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# The Times Are-a-Changin': Portrayal of Atticus Finch Across Harper Lee's Novels

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### The Times Are a-Changin': Portrayal of Atticus Finch Across Harper Lee's Novels

Atticus Finch, beloved father and successful lawyer in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is presented in a different light in her second novel, *Go Set a Watchman*. "In "Mockingbird," Atticus was a role model for his children, Scout and Jem- their North Star, their hero, the most potent moral force in their lives. In "Watchman," he becomes the source of grievous pain and disillusionment" (Kakutani).

In Harper Lee's 1960 novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch is the most successful lawyer in Maycomb, AL during the 1930s. When he takes a rape case defending an African American man against a white woman, the town doubts his sanity. The townspeople speculate that Atticus has taken the case for the sake of justice, possibly even racial equality. He goes against the town's unspoken racial stigma to defend Tom Robinson. However, Atticus' views on race relations seem to have flipped one-hundred-eighty degrees in Lee's 2015 novel *Go Set a Watchman*. Readers see a dark side of Atticus when he belittles the beloved heroine Jean Louise, questions her intelligence on race relations and the NAACP, attends a Klan meeting, admits to being pro-segregation, and uses the word "nigger." Atticus is not the justice-fueled man anymore. Atticus Finch externalizes his inner ideology in *Go Set a Watchman*. This is evident when Finch compares himself to Tom Heflin, owns a pamphlet belittling African American intelligence, and varies in his treatment of Calpurnia.

During the time that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written, *Brown v. Board* was a large issue. Some readers believe that *Mockingbird* was written as a beacon of hope during the time of *Brown v. Board*. "Mockingbird was published 12 years after the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights, six years after *Brown v Board of Education*, and five after the Montgomery bus boycott... Yes, Tom Robinson is found guilty – but the jury stays out for hours, not minutes. The message is hope” (Chakrabarti). While it was written to be hopeful, it’s also written to participate in the *Brown v. Board* discourse and spur change through that hope.

The need for that hope continues today with the Black Lives Matter movement. Now, there are race riots similar to that in the sixties. Similarly to Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, African American men are being falsely accused of crimes in order to promote the idea of white supremacy. Trayvon Martin, a seventeen-year-old African American, was shot by a white man for supposedly looking suspicious. Michael Brown, a nineteen-year-old African American, was shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. From these among several other unnecessary deaths stemmed the Black Lives Matter movement in 2015. The movement made people question their political correctness not just as individuals but also as an institution. Changes for political correctness began sprouting around the country. “The South Carolina legislature took down the Confederate battle flag from its statehouse grounds after days of emotional debate. Protests have erupted around the country after police shootings of unarmed black men” (Alter). The conversation of race from the sixties was revived and change was implemented because of it.

Lee’s first novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, introduces readers to young Scout Finch as she discovers the meaning of justice, the cruelty of life as an African American in Maycomb, ladyhood, and boys; and solves the mystery of her curious neighbor. As this coming of age novel unfolds, readers realize that the narrator is an older Jean Louise Finch recounting events from her childhood. The thing that Jean Louise loves most in the world is her father Atticus. Atticus Finch is the only man in Maycomb with a higher education, or at least the only one that uses their

education. Because of Atticus' upper-level education, bibliophilia, and occupation, Atticus is a clear outlier in Maycomb society. Maycomb is a place where "there was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go," meaning Maycombians are relaxed southern people, happily stagnating (Lee 6). Lawyers, however, especially Atticus, cannot stagnate. The town looks to Atticus for advice, counseling, and as a quasi-figurehead. Lee creates him as a myth, the perfect man. He's an outstanding father, member of his community, neighbor, and lawyer. His presence in the courtroom is demanding, rational, and concise. Readers of *Mockingbird*, such as Shami Chakrabarti, were so inspired by Lee's fictional character that they attended law school in hopes to become the mythical Atticus. Chakrabarti, now the director of Liberty, a civil rights liberties advocacy organization, read *To Kill a Mockingbird* sometime in school. She was transported by the lawful attorney and inspired to follow in his footsteps. "I wasn't the first led into law by Atticus Finch, and I won't be the last...It is this simplicity and lack of pretension that helps [*Mockingbird*] pack a considerable punch. It is accessible, touchingly human and intimate; it also tackles enduring questions of discrimination and injustice" (Chakrabarti). The Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* has potential to influence lives outside of the novel that will fight for justice.

