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# Classical Rhetoric in Atticus Finch's Speeches

*By exploring the uses of plain, middle, and grand styles, the author examines how theories of classical rhetoricians can be applied to Atticus Finch's speeches in To Kill a Mockingbird.*

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ithin the walls of a typical high school English classroom sit 30 active, intelligent students with voices to express and words to be heard.

They have plights and preoccupations—they have goals and plans. Some aspire to be pilots, others educators, some medical professionals, and some parents. The teacher, standing at his or her doorway looking in, observes the 30 students and sees the day's challenge: how to equip and inspire these scholars to become effective communicators so they can master their future occupation and position in society. The teacher needs an example—a master orator who will intrigue and teach all students. The ideal scenario is to have the students learn from someone who is eloquent in many spheres: at home, as well as in public and at the workplace. *To Kill a Mockingbird's* Atticus Finch is this ideal classroom guest.

## Rhetoric and Today's Classrooms

In the high school English classrooms that I've encountered, *rhetoric* has not been a focus or even a passing discussion. It forms the basis for how we teach our students to communicate, but most, if not all, students are unfamiliar with the term let alone its functions. Students want to be heard and want to be persuasive; therefore, they need to know Aristotle's famous definition of rhetoric: "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (181) and be able to answer Cicero's question, "What [is] so pleasing to the understanding and the ear as a speech adorned and polished with wise reflections and dignified

language?" (*De Oratore* 293). Studying Atticus Finch's speeches provides answers to Cicero's question and validity to Aristotle's statement. If students comprehend the scope of rhetoric, they will be able to reach audiences they never thought they could.

## Cicero's Plain Style and Atticus's Speeches to His Children

In *Orator*, Cicero explains that "to prove is the first necessity" of an effective speaker (339). Proving or informing is the aim of the plain style, so when Scout, in despair, comes home from her first day of school to tell Atticus about how her teacher, Miss Caroline, does not understand any of the students nor Maycomb's ways, Atticus employs the plain style in his speech to her. He knows that before he can please or persuade her he must lay down the bottom line and give her the truths of the matter carefully and without embellishment.

When Scout says to Atticus that she doesn't feel well and she'd rather not "go to school anymore if it was all right with him" (Lee 29), he calmly settles in for a porch-swing talk and applies body language appropriate to a speech given in the plain style. He "crossed his legs," fingered his watchpocket as "that was the only way he could think," and "waited in amiable silence" for Scout to speak (29). Scout explains that she doesn't want to go to school—she doesn't really need to—and instead of rebuking or arguing with her, Atticus responds logically and calmly. His firm, friendly responses invite Scout to share all of the social taboos that Miss Caroline violated. Atticus then stands and takes a contemplative



Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (dir. Robert Mulligan; Universal, 1962)

stroll to one end of the porch and back before he says to her, “First of all . . . 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 . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it” (30). This quells Scout’s rage for a moment, but when she affirms that she still doesn’t want to go to school and that it’s not fair that Burris Ewell doesn’t have to go but she does, he replies, “You can’t do that, Scout . . . Sometimes it’s better to bend the law a little in special cases. In your case, the law remains rigid. So to school you must go” (30).

While Atticus may not be the dad who tackles or does anything too interesting in Scout’s and Jem’s eyes (89), he does know how to gain their respect and admiration, and with Scout he does it by using the plain style. He speaks to instruct. His words meet Cicero’s definition of the plain style by being “loose but not rambling” and they “move freely but not to wander without restraint” (*Orator* 340). Cicero writes that propriety is the “chief aim” of the plain style (340), and Atticus demonstrates propriety in this speech. He expresses his point in a way that his daughter will understand, but he avoids childish words. Furthermore, Cicero explains how the orator of the plain style “will employ only slight movements of the body” (341). As described above, Atticus only makes a few movements, and all are intentional.

