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KILL A MOCKINGBIRD AND GO SET A WATCHMAN**

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ADOLESCENCE, RACISM AND OTHERNESS IN HARPER LEE'S *TO KILL A
MOCKINGBIRD* AND *GO SET A WATCHMAN*

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By
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In the years since the publication of Harper Lee's, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), and *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), millions of readers have sought out these stories. But why? Perhaps it is the appeal of identity formation through a coming-of-age story or a bildungsroman tale. Perhaps it is the desire for the reader to identify with characters presenting as upstanding citizens of the world they inhabit. Or, maybe it is the intrigue of characters who are deemed outcasts or Others. Conversely, it could also draw readership across decades because of the challenges raised by the historical context of the story—leading readers to believe we, as a society and as a culture, have progressed beyond. This essay will examine how *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* depict and confront adolescence, racism, and Otherness. This essay will take into account historical context and Harper Lee's life before analyzing events and characters that depict and confront adolescence, racism and Otherness.

Historical Context

Before this essay delves into how *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* depict and confront adolescence, racism and Otherness the historical contexts in which the books were set and written will be outlined in order to understand Harper Lee, her father, and the characters discussed in this paper from both of her novels. The historical context of *To Kill a Mockingbird* was in part molded by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Harper Lee's hometown of Monroeville and the fictional setting of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Maycomb, felt the despair of the Great Depression. The Great Depression impacted all social classes and occupations of Alabama with those involved in agriculture and banking in the rural South hit particularly hard. In 1932,

incomes were 58 percent of their 1929 levels. In that same period of time, the income of rural Alabama farmers was only 39 percent of their 1929 income.¹

Despite the fact in some cases Blacks and poor whites worked together for the first time to better their situations, the wild instability of the economic climate, competition for jobs, and long--standing racial fear only fueled the bigotry of the rural South. Many white Southerners reacted violently to the instability and perceived threats to the order and meaning of Southern life. Fears of "...economic collapse, unionism, Communism, Rooseveltism, or a breakdown of the class and, especially, racial boundaries that defined their society"² stoked the flames of hate that is evident in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The preeminent threat to white domination in the South came from, according to the dominant whites, the beastly desire of Black men for sexual intercourse with white females. Harper Lee depicted and confronted that fear in *To Kill a Mockingbird* with the rape trial of Tom Robinson. Although fictionalized, the trial of Tom Robinson was influenced by and rooted in an historic court case in Scottsboro, Alabama in 1931.

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The court case, known as the Scottsboro Trial, was the result of an incident on March 25, 1931 when nine Black boys were arrested as they exited a freight train in Scottsboro.⁴ The boys were charged with raping two white females named Ruby Bates and Victoria Price. On April 6,

¹ Claudia Durst Johnson, *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries* (New York: Twayne, 1994), 4.

² Ibid.

³ *Fearful Symmetry*, dir. by Charles Kiselyak (1998; Universal Home Video, 1998 dvd).

⁴ Joseph Crespino, *Atticus Finch, The Biography: Harper Lee, Her Father, and the Making of an American Icon* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 17.

1931, the nine defendants were escorted by a 118 member military detachment to the courthouse. To the population of Scottsboro, and by extension the all-male, all-white jury and judge, it did not matter if the boys actually raped the girls, were present while a rape occurred, or even *wanted* to rape the girls. Rather, it was merely the possibility for or *desire* of a Black male to have sex with a white female that should result in the death of at least one Black male. Regardless of the reputation of the females involved in this case, the women were still white and needed to be protected. Moreover, it was the overarching belief in Scottsboro, and elsewhere in the South, that all white women needed to be protected from the sexual desires of Black males.⁵ Unlike Tom Robinson, the boys of the Scottsboro Trial did not die as a result of the trial. After decades of appeals, all nine of the accused were exonerated or pardoned of the rapes. The fight for white superiority was illuminated in the Scottsboro Trial. White superiority was not exclusive to Scottsboro. The 1901 Alabama state constitution attempted to codify it and as has been written in this essay, Harper Lee's father advocated for it in the *Monroe Journal* in the 1940s.⁶ Historically, white superiority continued as a guiding principle for the South as is depicted in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*.

Like the Scottsboro Trial, which was central to Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* and resulting fight for desegregation were fundamental influences on *Go Set a Watchman*. The conflict between the adult Scout in Jean Louise and her father

⁵"The First Scottsboro Trials," University of Missouri-Kansas City, http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/scottsboro/SB_HRrep.html.

⁶ Wayne Flynt, "Nelle Harper Lee on Law," *Alabama Law Review* 69, no. 3 (Spring 2018): 634-635.

Atticus Finch were rooted in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court led by Chief Justice Warren, ruled on the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, sending the message that separate was not equal in education.⁷ Although the ruling was historic and the impetus for subsequent events of the decade that led to the desegregation of all public aspects of Southern life, it was issued with the ambiguous directive, "...that racial integration be enforced 'with all deliberate speed'."⁸ The following year, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Mrs. Rosa L. Parks was arrested for violating a law that segregated the busses of Montgomery. Parks' decision to not sit in the back of the bus led to the start of the year-long plus Montgomery bus boycott. In the midst of the bus boycott, Lee's University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa was experiencing the effects of *Brown v. Board* and putting up a fight. That same year, two black women, Pollie Ann Myers and Autherine Lucy, had their admission to the University of Alabama overturned when their skin color came to light. Following a lawsuit by the women, that the school unsuccessfully appealed, Lucy enrolled in 1956 while Myers withdrew because of pressure. A scene similar to that of the Scottsboro Trial 25 years earlier played out in Tuscaloosa. Thousands of whites from inside and outside of Alabama rallied the weekend before classes were to start. During the demonstrations, the crowds chanted, "keep 'Bama white" and intimidated Blacks in cars by throwing rocks and fire crackers. The mob even went so far as to harass the university president at his home. Despite all of the violence leading

⁷ Trevor Cook, "'Well, Heck': Confounding Grace in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*," *Christianity & Literature* 66, no. 4 (2017): 39.

