

Character Sketch of Atticusin Harper Lee's Go Seta Watchman

Dr HENRY, Associate Professor, Department of English, Buddha P.G. College, Kushinagar,
Uttar Pardesh - 274403

Abstract

Go Set a Watchman is the sequel to Harper Lee's classic To Kill a Mockingbird. The film Go Set a Watchman (released in 2015) has garnered a lot of positive feedback. Though there are numerous differences between Mockingbird and Watchman, the main character's father, Atticus Finch, is possibly one of the most significant. Atticus is now a segregationist in Go Set a Watchman, and he appears to be a completely different character than he was in To Kill a Mockingbird. "Atticus displays himself as a segregationist and a regressive extremist in the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court's recent decision in Brown vs. the Board of Education. He is a strong supporter of states' rights.

Introduction

Go Set a Watchman is a poignant coming-of-age narrative for adults that delves into topics of race, class, social change, and privilege. Jean Louise, must reconcile her feelings for her father with the man whose social and political ideals she finds repulsive. Go Set a Watchman is set in the mid-1950s, just after the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court judgement declaring segregation illegal. It chronicles the narrative of Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, who is returning home from New York City for her yearly visit to Maycomb, Alabama. Much of what Jean Louise loves about her community is disappearing: the ancient Finch family riverbank farmhouse has been auctioned off piece by piece, her childhood home is now an ice cream shop, and new post-war family housing is springing up in town. Another thing that irritates her is the growing distrust between white and African-American groups. She wonders if she was blind to it as a youngster or if she's seeing something that was always there but is now seething in the civil rights period with new eyes. Jean Louise travels with relatives and friends throughout the novel, drifting into memories of her own and Maycomb County's past. She's a modern, independent woman in a country where those qualities aren't valued, and she considers herself "colorblind" in an area where white residents don't want integration forced upon them. The most difficult task she has is balancing her love and respect for her father, uncle, aunt, and beau with her disgust for their social and political ideals. As much as she adores the Maycomb of old, she understands that societal change is for the best, even if it means questioning her sentiments for individuals who she believes shaped her as a person and whom she has long held in high regard. It's acceptable that the publisher decided to offer this material mainly unedited. Even though it can be rambling and even confusing at times, particularly when Jean Louise is recounting some of Maycomb County's history or when the writing shifts from third to first person, it is an insightful document of how people in the South reacted to change, particularly in the early days of desegregation. The novel is pertinent

to current events, such as the debate over whether the Confederate flag should be flown on government buildings.

The conversation and humour are enjoyable, and the characters are well-developed and complex persons. Harper Lee's examination of what it means to be a modern woman in a historical setting is impressive. Lee also tackles difficult topics like women who don't want to marry or have children, how to embrace social progress without sacrificing important aspects of the past, admitting that privilege allows some people to have more social and economic options, and the difficulty of navigating relationships with parents as we grow up. In short, Lee crams a lot of information into 288 pages.

Atticus in *Go Set a Watchman* still adheres to the letter of the law and believes that everyone is entitled to justice, but he believes the federal government is misusing its power by forcing integration before people are ready. The reader, like Jean Louise, will question if this is how he's always been or if this is the fearful thinking of an elderly guy in a rapidly changing world. Lee's depiction of Atticus and Jean Louise's lover Henry Clinton's views on race and desegregation is difficult to read. Lee presents them as rational in their opinion that gradual integration was necessary since African-Americans were not prepared or capable of handling all of the privileges that white people had at the time. It's a patronising view of a whole group of people who have long been denied their full constitutional rights, but it's an interesting look at the attitudes of many individuals in that era who thought themselves to be moderate on the subject.

Character Sketch of Atticus

Who is Atticus?

Atticus Finch is a fictional character in Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was published in 1960. A draught of the character can also be found in the novel *Go Set a Watchman*, which was written in the mid-1950s but was not published until 2015. Atticus Finch is the father of Jeremy "Jem" Finch and Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, and a lawyer in the fictitious Maycomb County, Alabama. Lee based Atticus on her father, Alabama lawyer Amasa Coleman Lee, who, like Atticus, represented black defendants in a high-profile criminal trial. Out of 100 Best Characters in Fiction, according to *Book Magazine* Since 1900, Finch has been voted the seventh finest fictional character of the twentieth century [2,3]. The American Film Institute named Gregory Peck's portrayal of Atticus Finch in the 1962 film adaption as the greatest hero of American cinema in 2003.

As a revered lawyer, Atticus is universally regarded throughout town. Despite taking some contentious cases over his career, he has maintained his reputation as a public person of unquestionable integrity who is always on the side of justice. Atticus is a true believer in what he teaches, and he acts the same way in private as he does in public. He is a deeply ethical and moral person who, above all, believes in the law's strength and validity.

Physical and Emotional Strength of Atticus

But Atticus isn't without flaws. Atticus is no longer a physical force to be reckoned with. He has arthritis, which gives him a lot of pain, and despite his best efforts to keep his daily routine and avoid complaining about his suffering, he regularly needs people to drive him and assist him in his daily duties. Jean Louise has become accustomed to Atticus' physical deterioration, and she is sorrowful but realistic about his impending old age. Jean Louise, on the other hand, can't fathom the possibility that Atticus isn't the pinnacle of morality and ethics that she has always imagined him to be. Throughout her life, Atticus has been Jean Louise's moral compass. She knew that whatever Atticus said or did was ethically correct, and that he would never lie to her or treat anyone with less than dignity.¹