While the Atticus of *Mockingbird* inspired middle school students to pursue law degrees, the Atticus in Lee's latest novel erases any positive thoughts we once held toward Mr. Finch. Lee's latest novel *Go Set a Watchman* recently came out on bookstore shelves in 2015. Critics have theorized that *Watchman* was published sneakily without Harper Lee's consent. In 2007, Harper Lee suffered a stroke, leaving her with a loss of memory and in need of constant assistance. After the release of *Watchman*, literary nerds flocked to their local bookstores in hopes to re-experience *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Readers were confused on what *Watchman* was

meant to be- a sequel, a prequel, a companion novel, or two separate novels? *Watchman* was written as a first draft of *Mockingbird*. Lee's editor was more interested in the joyous flashbacks rather than the harsh tone and heavy message. So, Lee scrapped *Go Set a Watchman* and gave her editor *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Although *Watchman* seems like it would be merely a first draft, it functions more as a sequel. The shift of time between the two novels creates a linear timeline of the rift in the Finch family. *Watchman* features a twenty-six-year-old Jean Louise Finch with a job, a life outside of Maycomb, and a love interest. *Mockingbird* revolves around the messy antics of a six-year-old Scout Finch as she experiences the rawness of childhood and is subtly introduced to life's much heavier burdens. *Mockingbird* is a coming of age novel. *Watchman* is a novel of disillusionment, pulling back the curtain to reveal the truth. In *Mockingbird*, the Finch family was full of joy as the children ran and played in the summer. Now that Jem is dead, the family has distanced themselves from one another.

Several critics and young readers believe that Atticus was always a racist. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, life is finally settling down for Scout after the Tom Robinson trial. Jean Louise flashes back, commenting "Cecil Jacobs asked me one time if Atticus was a Radical. When I asked Atticus, Atticus was so amused I was rather annoyed, but he said he wasn't laughing at me. He said, 'You tell Cecil Jacobs I'm as radical as Cotton Tom Heflin'" (Lee 287). A former senator of Alabama, James Thomas Heflin, "shot and seriously wounded a black man who confronted him on a Washington streetcar. Although indicted, Heflin succeeded in having the charges dismissed. In subsequent home-state campaigns, he cited that shooting as one of his major career accomplishments" (senate.gov). In other words, Atticus Finch, beloved lawyer and father, equates himself with a prideful, racist, killer. But that's the opposite of how he's

presented in the rest of *Mockingbird*. Atticus is the loving father, the most intelligent man in town, and a gentle soul. Or is he? Could it be that the noble, kind Atticus that we saw in *Mockingbird* was only portrayed that way because we were seeing him from the eyes of his six-year-old daughter?

In *Watchman*, Jean Louise, now twenty-six and worldly, discovers *The Black Plague* pamphlet in Atticus' office. It is then Jean Louise realizes that her father is not the man she believed him to be. This publication states that African Americans "couldn't help being inferior to the white race because their skulls are thicker and their brain-pans shallower" (Lee 102). In an attempt to upkeep the typical southern culture that whites are superior, a southerner must create a pamphlet belittling the anatomy of African Americans, as if God created them to be lesser. Jean Louise's gut reaction to the pamphlet directly contradicts how she was raised. She later verbalizes this.

Never in my life until today did I hear the word "nigger" spoken by a member of my family...When I grew up, and I did grow up with black people, they were Calpurnia, Zeebo the garbage collector, Tom the yard man, and whatever else their names were...They were poor, they were diseased and dirty, some were lazy and shiftless, but never in my life was I given the idea that I should...mistreat one and get away with it...I was taught never to take advantage of anybody who was less fortunate than myself, whether he be less fortunate in brains, wealth or social position" (Lee 177-78).

In *Mockingbird*, Atticus never says a cruel word against Calpurnia, the Finch's African American housekeeper and nanny. When Jem dies, Calpurnia leaves, and Jean Louise attempts to reconnect with her by visiting her in *Watchman*. Due to the tense race relations of the time, and

Calpurnia's negative feelings toward the entitled Finch family due to the tension, Calpurnia refuses to speak to Jean Louise. "What the Finches saw as Calpurnia's loyalty was mostly a reflection of their power over her and her family. With Atticus more adamant about his segregationist beliefs, Calpurnia is constrained from telling Jean Louise any truth at all. Integrity and honesty are shown in *Watchman* to be mainly for the powerful" (Nichols). In *Watchman*, Atticus no longer treats Calpurnia like the family he once claimed her to be. When Atticus has the opportunity to offer legal help to Calpurnia's family, he accepts but not for the right reasons. After the influx of NAACP lawyers, Atticus feels the need to be the opposing lawyer to them, the one representing white justice. Jean Louise reflects that "not long ago, Atticus would have done it simply from his goodness, he would have done it for Cal" (Lee 150).