Atticus’s acceptance of Tom Robinson’s court case is another example of speaking in the plain style. At school, Scout and Jem hear students make degrading remarks about Atticus’s choice to defend a Negro. When Scout comes home and asks Atticus if what the other students say is true, he has to respond, and he takes this opportunity to inform Scout—not to please her or to entertain her. He responds with the integrity that the situation warrants, and he tells

her why he is defending this man. He says, “The main one [reason] is, if I didn’t I couldn’t hold up my head in town, I couldn’t represent this country in the legislature, I couldn’t even tell you or Jem not to do something again” (Lee 75). Atticus could have told Scout that the children at school had poor upbringings, or he could have told her to simply ignore the other students, but instead he teaches her: “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 let ’em get your goat” (76).

Scout asks Atticus if they will win the trial, and when he tells her that they won’t, she asks why and he responds: “Simply because we were licked a hundred years before we started is no reason for us not to try to win” (76), and he concludes his speech by explaining to Scout that unlike during the Civil War, this time “we’re fighting our friends” (76). Atticus’s speech is restrained—a quality that Cicero attributes to the plain style. Again, Atticus tames his tongue and speaks respectfully. He gives Scout the facts without hyperbole. He calmly tells her what she needs to know in a way that she can comprehend. His final line, though restrained, exudes emotion; his speech has “the sap of life” that Cicero describes (*Orator* 339).

Students who are prepared to contribute effectively to society need to master the plain style. A high level of clarity and precision is demanded in the public sphere. So much so, in fact, that on October 13, 2010, President Obama instated the “Plain Writing Act” with the purpose of increasing the effectiveness of communication between the government and the public (United States). The goal is always to be clear, and if our students speak and write with clarity and precision they have at least two essential tools with which to face the world. To speak well and clearly is an esteemed talent. James Simpson, professor in Harvard University’s Department of English, writes that “schools of law and medicine prize English graduates” (*Department*). Similarly, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga’s English Department website includes the statement that “students [with a bachelor’s degree in English] are prepared to enter careers in marketing, technical communications, sales, public relations,

publishing, advertising, teaching, and even business positions where such skills are increasingly given premium value" (*English*). Employers seek graduates with English degrees because with the possession of such a degree comes the assumption that the student is an effective communicator. Precision and concision are the goal. Benjamin H. Austin, in the abstract to his thesis "A Plain Apology: Teaching Plain Style in First-Year Composition," writes that "teaching the plain style of writing . . . would improve both writing and thinking." William Zinsser, in *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*, tells how to write simply: "the secret of good writing is to strip every sentence to its cleanest components" (6), and he concludes his chapter "Simplicity" by writing, "Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it *is* hard" (9; italics original). Our students need and crave a challenge, and mastering the plain style is that challenge. Students can use Atticus's speeches as an example of quality plain style. He speaks in a straightforward manner that his audience understands.

### Cicero's Middle Style and Atticus's Speeches to His Neighbors

When Atticus steps off of his front porch and onto the street, he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a new speech style. While the plain style informs, the middle style informs and delights. The middle style "is fuller and somewhat more robust than the simple style" (Cicero, *Orator* 341). The middle style exudes "a minimum of vigor and a maximum of charm" (341) as implemented by Atticus when he talks to his indomitable neighbor Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose. The old woman taunts Scout and Jem and hurls ugly stares at them when they walk by her house. Atticus responds to Scout's and Jem's disdain for this woman by saying, "She's an old lady and she's ill. You just hold your head high and be a gentleman. Whatever she says to you, it's your job not to let her make you mad" (Lee 100). This comes across as an informing session, but when Atticus confronts Mrs. Dubose himself he plasters on charm. Scout recounts Atticus greeting Mrs. Dubose: "Atticus would sweep off his hat, wave gallantly at her and say, 'Good evening,

Mrs. Dubose! You look like a picture this evening'" (100). In this interaction, Atticus uses a simile, and his language, in keeping with the middle style, "possess charm to a high degree" (Cicero, *Orator* 341). His tone and delivery are robust, and his charm and wit please Scout (Lee 100). Atticus intentionally chooses the demeanor of the middle style because he knows his calm, confident charm will quell Mrs. Dubose's snobbery and excite, impress, and set an example for Jem and Scout.