⁸ Rachel Watson, "The View from the Porch: Race and the Limits of Empathy in the Film *To Kill a Mockingbird*," *Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 3/4: 440.

up to the first day of class, the authorities were unprepared, and the mobs kept Lucy from school.

⁹ The feelings evoked by the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and the subsequent challenges from the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the desegregation of the University of Alabama were paramount in the conflict between Jean Louise and Atticus Finch as he articulated, "...I'd like for my state to be left alone to keep house without advice from the NAACP...Do you want Negroes by the carload in our schools and churches and theatres? Do you want them in our world?"¹⁰

Adolescence

The discussion about how *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* depict and confront adolescence must include consideration of the books' author Harper Lee, who is represented in the books respectively as Scout and Jean Louise. On April 28, 1926, Nelle Harper Lee was born in Monroeville, Alabama. As the youngest child of Amasa Coleman Lee and Frances Finch Lee, Harper Lee's childhood and adolescence would be influenced by societal forces that would shape her life and her writing.

Harper Lee's adolescence and coming of age were most easily seen in her writing, beginning with her first published pieces. After graduating from high school in 1944, Harper Lee attended one year at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama. During this time, she contributed to the school's literary magazine, *The Prelude* and published her first pieces of writing. "A Wink at Justice" and "Nightmare" were the titles of the stories. Both touched on

⁹ Johnson, *Threatening Boundaries*, 12.

¹⁰ Harper Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), 245.

racial and political themes that would find their way into her later work, including *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*.¹¹

Upon close review of those early writings, it became evident that Lee's future novels would address themes such as racism, the application of law, and justice. In his book *Atticus Finch: The Biography*, Joseph Crespino included a summary of Lee's first piece, "A Wink at Justice":

"...the story of a shrewd country judge who presides over the trial of eight black men arrested for gambling. The narrator views the action from the courtroom gallery...The judge has the men hold out the palms of their hands so that he can inspect them. He dismisses three of the men and sentences the others to sixty days in jail. When the narrator asks the judge afterward how he had come to his decision, he explains that the hands of the men he dismissed had calluses, which for the judge, marked them as farmhands likely to have families to support, whereas the hands of the men sentenced were smooth, suggesting that they were professional gamblers. 'Satisfied?', the judge snaps. 'Satisfied', the narrator nods."¹²

In Lee's other piece from *The Prelude*, the three paragraph short story "Nightmare", recounted a memory of a lynching overtaking a daydreaming school girl's mind. Standing on one side of a fence, the girl realized that a lynching was taking place on the other side. Upset, the girl ran off, screaming and crying to her bedroom only to hear the lynchers speaking proudly of their accomplishment as they passed by.¹³

In "A Wink at Justice", we are first introduced to Lee's use of a courtroom as a setting to depict and confront her evolving adolescent beliefs in regards to race, law, and justice. By using

¹¹ Joseph Crespino, *Atticus Finch*, 33-34.

¹² Ibid, 34.

¹³ Ibid, 33.

the setting of a courtroom, Lee is tapping into her experiences as a child whose family was involved with law and justice; her father and a sister were both lawyers and Lee would also attend law school. These themes resurfaced in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*. The intellectual awakening of adolescence is confronted in both “A Wink at Justice” and “Nightmare”. “A Wink at Justice” like *To Kill a Mockingbird* educated its narrator on society with a lighter touch than “Nightmare”. The lynching in “Nightmare” reappeared as an attempted lynching in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. However, the trauma and emotion of “Nightmare” aligned more closely with *Go Set a Watchman*. Lee’s first two published works illustrated how she was confronting her adolescent challenges surrounding race, law and justice by drawing on childhood memories.

By the summer of 1947, perhaps as a result of socio-political changes taking place around her at the University of Alabama, Harper Lee had also changed, continuing her coming of age. She was no longer a regular fixture with her writing friends or her sorority. The few classmates that can recall Lee described her as quiet, private and defiant in her dress and appearance. After spending a summer studying abroad in England, Lee attended the University of Alabama for one more semester before giving up on a law degree. She returned home to Monroeville for a short time and left for New York in 1949 to join her friend Truman Capote.¹⁴

After several years of writing, Lee delivered a manuscript for her first novel to J.B. Lippincott Company in 1957. Lee’s editor, though, was not happy with what she considered a handful of short stories instead of an end-to-end novel. After advice and pressure, Lee made

¹⁴ Ibid, 58 & 60.

substantial adjustments to the draft, rewriting and reorganizing much of the text.¹⁵ By November of 1959, Lee's novel was finished, titled, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and was set for release in the summer of 1960.¹⁶