Atticus' participation in the Maycomb County Citizens' Council, a white supremacist group, appears to contradict all he taught Jean Louise and Jem as they grew up. He is, nevertheless, still behaving in the manner that he has cultivated throughout his life. Atticus has no prejudices against individuals, and instead of putting his own set of ideals on them, he attempts to meet them on their own terms. Atticus understands that he cannot be Jean Louise's conscience for the rest of her life. Jean Louise must be able to react to her own feelings and have the confidence in her own views to stand up for what she believes is right in order to become totally her own, independent person. Standing up for one's own beliefs, according to Atticus, does not imply surrounding oneself with like-minded people. Atticus must negotiate with individuals of many different faiths, and understanding when to speak up and when to remain diplomatically silent is an important part of that negotiation.²

Moral Conscience of Atticus

We remember Atticus Finch as the moral conscience of Harper Lee's classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*. He was kind, wise, honourable, an avatar of integrity who used his legal skills to defend a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman in a small Alabama town rife with prejudice and hatred, in the 1930s. He was the ideal parent and a conscientious idealist, an intelligent, almost saintly believer in justice and fairness, as portrayed by Gregory Peck in the 1962 film. People named their children after Atticus in real life. Because of Atticus, people went to law school and became lawyers. Atticus is concerned with honesty and ethics, but he is not a revolutionist. Atticus follows his own moral standards, but he does not aggressively try to influence other people's beliefs. Atticus does not appear to be a racist towards the end of the story, but he also does not appear to be colorblind. Atticus is a product of his day. He follows the law and treats everyone fairly and equally, but he does not try to alter those who do not. At the end of the day, Atticus is more concerned with the law and justice than with equality for all people.

Atticus as a Racist

In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* Atticus Finch was a pillar of justice, decency, and kindness in Harper Lee's famous 1960 novel. According to early reviews in *USA Today* and *The New*

¹ <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/go-set-a-watchman/character/atticus-finch/>

² <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/go-set-a-watchman/character/atticus-finch/>

York Times, readers may not recognise the aged Atticus who arrives in the author's long-awaited second novel, *Go Set a Watchman*. In *Watchman*, a 26-year-old Scout goes home from New York City to Maycomb, Alabama, only to discover that she and her father disagree on race and segregation. Readers will be astounded to learn that the famous character has been reimagined as a racist who once attended a Ku Klux Klan meeting. "Do you want Negroes by the carload in our schools, churches, and theatres?" Atticus asks his daughter at one point. Do you want them to be a part of our world?" "The Negroes down here are still in their childhood as people," he remarks in another cringe-worthy moment. In *Watchman*, the same man who in *Mockingbird* valiantly defends a black man wrongfully convicted of raping a young white lady proclaims that he wants his home state "to be left alone to maintain house without advice from."³

Impact on the Legal Profession

"A bigger amount of critical readings has been amassed by two legal scholars in law journals than by all the literary scholars in literary journals," Claudia Durst Johnson said of the novel's reviews [5]. "Atticus has become something of a folk hero in legal circles," Alice Petry observed, "and is treated almost as if he were a genuine person." There are numerous examples of Atticus Finch's influence on the legal profession. Atticus is a key judicial influence, according to Richard Matsch, the federal judge who presided over the Timothy McVeigh trial. To Kill a Mockingbird was the most influential textbook for one law professor at the University of Notre Dame, and an article in the Michigan Law Review claims, "No reallife lawyer has done more for the self-image or public perception of the legal profession," before questioning whether "Atticus Finch is a paragon of honour or an especially slick hired gun."⁴

Monroe Freedman, a law professor and well-known legal ethicist, wrote two pieces in the national legal daily *Legal Times* in 1992, urging the legal community to reject Atticus Finch as a role model. Atticus still worked within a system of institutionalised racism and misogyny, according to Freedman, and hence should not be idolised. Attorneys who entered the profession with Atticus Finch as a hero and the reason for which they became lawyers flooded in to respond to Freedman's piece.⁵ Atticus Finch, according to Freedman, is dishonest, unethical, misogynistic, and innately racist, and he did nothing to alter Maycomb's racial status quo. The paper by Freedman caused a raging debate, with one legal scholar opining, "What Monroe really wants is for Atticus to be fighting for the NAACP in the 1930s, and if he isn't, he isn't entitled to be a hero; Monroe has this notion of the lawyer as prophet. Atticus sees a lawyer not only as a prophet, but also as a parish priest "The Alabama State Bar

³ <https://people.com/books/harper-lees-go-set-a-watchman-is-atticus-finch-racist-in-new-novel/>

⁴ Lubet, Steven. "Reconstructing Atticus Finch." *Michigan Law Review* 97, no. 6 (May 1999): 1339–62.

⁵ Monroe H. Freedman, "'Atticus Finch, Esq., R.I.P.," 14 *LEGAL TIMES* 20 (1992); Monroe H. Freedman, "'Finch: The Lawyer Mythologized,'" 14 *LEGAL TIMES* 25 (1992) and Monroe Freedman, *Atticus Finch – Right and Wrong*, 45 *Ala. L. Rev.* 473 (1994).

dedicated a monument to Atticus in Monroeville in 1997, calling him the "first memorial milestone in the state's judicial history." ⁶

Conclusion

Go Set a Watchman will fascinate students for the following reasons: How did a sloppy story about a young woman's sadness over learning of her father's racist ideas become a great coming-of-age tale about two children and their loyal widower father? How did a depressing storey filled with characters spewing hate speech (from the casually patronising to the disgustingly grotesque and presumably meant to capture the extreme prejudice that could exist in small towns in the Deep South in the 1950s) mutate into a redemptive novel associated with the civil rights movement, hailed for giving us "a sense of emerging humanism and decency," in the words of former civil rights activist and congressman Andrew Young?

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