Later, after Jem serves his punishment of reading to Mrs. Dubose for two hours every day except Sunday because he destroyed her camellia bushes, Atticus explains why he chose that punishment for Jem. During this time Jem witnessed Mrs. Dubose overcome a morphine addiction, and Atticus says to Jem, "I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do. Mrs. Dubose won . . . she was the bravest person I ever knew" (112). Scout also hears this speech, and undoubtedly Atticus's eloquence in portraying this message has as much of an impact on his children as the experience of reading to Mrs. Dubose has on Jem.

Not only does Atticus's style make him effective, but his persona does too. While classical rhetoricians write extensively about the techniques of effective oratory, they also emphasize the importance of the speaker's character. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle states matter-of-factly that good men are more believable than others (182). Similarly, Quintilian, an admirer of Cicero, emphasizes in *Institutes of Oratory* the importance of a speaker's morality and good character: "no man will ever be thoroughly accomplished in eloquence, who has not gained a deep insight into the impulses of human nature, and formed his moral character on the precepts of others and his own reflection" (418). As teachers, we have a golden opportunity to emphasize character building when we teach oral communication. In a short introduction to Cicero's work, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg affirm that "[t]he establishment of good character, both for the speaker and his client, was often crucial to winning a case" (283).

Atticus possesses a character worth emulating. Readers of *To Kill a Mockingbird* can safely say that

while everyone in Maycomb may not like Atticus, they cannot argue with his virtuous character. In reference to the trial, when Alexandra expresses her fear for how the town will tear Atticus apart, Miss Maudie responds, “Whether Maycomb knows it or not, we’re paying the highest tribute we can pay a man. We trust him to do right. It’s that simple” (236). We want students who will fight for truth. We want students who, when provoked by Bob Ewells, will look at situations from all perspectives and say, “if spitting in my face and threatening me saved Mayella Ewell one extra beating, that’s something I’ll gladly take” (218). As written in *Rhetoric ad Herennium*, middle style discourse is relaxed—not as ornate as the grand—but not as ordinary as the simple (249). It is an understandable, impressive dialect that invites agreement and achieves respect.

### Cicero’s Grand Style and Atticus’s Speeches to the Jurors

Once students speak fluently in the middle style they can graduate to the grand and achieve the highest level of eloquence. Our students will fit Cicero’s call for a man “who can discuss trivial matters in a plain style, matters of moderate significance in the tempered style, and weighty affairs in the grand manner” (*Orator* 343), and they can learn how to attain eloquence in the grand style by studying Atticus Finch’s speeches to the jurors. The grand “style is magnificent, opulent, stately and ornate” (342). The eloquence of the grand style has the “power to sway men’s minds and move them in every possible way” (342), and this is what Atticus Finch does in the courtroom. Like many speakers of the grand style, he is not always favored by his audience, but his job is to challenge minds and to display truth. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle explains three modes of persuasion. The first is a belief in the credibility of the speaker. The second comes through invoking an emotion in the audience. The third is the speech itself when its message and words are solid (181). Atticus accomplishes all of these.

In the courtroom, Scout describes Atticus as “speaking easily . . . . He walked slowly up and down in front of the jury, and the jury seemed to be attentive” (Lee 202). Addressing the jury as “Gentlemen,” he begins (202). Atticus’s words are tough, simple, and gripping. Tom Robinson’s