To Kill a Mockingbird is a story about a girl, her family, friend and town and how each responded and is affected by the trial of a black man accused of raping a white female. The girl, Jean Louise Finch who is better known to her family as Scout, was believed to be based on Harper Lee. Lee narrated the story through an adult Jean Louise, but it is focalized through the young girl, Scout. *To Kill a Mockingbird* analyzed and considered relationships between characters and place, so Lee used Jean Louise to mark signposts in the development of those relationships.¹⁷

Scout was a tomboy who resisted the feminine trappings and norms placed upon her by her community. She fought with boys, refused to wear dresses, and was angered when her brother Jem, who was once her best friend, began to exclude her from his "boy" activities.¹⁸ Although Scout's increased understanding of her community, her father, and Others is clear in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the view of her father as different from the rest of Maycomb's

¹⁵ Michal Choinski; Maciej Eder and Jan Rybicki, "Harper Lee and Other People: A Stylometric Diagnosis," *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 70-70, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 357.

¹⁶ Claudia Durst Johnson, *Threatening Boundaries*, xi.

¹⁷ Julia Pond, "No one Likes to Feel Like and Adolescent: Genre Resistance in Harper Lee's Novels," *Mississippi Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2020): 83-84.

¹⁸ Harper Lee, Foreword to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

citizens—that he is extraordinary—was left intact and heightened at the end of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

While Scout's development is an important theme in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, it was her brother Jem who experienced the coming of age. By the middle of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Jem began to differentiate himself from Scout and identifies as an adult, speaking to Scout, "That's because you can't hold something in your mind but a little while...It's different with grown folks, we—." ¹⁹ Additionally, as adolescence is typically marked by physical change and this was highlighted near the end of the book when the narrator remembers, "His eyebrows were becoming heavier, and I noticed a new slimness about his body. He was growing taller." ²⁰

Scout's coming of age and transformation occurred not as a physical change, but as realization in *Go Set a Watchman* as Jean Louise. ²¹ In the case of Scout's coming of age, instead of the clear physical transformation that we see with Jem's broken arm, there was instead a visual transformation of her name on the page, switching to Jean Louise in *Go Set a Watchman*. In *Go Set a Watchman*, Jean Louise is disillusioned with her hometown and her father is challenged to differentiate herself from them and form her own identity. Like most readers, she was shattered by the reality that her father does not live up to her moral expectations. She had to

¹⁹ Ibid, 157.

²⁰ Ibid, 258.

²¹ Pond, "Adolescent," 87-88.

face the fact that her father was imperfect, with blind spots, and not the paragon of virtue many believed him to be.²²

Harper Lee writes of an almost grown up, 26 year-old Jean Louise²³ taking the train from New York City to her childhood home of Maycomb, Alabama to visit her aging father.²⁴ After living in New York, Jean Louise finally clashed with her father, the revered Atticus Finch. Jean Louise's return home quickly found her appalled at the pervasive racism that inhabits everyone she knows in Maycomb. Her old schoolmates, her boyfriend Hank, her aunt, uncle, and—to the shock and horror of both her and fans of *To Kill a Mockingbird*—her father Atticus Finch, were all racists.²⁵ Jean Louise's shock was shared by most readers of *Go Set a Watchman* and attracted attention to the book contributing to its popularity.

Jean Louise comes of age in *Go Set a Watchman* questioning the culture and people who produced her.²⁶ In the end, *Go Set a Watchman* is a story of a loyal white daughter of the South who must confront the paradox of being from a culture but no longer of it. Harper Lee, like Jean Louise in *Go Set a Watchman*, struggled with calling up the moral courage to expose and condemn the South. Lee engaged the fight for racial justice by writing *Go Set a Watchman*, and

²² Nicholas Buck, "Harper Lee and Her Two Books: A Comparative Essay on *To Kill a Mockingbird* & *Go Set a Watchman*," *Encounter* 76, no. 1 (2016): 52.

²³ Judy M. Cornet, "Four Reasons Why Readers Hate *Go Set a Watchman* (And One Reason Why I Don't)," *Cumberland Law Review* 47, no. 1 (2016): 13.

²⁴ Dwight Tanner, "'She Forgot': Obscuring White Privilege and Colorblindness in Harper Lee's Novels," *South Atlantic Review* 84, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 55.

²⁵ Cornet, "Four Reasons Why," 13.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

she made herself vulnerable with her condemnation. Harper Lee, not Atticus or Jean Louise, was the one exposing the institutions and systems of racism that are invisible to most. *Go Set a Watchman* makes Lee's thoughts clear, whereas *To Kill a Mockingbird* expressed the same feelings, but much more subversively, pushing the story of the children to the foreground leaving the confrontation of racism partially obscured.

Continuing the discomfort for *To Kill a Mockingbird* fans, Jean Louise witnesses Atticus at a citizens' council meeting. The council meeting takes place in the courthouse where Atticus, according to *Go Set a Watchman*, was said to have successfully defended Tom Robinson. This was in direct contrast to what actually transpired in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Similarly to the narrator in "A Wink at Justice" and Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Jean Louise learned a truth from the courthouse balcony. As she had watched her father defend Tom Robinson in the same courthouse as a child, in *Go Set a Watchman*, a maturing Jean Louise observed her father as he sat at the right hand of a guest speaker promoting segregationist fears.²⁷ These segregationist fears were familiar to Harper Lee from her own experiences living in Alabama as a child through early adulthood.

