

Literature and the Arts in Medical Education

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Editor's Note: In this column, teachers who are currently using literary and artistic materials as part of their curricula will briefly summarize specific works, delineate their purposes and goals in using these media, describe their audience and teaching strategies, discuss their methods of evaluation, and speculate about the impact of these teaching tools on learners (and teachers).

Submissions should be three to five double-spaced pages with a minimum of references. Send your submissions to me at University of California, Irvine, Department of Family Medicine, 101 City Drive South, Building 200, Room 512, Route 81, Orange, CA 92868-3298. 949-824-3748. Fax: 714-456-7984. jfshapir@uci.edu.

To Save a Mockingbird

Robin O. Winter, MD, MMM

Justice, justice shall you pursue...
Deuteronomy 16:20

Justice, autonomy, nonmaleficence, and beneficence are the core moral principles of biomedical ethics.¹ Increased attention is being paid to the principle of justice because of the rising costs of health care coupled with the growing number of uninsured Americans and the existence of health care disparities in the United States.²⁻⁴ The principle of justice deals with the fair distribution of benefits, risks, and costs according to what is due or owed an individual. The difficult challenge facing society today is actually delivering what is due each person.¹

Family physicians frequently face ethical dilemmas of justice because they are asked by insurance companies and hospitals to balance their responsibility to individual patients with the need to control costs and manage access to limited health care resources.⁵ To help residents learn how to deal with these difficult ethical dilemmas, we show how three different fictional characters pursue justice. In preparation for this presentation, residents are asked to reflect upon and write about their experiences caring for the large uninsured population in our Family Medicine Center.

The first character, Superman, was created in 1932 by two Depression-era teenagers, writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, to fight the injustices they were witnessing in society. We start by watching the beginning of the first television series based on their character, *Adventures of Superman*, that opens with the famous lines, "Look, up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane!

It's Superman—who, disguised as Clark Kent, fights a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way." Since Superman was created, he has been continuously updated to reflect the mood of the times and to fight against society's current injustices. Siegel and Shuster believed that Superman's popularity stemmed from people's desire to have hidden powers like Clark Kent.⁶ The dream of having a dual identity like Superman/Clark Kent can open a discussion with residents about their hopes for possessing super powers to fight disease versus the reality they have encountered as doctors.

Harper Lee, in her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, created a very different kind of fictional character to help combat the inequalities she saw while growing up in Alabama during the 1930s.⁷ Instead of creating a super hero, Lee created a man with the unwavering powers of courage, empathy, and moral fortitude to fight against racial prejudice. Lee's

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book describes how Atticus Finch, a widowed attorney in Maycomb, Alabama, provides his daughter, Scout, and son, Jem, with a moral education by defending Tom Robinson. Mr Robinson, a black man, has been falsely accused of raping a white woman, the daughter of Bob Ewell. Selected scenes from the film version of the novel are used to illustrate the book's themes of justice and compassion.

We show the opening scene of the movie when Mr Cunningham, a poor white farmer, pays Atticus for legal work that he did for him with a bag of chestnuts. Scout asks Atticus if they are as poor as Mr Cunningham. Within Atticus's answer we learn about Maycomb's 1930s class structure. In this scene we also meet Calpurnia, the Finch's black housekeeper, who has been with the family since Jem was born and helped raise the children after their mother died. In the novel, Calpurnia is an important link between the races and helps Scout and Jem gain a better understanding of the black community by taking them with her to her church. Since many of our residents come from different countries, this scene enables us to discuss the class structures found in their countries in comparison with those in the United States. One resident expressed his surprise at finding such a diverse population in our community, and another wrote, "I had little education about cultural diversity during medical school. I have learned here how to respect all the different backgrounds and beliefs of my patients."

In the next scene, Jem and Scout tell their new friend, Dill, about the superstitions surrounding the reclusive Boo Radley. Boo's hidden presence is felt throughout the story by his acts of kindness, which includes secretly leaving gifts for the children in a hollow tree. We discuss how the children's fanciful ideas about Boo mirror the town's racial prejudice that is dominated by fear and ignorance, rather than knowledge and understanding.

During a dinner scene that we show, Jem, wishing he had a gun of his own, asks Atticus how old he was when he got his first gun. In answering, Atticus explains that you can "Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird . . . Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy . . . That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." This is the only time Atticus tells his children it is a sin to do anything.

The story's themes of prejudice versus tolerance, guilt versus innocence, and cowardice versus courage all come together at Tom Robinson's trial. During the trial, Atticus provides clear evidence that Robinson is innocent. Together, we watch his passionate closing remarks to the jury, where he implores them to set aside their prejudice and do their duty by declaring Robinson innocent. Despite the skillful defense by Atticus, the jury finds Robinson guilty. We then watch the film's most dramatic moment, when the black community, having watched the trial from the balcony, stands up for Atticus as he leaves the courtroom out of respect for his courage and compassion in defending Tom Robinson. Later, we learn that Robinson was killed while trying to escape from jail.

Despite the verdict in his favor, Bob Ewell feels disgraced by Atticus and attempts to take revenge by attacking Atticus's children. They are ultimately saved by Boo Radley. In the next scenes that we watch, Scout finally meets Boo and learns that he is not the mysterious monster the children had previously described to Dill, but like Tom Robinson, he is just an innocent mockingbird. By the end of the movie, we see that through Atticus's courage, empathy, and moral convictions, he has successfully taught his children how to fight against prejudice by seeing the good in other people.

In applying the lessons of *To Kill a Mockingbird* to health care, we discuss with the residents the

injustices they see on a daily basis in our Family Medicine Center where they care for a large number of uninsured patients who struggle to afford needed health care. We review some of the national data on uninsured children showing that they are more likely to suffer higher rates of infant mortality, asthma, lead poisoning, and obesity and how they represent one example of our society's mockingbirds.⁸ One resident expressed her commitment to caring for this population, having grown up in an underserved neighborhood herself, and another wrote of the difference she makes for patients who have nowhere else to go.

Finally, the third fictional character is introduced to present a theory of justice, which if applied to our health care structure, could possibly help create a more equitable system. At the end of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982), Mr Spock risks his life to save the starship Enterprise by entering the ship's highly radioactive reactor room to repair its engines. We watch the scene where Spock tells Captain Kirk before he dies that it was "logical" for him to risk his life for the ship because "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one." This scene opens a discussion about different theories of justice and how the application of Spock's theory has the potential to lead to the creation of a system that guarantees a decent minimum level of health care for all.¹⁹

The presentation concludes by emphasizing to the residents that even though they do not have super powers with which to cure disease, they do have the power to pursue justice and to protect the mockingbirds in our society through their practice of family medicine. If they do, then maybe one day, their community will stand up for them like Atticus's did for him.

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