fate hangs from each word. Atticus perceives their cowardice, but he continues anyway. Speaking with “the kind of eloquence which rushes along with the roar of a mighty stream, which all look up to and admire, and which they despair of attaining” (Cicero, *Orator* 342), he continues. He reminds the jurors “that this case is not a difficult one,” that the “case should never have come to trial,” and that the case of an innocent Black man accused of raping an abused, unfortunate, White girl “is as simple as black and white” (Lee 203). He restrains his words but not his emotion when he indirectly accuses Bob Ewell of raping Mayella: “The defendant is not guilty, but someone in this courtroom is” (203). Next, in one statement, he accepts that rape has happened, shows empathy, and attacks the jurors’ morality: “I have nothing but pity in my heart for the chief witness for the state, but my pity does not extend so far as to her putting a man’s life at stake, which she has done in an effort to get rid of her own guilt” (203). Cicero describes an orator of the grand style as one who “seems to be scarcely sane” (*Orator* 343), and for a man to voice what Atticus does may seem crazy, but Atticus must expose these truths. He speaks blatantly about the racism Maycomb’s citizens harbor: “She [Mayella Ewell] has committed no crime, she has merely broken a rigid and time-honored code of our society . . . . She must destroy the evidence of her offense. . . . Tom Robinson, a human being. She must put Tom Robinson away from her” (Lee 203). While Atticus’s speech may not be as ornate as some in the grand style, his words are impressive, and he speaks with an unrelenting momentum absent in the middle style.


After showing the black-and-white truth that Maycomb citizens deny, Atticus, with unparalleled conviction, continues addressing the jurors and with a final firm plea for the justice he knows they know is due, and he says, “A court is only as sound as its jury, and a jury is only as sound as the men who make it up. I am confident that you gentlemen will review without passion the evidence you have heard, come to a decision, and restore this defendant to his family. In the name of God, do your duty” (205). Every time I read those words and hear Gregory Peck’s voice from the 1962 film as he leans into the jury box, I sink into my seat and picture myself looking up at him, speechless, nodding my head obediently. While some scholars may argue that the language

in this speech is not ornate enough to be considered grand, I argue that the momentum, rhythm, and poignancy of this speech make it grand.

Cicero claims that an orator must know both sides of the argument and also that “the complete and finished orator is he who on any matter whatever can speak with fullness and variety” (*De Oratore* 297). Atticus does—in one speech he employs irony, mentions tradition, asks questions, and references Thomas Jefferson, Einstein, and God. Furthermore, Cicero describes a man of the grand style to be one who tries to work his audience into a “fiery passion” and “seems to be a raving madman among the sane, like a drunken reveler in the midst of sober men” (*Orator* 343). Cicero’s definition almost implies a man who has lost control, and while Atticus does meet a lot of the qualities laid out by Cicero regarding the grand style, he is never out of control. He speaks with an ignited passion because he believes what he says. He seeks to move his audience, and even though they do not give him the answer his speech warrants, I am certain that if we could investigate the heart of each man in the jury box we would see pride overruling truth. They believe Atticus. But when dealing with men, Atticus knows, and our students must learn, that reason will not always win. However, eloquent speakers such as Atticus attack men’s minds to the point where even if there isn’t outward approval or acknowledgment, there is inward change.

### An Orator's Life

I analyze Atticus’s speeches with my students to reveal a speaker’s life. Some of my students may want to be professional, public orators, and in the courtroom Atticus Finch reveals the challenges, stimulation, and moral responsibility of such a career. In Book I of *De Oratore*, Cicero writes about the scope of oratory’s influence: “there is to my mind no more excellent thing than the power, by means of oratory, to get a hold on assemblies of men, win their good will, direct their inclinations wherever the speaker wishes, or divert them from whatever he wishes” (293). Teenagers want to be persuasive and be heard, and Cicero’s rhetoric shows them how. The skill of oratory is so widespread that if

our students could catch a glimpse of the good they could do with it, they would be on fire. Atticus shows glimpses of this good, and Cicero also does when he writes, “the wise control of the complete orator is that which chiefly upholds not only his own dignity, but the safety of countless individuals and of the entire State” (*De Oratore* 294). Oratory is a humanistic art. Once acquired, it is a skill we can use to better ourselves, our friends, and our communities, just as Atticus Finch does. As we, with the help of Atticus Finch, educate students on how to be eloquent and how to employ the three styles of oratory and other classical techniques, they will be equipped with the tools needed to incite change in their spheres. 

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