Akin to the girl in Harper Lee's "Nightmare", Jean Louise returned to her childhood bedroom in *Go Set a Watchman*. While there, it was revealed, "...all her life she had been with a visual defect which had gone unnoticed and neglected by herself and those closest to her: she was born color blind." Jean Louise was not literally color blind; rather this was a nod to the figurative kind frequently cited as a valuable lesson to be learned from *To Kill a Mockingbird*

²⁷ Tanner, "She Forgot," 59.

and a trait commonly claimed over the decades by those who deemed themselves progressive.²⁸ Jean Louise will go on to see how racism pervaded Maycomb and ascribed it to changes within her—changes that are connected to her moving away to New York. “What was this blight that had come down over the people she loved? Did she see it in relief because she had been away from it? Had it always been under her nose for her to see if she had only looked? No, not the last.”²⁹ She had become an outsider and that complicated her understanding of not just her hometown, but her father and herself. Racism existed in Maycomb, but what she believed to be true about her father was false, but not necessarily hidden, just never questioned.³⁰

Go Set a Watchman can make *To Kill a Mockingbird* uncomfortable to think about, as it caused many to feel like they have been duped and tricked much like Jean Louise felt in *Go Set a Watchman*. What Scout realized about her father in *Go Set a Watchman* was that he was not perfect. Rather, he was, at best, flawed the whole time. At worst, Atticus was a hypocrite who she held as the ideal human.

Our first impression of Jean Louise in *Go Set a Watchman* is that of a moral beacon as compared to other characters, because when she encounters a decline in race relations in her hometown she was the only one who wonders why it happened. In the end Jean Louise is not who we thought she was, because her consciousness was just a facsimile of Atticus'. When Jean Louise's beliefs diverged from Atticus's, her beliefs and morality were blurred. As a result, Jean

²⁸ Ibid, 59-60.

²⁹ Harper Lee, *Go Set a Watchman*, 150.

³⁰ Ibid, 69.

Louise resorted to adolescent name calling, labeling her father a “...double dealing, ring-tailed old son of a bitch.”³¹ She severed relationships, breaking off her engagement to her fiancé, and fleeing because she considered the beliefs of others nonsensical. Dr. Finch explained to her, “You’ve no doubt heard some pretty offensive talk since you’ve been home, but instead of getting on your charger and blindly striking it down, you turned and ran. You said, in effect, ‘I don’t like the way these people do, so I have no time for them.’”³²

It is easy to make connections between Jean Louise in *Go Set a Watchman* and the life of Harper Lee. Support for these connections are Jean Louise’s departure from home for New York City, Amasa Lee’s similarities in career and temperament to Atticus Finch, and Lee’s own eventual return to her southern hometown of Monroeville, Alabama. *Go Set a Watchman* does not obscure the impact of Lee’s life on its story—it leaves no doubt that the story is about a young woman’s ambivalence and disillusionment with her father and hometown. *Go Set a Watchman* was the story of the delayed adolescent experience of Jean Louise, presenting an adult in Jean Louise who was still growing up.³³

Lee’s second book displayed the growth that Scout must undertake to become the mature narrator found in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Lee’s characterization of Jean Louise in *Go Set a Watchman* indicated Jean Louise’s growth from child to adult in the novel. As opposed to *To Kill*

³¹ Ibid, 253.

³² Bima Atmana and Sumitro, “Genetic Structuralism Analysis in “Go Set A Watchman” by Harper Lee,” *Utopia y Praxis Latinoamericana* 25, no. Extra 1 (2020): 488.

Lee, *Go Set a Watchman*, 267.

³³ Pond, “Adolescent,” 89.

a Mockingbird, in which Scout remains a child, *Go Set a Watchman* employed a protagonist who, although in her twenties, had outgrown childhood but continued to search actively for peace with her own identity, a paramount adolescent concern. Lee positioned her protagonist between a number of statuses or roles, Northerner and Southerner, feminine and masculine, daughter and wife, and possibly the most important in *Go Set a Watchman*: child and adult. One factor for Jean Louise's delayed identity formation was her decision to move to New York City. Instead of casting her identity in New York City, Jean Louise returned to *Go Set a Watchman*'s Maycomb confused over what she wants and who she is regionally. Her time in New York acted as a pause in her formation process, and through *Go Set a Watchman*, it became obvious that only among her family and surrounded by her childhood memories can she decide what to incorporate into her adult identity and what to push away.³⁴

During her visit home, Jean Louise took note of changes in Maycomb. Her eyes were opened to changes between the Black and white citizens, the white community seemed more racist, and the Black community was retreating further among themselves. She denied the possibility that this was the way it had always been in Maycomb. Readers will realize that what is happening with the Black and white communities of Maycomb were not changes in the town, but in Jean Louise, who has grown old enough to recognize relations between the races that have always existed. Jean Louise has a similar realization about her father. She was shaken to find out that the most influential individual in her life, her father, was not who she thought he was. An adolescent crisis is set in motion when Jean Louise is awakened to her father's racist ways.³⁵

³⁴ Ibid, 90-91.

³⁵ Ibid, 92.

