between the ages of nineteen and forty (Hamming 2). During this stage, people should manage to make meaningful relationships in the form of a romantic relationships or quality friendships. Those who are not successful in doing so, end up suffering from loneliness, isolation and depression (McLeod). A good example from the novel based on the above-mentioned notions of intimacy versus isolation is that of Mayella Ewell. A nineteen-year-old girl, she stays isolated from society because of her father Ewell, a good-for-nothing drunkard. She lives a lonely life near the town dump which later instigates her to seduce a Black man and accuse him of sexual abuse. Scout speaks of Mayella in the lines: "As Tom Robinson gave his testimony, it came to me that Mayella Ewell must have been the loneliest person in the world" (TKM 211). Hence the inability to form meaningful relationships during this age can lead to loneliness.

#### **Generativity versus Stagnation**

Generativity versus stagnation is a stage in adulthood between the ages of forty and sixty-five. Generative people are productive and are concerned with guiding the next generation. (Erikson 267). Those who fail to do so, suffer from stagnation, have poor quality relationships and are self-centred. Atticus is a talented lawyer and a generative person who instructs his children to never discriminate the coloured people. In the novel *Go Set a Watchman*,



Atticus not only mentors his children but also supports Jean's friend Henry after his father's death. He is productive in how he manages to build a house: "He is an incredible man, she thought . . . Atticus tears down the old house and builds a new one in a new section of town" (GSW 32). However, Ewell is seen as a stagnant person who drinks, abuses his daughter and teaches her to lie against Tom Robinson at the court. Hence hard work and productivity are essential to be generative.

### Conclusion

From the above study, it is noticed that the role of parents is indispensable for positive psychosocial development in children, evident in the comparison between how Ewell and Atticus parent their children. From the incidents in the lives of Boo Radley and Jean Louise, it is evident that teenagers should be allowed to explore the world to develop a sense of identity. The character of Mayella is used to exemplify the fact that a person must be able to form meaningful relationships during his young adulthood to evade loneliness. Finally, as seen in the character of Atticus, adults should learn to be productive in life, to mentor their children and the younger generation in the right footsteps.

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