Though Atticus equates himself to Tom Heflin, readers choose to imagine Atticus by his portrayal in the *To Kill a Mockingbird* film. "Gregory Peck in the 1962 movie, he was the perfect man- the ideal father and principled idealist, an enlightened, almost saintly believer in justice and fairness" (Kakutani). Those who have both read the novel and seen the film tend to favor the Gregory Peck version. Why do people choose the film version over the book, a rare choice? In an interview with Gregory Peck, he said "[Viewers] were young when they first saw it, and they became determined to serve the cause of justice and fight against bigotry and ignorance...I think it's the warmth between the widowed father and his two kids and the way he spoke to them, like young adults. He didn't patronize them, and he always made time for them. I think that probably means more to teenagers today than the civil rights issue" (Goodman).

Differing points of view in the novels create different emotions about Atticus. In *Mockingbird*, the story is told through the eyes of a six-year-old Scout Finch, who looks up to her father. In *Watchman*, the same Scout Finch, now Jean Louise Finch, doesn't reveal all of her

feelings to us directly. Readers are presented with facts and he said/she said, from an omniscient third-party narrator. In doing this, readers are presented with unbiased facts and conversations in *Watchman*, thus creating a more logical and less emotional train of thought and relations between characters. When Jean Louis returns home to Maycomb, the warm and fuzzy environment previously depicted in *Mockingbird* is gone. Aunt Alexandra harshly criticizes her adult niece, Atticus is presented as less loving and more frustrated, all of which adds to the sense of isolationism.

I believe that Atticus was confused on his ideas of race relations and human rights when he was assigned the Tom Robinson case. The judge must have known he was the only lawyer in town mildly willing to accept a case defending an African American man against a white woman. Atticus knows this could ruin his reputation in Maycomb as well as his career. So, why take the Tom Robinson case at all? When Scout looks up to her respected father and asks why he took the Tom Robinson case, knowing the chances that he could lose, Atticus replies “The main one 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...every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that effects him personally. This one’s mine” (Lee 86). I posit that Atticus, an outlier in Maycomb, empathizes with otherness. When assigned the Tom Robinson case and learning of his disability of his arm and his race, Atticus fought to see that Tom’s name was cleared of false accusations. It was not a fight for African Americans but a fight for Tom. It had less to do with justice and more with honor.

Although *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* were published fifty-five years apart, the cultures of the generations in which they were published deal with similar issues. Both novels completed in the sixties. Following the idea that it wasn’t published by Lee, whoever



published it did so in 2015 because that's when it needed to be published. "'Watchman,' which was completed in 1957, is landing in the middle of the debate, like a literary artifact out of a time capsule from a period when the country was divided over many of the same issues" (Alter). This means that the publication of *Watchman* in 2015 was intentional due to the recent race riots, protests, movements, and changes.

Maycomb, Alabama has a clear hierarchy to their classes. At the top, there are the wealthy white people, typically those that have lived in the area for generations, own land, and have a well-known presence in town. Underneath those are the middle class whites, still owning land and making enough money to have disposable income. Beneath them is the lowest class of white people- making little to no money, typically filthy and disassociated with the upper classes. Even further down hierarchy are the African Americans. Mixing classes was a sin. Therefore, to defend a disabled black man against a white woman, no matter how trashy or low they are in society, was equal to blasphemy in the South. The Ewells are race traitors.<sup>1</sup> Their daughter slept with a black man. That places them in the same square of the hierarchy as the African Americans. Atticus realizes this clear division of hierarchy, and that is what sparks the change in him. He no longer fights for honor or justice. He fights to see that the races aren't mixing and everyone is staying in their predetermined class. From this conversation and the recent movements and protests, questions such as "would you let your daughter date a black guy," "how would you feel if your grandchildren were mixed," "wouldn't that be a disgrace" arose. Presidents began spouting "Let's build a wall to make America great again!" Where is the hope? "With luck, Go Set a Watchman will introduce a whole new generation to To Kill a

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Ewell's full name is Robert E. Lee Ewell, named after the Civil War Confederate Army general. This introduces him as the illogical racist.

Mockingbird...Harper Lee's messages of respect for human dignity, equality, and above all, hope are as urgent now as they were in 1960" (Chakrabarti).

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