In *Go Set a Watchman*, Jean Louise's uncle, Dr. Finch, recognized the adolescent crisis of disillusionment, differentiation, and identity formation when he told her “When you happened along and saw him doing something that seemed to you to be the very antithesis of his conscience—your conscience—you literally could not stand it. You had to kill yourself, or he had to kill you to get you functioning as a separate entity.”³⁶ Dr. Finch was telling Jean Louise that in order to mature into an adult, she must not rely on the ideas of others. Alternately, she must develop her own identity even when doing so will be painful as she finds faults in her previously held truths.

Jean Louise’s disillusionment with her world was evident in her losing faith in the system of automatic transmission of the ideology that has shaped her. Jean Louise has moved to New York and doing so has compromised her ability to automatically accept her hometown and the ideology of those in it. Upon her arrival to Maycomb she is challenged by an ideology that has shaped her. The discomfort and literal sickness she feels as the novel progresses stems from the problem that, despite her resistance to this ideology, she cannot refute that it has had a deep impact on her worldview.³⁷

Go Set a Watchman emphasized individual identity and consciousness. Although Jean Louise is legally an adult, the book captured her transition from childhood to adult responsibility. Part of her responsibility was to raise awareness of the shortcomings of institutions and laws that were believed to be inherently just. Lee herself came to realize that laws can perpetuate injustice.

³⁶ Lee, *Go Set a Watchman*, 265.

³⁷ Cook, ““Well, Heck,”” 661.

Lee, like Jean Louise in *Go Set a Watchman* grappled with calling up the moral courage to expose and condemn her hometown as a “prophet without honor.”³⁸

As an act of differentiation from her father and hometown and identity formation that was found in Lee’s writings in *The Prelude* and later at the University of Alabama’s *Rammer Jammer*, Lee continued to draw attention to the obstacles to the fight for racial justice. By writing *Go Set a Watchman*, Lee made herself vulnerable as she condemned her father and her hometown. Lee, not Jean Louise, was the one exposing the institutions and systems of racism that are invisible to most.³⁹ Through Jean Louise in *Go Set a Watchman*, we experienced Harper Lee’s revulsion and disillusionment to the racial progressives, gradualists, and accommodationists, in short the racism, that permeated the South, her hometown, and her family, especially her father Amasa Lee, the inspiration for the character Atticus Finch.⁴⁰

Racism and Atticus Finch

Having established how Harper Lee depicted and confronted adolescence in her writings, this essay will next consider Harper Lee’s confrontation and depiction of racism through the character of Atticus Finch. In order to do this, an understanding of Lee’s father is necessary. The character of Atticus Finch served as a vehicle for Harper Lee to exercise her strong, conflicted feelings towards her father, a man she knew was revered and respected, even as he

³⁸ Mark J. Baggett, ““Tumbling out of the Beautiful Dream”: *Go Set a Watchman* and Harper Lee’s Legacy,” *Cumberland Law Review* 47, no. 1 (Fall 2016): 14.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 14-15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 18.

promoted segregation through his newspaper and civic involvement.⁴¹ Amasa Lee was a state representative in Montgomery from 1926-1939. During that time, he was admitted to the bar in 1929 and was considered a respected member of the Alabama Bar Association in Monroeville.⁴² Concurrent with his time as a Alabama state legislator, he owned and wrote editorials for the Monroeville newspaper the *Monroe Journal*. These positions combined with his status as the most influential member of the town's Methodist church contributed to his role as the premier civic leader of his corner of Alabama. In Montgomery, Amasa Lee was a conservative, status quo segregationist south-Alabama state's righter, "who nonetheless (like many paternalistic white politicians before the 1950s) tended to be anti-Ku Klux Klan and sympathetic to the plight of local African Americans who suffered gratuitous indignities and were systematically denied equal justice."⁴³ In other words, Amasa Lee disdained violence in maintaining separate but equal, yet favored the policy and advocated using the law to uphold the post-Reconstruction norm. While Harper Lee was writing political satires critical of segregationist efforts in Alabama, Amasa Lee was writing in his paper, the *Monroe Journal*, his advocacy of a state constitutional amendment for voters to have to take a reading comprehension test and if needed barr "...those elements in our community which have not yet fitted themselves for self government..." from being allowed to vote.⁴⁴ It is with this type of racism that Amasa Lee personified that this paper

⁴¹ Zachary J. Letchner, "To Kill a Mockingbird in Historical Perspective and Current Context: A Review Essay." *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 103, no. 2 (2019): 169.

⁴² Baggett, "Tumbling," 5.

⁴³ Flynt, "Nelle Harper Lee on Law," 632.

⁴⁴ Crespino, *Atticus Finch*, 53.

considers how Harper Lee depicts and confronts racism through the character of Atticus Finch in *Go Set a Watchman* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Go Set a Watchman was set in 1956 Maycomb amid the Montgomery bus boycott which brought apprehension to privileged, liberal, white moderates like Harper Lee's father Amasa and the fictional character Atticus Finch. Even though it was published in 2015, *Go Set a Watchman* was written before *To Kill a Mockingbird* and it carried the original message that Harper Lee wanted conveyed. The Atticus in *Go Set a Watchman* was the Atticus she wanted the world to meet. Similar to her writings in *Rammer Jammer*, Lee wrote *Go Set a Watchman* as a means to share her frustration with racial progress and not to defend the status quo.⁴⁵

As Jean Louise learned in *Go Set a Watchman*, Atticus was once a member of the Ku Klux Klan and was currently a member of the Maycomb citizens' council. The purpose of the latter was to preserve racial segregation and Jim Crow oppression without the hoods and violence of an organization such as the Ku Klux Klan. Citizens' councils usually formed as a response to the events precipitated by the Supreme Court's ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*. Citizens' councils feared outsiders such as the federal government or NAACP forcing integrationist policies. Frequently, council members took the position of favoring local control and states' rights with a tendency toward paternalism in the treatment of African Americans.⁴⁶ Citizens' councils in Alabama began forming as a result of the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott. Overall, these councils were typically composed of white local businessmen who used economic

⁴⁵ Baggett, "Tumbling," 5.

⁴⁶ Flynt, "Nelle Harper Lee on Law," 637-638 & 632.

pressures to intimidate and punish Black citizens who attempted to vote or desegregate.⁴⁷ To Atticus and those in his social class, the prospect of losing power during the Civil Rights Movement led to the proliferation of white citizens' councils. Councils brought community pressure to people like Atticus to embrace the constitutional segregation of Alabama or face the consequences. He represented a Southern faith in racial hierarchy and belief that African Americans were not ready for citizenship. Atticus and many like him in Maycomb held on to the notion that the era of Reconstruction after the Civil War was a time of incompetent and corrupt state governments run by Northerners and recently freed African Americans. Atticus revealed this opinion when he told a disgusted and sickened Jean Louise, "What would happen if all the Negroes in the South were suddenly given full civil rights...I'll tell you. There'd be another Reconstruction. Would you want your state governments run by people who don't know how to run 'em?"⁴⁸ What Atticus tells Jean Louise echoed what Amasa Lee had written in his *Monroe Journal* editorials.

Atticus was a fairly accurate representation of Lee's father, Amasa. Atticus harbored a narrow conception of justice that he used to condemn lynching as well as equal rights in schools and at voting booths. To Atticus, the law was not about justice; it was about order. Like Amasa in Maycomb, Atticus also believed that separate but equal was the law, and it was right. Both would be loath to condone the violence of lynching and at the same time resist a law that upheld equal status.⁴⁹ In his writings and his legal work, Amasa Lee demonstrated a distaste for

⁴⁷ Tanner, "She Forgot," 57-58.

⁴⁸ Alfred L. Brophy, "Watchman's New Constitutional Vision." *Cumberland Law Review* 47, no. 1 (2016): 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 21-22.

violence and outside influence contrasted by a love of law. For example, Amasa Lee wrote editorials in the *Monroe Journal* in opposition to federal anti-lynching laws and yet, as a lawyer, Amasa helped a white man leave his property to a Black woman.⁵⁰ These sentiments were reflected in Atticus Finch in *Go Set a Watchman* as Atticus views African Americans as not fit to enjoy the same rights and privileges as whites yet.⁵¹ The Atticus revealed in *Go Set a Watchman* is just as an authentic portrayal of Harper's father as that of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.⁵²

Atticus Finch is commonly perceived as the hero of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, so readers reacted with great disgust to his character in *Go Set a Watchman*. This reaction can be seen as a misplaced trust in institutions and the law, and cause readers to reevaluate what were once believed to be transmitters of truth.⁵³

The racism of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* is typified by his *noblesse oblige*. His noblesse oblige is most clearly seen in his acceptance of racial hatred as something one is born with, tolerance for gradual change and a gentlemanly refusal to condemn his fellow citizens. Atticus's paralysis in affecting change is criticized as cowardly paternalism.⁵⁴ Atticus was at best a passive participant in the pervasive injustice of Maycomb. His prescription for his

⁵⁰ Ibid, 20.

⁵¹ Ibid, 19.

⁵² Baggett, "Tumbling," 4.

⁵³ Cook, "Well, Heck," 662.

⁵⁴ Baggett, "Tumbling," 8.

children, “you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them” is accused of reducing racism and the resulting social injustices to a kind of moral relativism.⁵⁵

Through scholarship, one can more readily see the racism of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Oft cited and among the earliest to call for a more balanced understanding of Atticus, Monroe H. Freedman wrote the following: “...Atticus Finch never in his professional life voluntarily takes a pro bono case in an effort to ameliorate the evil—which he himself and others recognize—in the apartheid of Maycomb, Alabama. Forget about ‘working on the front lines for the NAACP.’ Here is a man who does not voluntarily use his legal training and skills--not once to make the slightest change in the pervasive social injustice of his own town.”⁵⁶

Atticus, a state legislator and pillar of Maycomb with obvious clout, was a passive participant in the pervasive injustice of segregation. Why was it that Atticus did not do anything to stop the injustices and inequalities? Perhaps it was because as a lawyer and state legislator, he played a role in creating and perpetuating the systems and culture seen in Maycomb.⁵⁷ Atticus never raised objections to the segregation of the Black population of Maycomb or called for a representative jury in the Robinson case. He practiced law, helped make the law, but was not looking to change laws that perpetuate the systems of injustice. Instead, Atticus tried to change hearts and minds. As Tom Sanpietro explained in, “Why *To Kill a Mockingbird* Matters, “...changes in laws are what constitute the first and most necessary step in dismantling the

⁵⁵ Cook, “Well, Heck,”667.

⁵⁶ Baggett, “Tumbling,” 6.

⁵⁷ Cook, “Heck,”670.

corrupt system. An appeal for a change in hearts and minds is to be applauded, but it also never represents a threat in any way to the existing power structure.”⁵⁸

Taking Sanpietro’s view that Atticus’ action fell short of effecting change, Frances W. Kaye in “I’ve Got This Vision of Justice: *Why To Kill a Mockingbird* is a Fraud”, believed that the argument of *To Kill a Mockingbird* was that Atticus did all that he could to save Tom Robinson from an unjust conviction and challenges that using historical evidence. Citing the Scottsboro Trial, which will be discussed later in this essay, as her evidence, Kaye claimed that Atticus should have ensured that Tom’s jury was not composed solely of white male jurors and at the very least should have mounted an appeal to a higher court. Like Tom Robinson, the Scottsboro Boys were found guilty by an all-white male jury. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Robinson attempted to escape from jail and was shot in the back by a guard and killed. Unlike the fictional Tom Robinson, the Scottsboro Boys did not try to escape and their story attracted attention from multiple national organizations that were able to assist in mounting appeals all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.⁵⁹

In concurrence with Kaye’s critical review of Atticus Finch, Naa Baako Ako-Adjei’s article “Why it’s Time Schools Stopped Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*”, she lambasted Harper Lee for creating Atticus Finch as a white savior and for failing to leverage his white privilege. Speaking of Atticus Finch, “He was a man of such adamantine morals that rather than

⁵⁸ Tom Santopietro, *Why To Kill a Mockingbird Matters: What Harper Lee’s Book and Iconic American Film Mean to Us Today* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018) 150-151.

⁵⁹ Frances W. Kaye, ““I’ve Got This Vision of Justice”: *Why To Kill a Mockingbird* is a Fraud,” *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice* 11, no. 1: (Spring 2020): 78-79.

being a realistic rendering of a person, he was instead a human PEZ dispenser, offering readers saccharine sweet banalities such as the often quoted: “The only thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience”, or “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.”⁶⁰

Critical reception on the depiction and confrontation of racism through the character of Atticus Finch

Kaye’s and Ako-Adjei’s assessments of Atticus and his role in depicting and confronting racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird* contrasted with popularly held views of Atticus prior to the publication of *Go Set a Watchman*. Further evidence of this and the power of Harper Lee’s fiction on generations of readers is apparent in reviews in response to the publication of *Go Set a Watchman*.

Reviews of *Go Set a Watchman* fall into two categories: those that defend *To Kill a Mockingbird* Atticus as the “true” Atticus and those that argue that he has been a bigot before our eyes the whole time. Adam Gopnik, writing about *Watchman* in the *New Yorker*: “So the idea that Atticus, in this book, ‘becomes’ the bigot he was not in ‘Mockingbird’ entirely misses Harper Lee’s point--that this is exactly the kind of bigot that Atticus has been all along...part of a paternal effort to help a minority that, in this view, cannot yet entirely help itself.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Naa Baako Ako-Adjei, “Why it’s Time Schools Stopped Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*.” *Transition* 122: (2017): 184.

⁶¹ For an extensive selection of reviews and to understand the debate surrounding the publication of *Go Set a Watchman* see Kelsey Squire, “Novel, Sequel, Draft: Classification and the Reception of Harper Lee’s *Go Set a Watchman*,” *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History* 11, no. 1 (2019): 30-31.

It is not until the publication of *Go Set a Watchman* can we see what Lee was trying to do with the character of Atticus Finch. As Nicholas Buck expressed in his essay:

“...it seems the story Lee wanted to tell, one which shrewdly and honestly reveals the virulence of polite society’s discriminatory posturing, system racism, and overt classism, is the one we need to hear most. Perhaps the gift of this second book is that it might shake us from identifying too closely with *Mockingbird’s* Atticus so that we might begin seeing ourselves as the people of Maycomb, Alabama, or even in *Watchman’s* Atticus—from seeing ourselves in the courageous and magnanimous exception rather than the disingenuous and complicit rule. The contrast here is generative, and insofar as it might allow us to hold up a mirror, particularly, in these times, it is a gift. *Watchman* does not ruin Harper Lee’s legacy, it deepens it, not by being a great novel...but by helping us see ourselves more honestly, which may after all be Harper Lee’s lasting accomplishment.”⁶²

After 55 years of believing that standing up for another’s rights and standing in another’s shoes were the lessons of Harper Lee’s first book, *To Kill a Mockingbird* devotees found it difficult to reconcile with the notion that their favorite book may have been giving them a pass to avoid awareness, culpability and action against the unjust systems of racism it seemed to be opposing.⁶³ Perhaps an unfortunate legacy of Atticus Finch is that since 1960, Southerners have appropriated Atticus as a reflection of their better selves. He is lifted as the exemplar of a well articulated, progressive, liberating vision of social justice in the face of racism. The esteem to which Atticus is held gave permission to generations of Southerners to claim his widely regarded moral authority as their own and even go so far as to use him to extricate their guilt over racial inequality. Atticus’ failed defense of Tom Robinson opened the door for Southerners that cast

⁶² Buck, “Her Two Books,” 54.

⁶³ Tanner, “She Forgot,” 56.

themselves as progressive to now become co-victims with African Americans against a common enemy. The talisman of the heroic defender of racial justice allowed them to fete themselves as partners in racial progress, while casting a blind eye toward connections to their heritage of slavery and racism.⁶⁴

“Otherness”

Having established how *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* depict and confront racism, this essay will now consider how the two novels depict and confront Otherness in society. In this regard, *To Kill a Mockingbird* relied more on outcasts and Others as characters than *Go Set a Watchman*. The Others who played a large role in *To Kill a Mockingbird* are Tom Robinson, Bob Ewell, and Boo Radley. The Other to be discussed from *Go Set a Watchman* in this essay is the character of Hank Clinton.

Tom Robinson and Bob Ewell are Others who lose their lives in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Both characters are Others at the center of the trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Tom Robinson, the physically disabled African American husband, father, and laborer was accused of raping Mayella Ewell, the daughter of Bob Ewell. As has been mentioned, Tom was shot dead while trying to escape after being found guilty in the rape of Mayella Ewell. Mayella was barely literate, impoverished, dirty, and the victim of sexual and physical abuse at the hands of her father. Upon Bob’s discovery that his daughter, his possession, had sexually pursued a black man, Bob beat Mayella. Bob Ewell and his family were viewed by the community as Others. The Ewell family's skin color was white, but the general societal expectations of what constituted

⁶⁴ Baggett, “Tumbling,” 5.

whiteness in Maycomb did not apply to them. The Ewells lived on the edge of town near the dumps in close proximity to the black community and were identified as members of the “Trash” class by the Finches and their neighbors. As Scout recalled in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, “Does he [Mr. Bob Ewell] have anything to do with those Ewells that come every first day of school an’ then go home? Why, Atticus said they were absolute trash—I never heard Atticus talk about folks the way he talked about the Ewells...”⁶⁵ The Ewells were known scofflaws, not required to send their children to school, and not embarrassed to be receiving government assistance. “No truant officers could keep their numerous offspring in school; no public health officer could free them from congenital defects, various worms, and the diseases indigenous to filthy surroundings”.⁶⁶ However, the Ewells were acknowledged to be white in that they were favored over and hold a superior position to Black residents of Maycomb and were deemed worthy of protection when it comes to the boundary between white and Black. By the end of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, like Tom Robinson, Bob Ewell also lost his life as a result of the trial. Bob was killed by the mysterious Other, Boo Radley.

Arthur “Boo” Radley was the most marginal Other in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Stories were told of Boo, but no one had seen him in some time. It was rumored that Boo was living a life of exile for violations of the socially constructed code of Maycomb. Scout and Jem Finch were thoroughly intrigued by Boo’s house to the point of obsession. For some time, the children had received gifts from Boo in the hollow of a tree that served as the border between the children

⁶⁵ Lee, *Mockingbird*. 141.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 194.

and Boo. Eventually, Boo's father filled the hollow, effectively closing off the frontier between the children and Boo.

Boo reappeared to save Scout and Jem from an attack by Bob Ewell. It was in the Finch house that Boo was seen in the story. For Scout, it would be the only time she would ever see Boo Radley in her life. Boo's position in the Finch house put him alongside a portrait of the Finch children's mother implying a protective and maternal aspect to this mysterious hero. This aspect of Otherness was in direct contrast to the masculine violence needed to kill Bob Ewell.

Noticeably missing from *Go Set a Watchman* were the same outcasts and Others. The "Trash" class that the Ewells belonged to was acknowledged, but not filled with identifiable characters like in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The pivotal Boo Radley was not in *Go Set a Watchman*. In another departure from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Go Set a Watchman* also presented a wider swath of Maycomb's population as willing to engage in overtly racist actions to hold onto racial segregation. Racism was no longer the exclusive realm of Bob Ewell and the "trash."

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While class differences played a part in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, they took on a more overt role in *Go Set a Watchman* in the story of Jean Louise's boyfriend Hank Clinton. Hank was born into the "Trash" class. Early on in *Go Set a Watchman*, Jean Louise agreed to marry Hank. Hank had been taken under Atticus's wing and worked in his law practice. As a result of Hank's relationship to Atticus, Hank was able to transcend his birth class and attain

⁶⁷ Tanner, "She Forgot," 59.

prominence alongside Atticus. Even with Hank's high status in Maycomb society, Jean Louise was warned by her aunt to marry her own kind. That is, even as Hank appeared to be of the prominent class of citizens like the Finches, he is still "Trash." Later in *Go Set a Watchman*, after Jean Louise discovered that her father and fiancé were on the citizens' council, she confronted Hank and questioned him as to why he took part in the council meetings. Hank told Jean Louise he had to "...go along to get along."⁶⁸ Hank felt compelled to go along with Atticus and the citizens' council in order to not lose clout in Maycomb and further advance in Maycomb's class system. It is clear that Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* depict and confront otherness with characters who have intrigued readers for generations.

While the discussion in this essay is by no means exhaustive, the evidence presented has demonstrated why generations of readers embrace Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Go Set a Watchman*, and the books' characters. The development of Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and her challenging maturation as Jean Louise in *Go Set a Watchman* is relatable to the adolescent experience of readers. Jean Louise's coming of age in *Go Set a Watchman* is only possible after she confronts the racism depicted in her father, Atticus Finch, whom until the publication of *Go Set a Watchman* was considered by most to be an upright and good citizen. Finally, the characters who present Otherness such as Tom Robinson, Bob Ewell, Boo Radley, and Hank Clinton are important in guiding readers through the nuanced interactions between Maycomb's social and racial hierarchies in Harper Lee's two books.

⁶⁸ Cornet, "Four Reasons Why," 34.

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