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Children Once, Not Forever: Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman* and Growing Up

ALLEN MENDENHALL*

*"When I was a child, I spake as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things."*¹

*"Lawyers, I suppose, were children once."*²

Harper Lee's second novel *Go Set a Watchman* has caused a ruckus in the world of literary journalism and has sent professional critics into a tizzy from which they haven't recovered. *Watchman* has been called a "weird book" that represents a "sharp departure from the original narrative arc,"³ featuring characters who "certainly aren't the same as we remember."⁴ But is this accurate?

I say no. The notion that Lee's latest novel is a stunning reversal, or a prolonged retraction, is predicated on ahistorical assumptions and a willful misreading of Atticus Finch and the ominous, violent, and dangerous world of the fictional, yet eminently recognizable, Maycomb, Alabama. Maycomb may have been the tired old town where people moved slowly and there was nothing to buy and no money to buy it with,⁵ but it was also the brutal, highly irrational town where Atticus's first two clients could be hanged in the county jail,⁶ where two children could be attacked by an angry drunk,⁷ where the angry drunk could (most likely) beat and sexually abuse his daughter with apparent impunity,⁸ where a lynch mob could materialize on the steps of the jailhouse,⁹ where the Ku Klux Klan could descend upon the home of a Jewish man named Sam Levy,¹⁰ where accusations of rape

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¹ 1 Corinthians 13:11 (American King James Version).

² Charles Lamb, *Epigraph* in HARPER LEE, *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* (HarperCollins, 1988) (1960).

³ Jake Flanagan, *Is Harry Potter to Blame for This "Go Set a Watchman" Weirdness?*, QUARTZ (July 13, 2015), available at <http://qz.com/452086/this-go-set-a-watchman-business-is-weird-and-troubling/>.

⁴ *Despite Controversial Character Changes, Harper Lee Fans Eager to Read Mockingbird Sequel*, CBS CHICAGO (July 14, 2015), <http://chicago.cbslocal.com/2015/07/14/despite-controversial-character-changes-harper-lee-fans-eager-to-read-to-kill-a-mockingbird-sequel-go-set-a-watchman/>.

⁵ HARPER LEE, *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* 5-6 (HarperCollins, 1988) (1960) [hereinafter LEE, *MOCKINGBIRD*].

⁶ *Id.* at 5.

⁷ *Id.* at 299-302.

⁸ *Id.* at 208-10, 214, 250. I say "most likely" because the text insinuates but never explicitly states that Bob Ewell beats or sexually abuses Mayella Ewell.

⁹ *Id.* at 172-77.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 167.

could serve as acceptable cover for perceived affronts to codes of female honor,¹¹ where women could not sit on a jury,¹² where an ostensibly mentally challenged social misfit could be hidden away in his home,¹³ where a black man could not pity a white woman because of the position of privilege that pity entails,¹⁴ where blacks could be segregated from whites and subjected to an entrenched caste system,¹⁵ and, might as well say it, where the sheriff could close his eyes to the death of a man who was killed, however reasonably and justifiably, by the social misfit.¹⁶ Maycomb wasn't a utopia in miniature; it was a lawless town in which mistakes were fatal and fearsome social conventions were final.

The noisiest complaints about *Watchman* involve not Maycomb but the revered Atticus Finch. We should blame ourselves, not “inconsistencies in plot,”¹⁷ for adopting Atticus as what one critic calls “the moral conscience of 20th century America”¹⁸ and what another dubs our “moral conscience,” which is to say as a refined Southern gentleman who was “kind, wise, honorable,” an “avatar of integrity . . . who used his gifts as a lawyer to defend a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman,” and who, even more gloriously, was the “perfect man – the ideal father and a principled idealist, an enlightened, almost saintly believer in justice and fairness.”¹⁹ This hopeful and hagiographic conception of Atticus, supported by the unforgettable, impressive images of a big, benevolent, bespectacled Gregory Peck, has always been belied by the subtleties of the text. Atticus is assigned Tom Robinson's case, for instance, and does not voluntarily undertake Robinson's defense.²⁰ His treatment of Calpurnia can be condescending. He refers to certain white folks as “trash,”²¹ suggesting an off-putting classism that may be excusable because it's directed at the rampant racism among Maycomb's poor whites.²²

Despite these blots on his character, Atticus can and probably should remain a hero, though not without qualification. He can no longer represent the impossible standard of perfection that no actual person or compelling fictional character could meet. If it wasn't clear before, it is now: Atticus is a flawed man who despite his

¹¹ *Id.* at 225. Tom Robinson tells the prosecutor that he “felt right sorry” for his accuser, Mayella Ewell, to which the prosecutor retorts, “*You* felt sorry for *her*, you felt *sorry* for *her*?”

¹² *Id.* at 253.

¹³ *Id.* at 11–16.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 225.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 274–75 (the “Negro cabins” are separate from other homes and near the dump).

¹⁶ *Id.* at 314–15.

¹⁷ Flanagan, *supra* note 3.

¹⁸ Gaby Wood, *Go Set a Watchman, Review: ‘An Anxious Work in Progress,’* TELEGRAPH (July 13, 2015), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11735560/harper-lee-go-set-a-watchman-review.html>.

¹⁹ Michiko Kakutani, *Review: Harper Lee’s ‘Go Set a Watchman’ Gives Atticus Finch a Dark Side*, N.Y. TIMES (July 10, 2015), available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/11/books/review-harper-lees-go-set-a-watchman-gives-atticus-finch-a-dark-side.html>.

²⁰ LEE, *MOCKINGBIRD*, *supra* note 5, at 187.

²¹ *Id.* at 141, 253.

²² The most famous critiques of Atticus Finch came from Monroe Freedman. For a representative example, see Monroe Freedman, *Atticus Finch, Esq., RIP*, LEGAL TIMES, Feb. 24, 1992, at 20–21; see also Monroe H. Freedman, *Atticus Finch – Right and Wrong*, 45 ALA. L. REV. 473 (1994).

depravity found the courage and wisdom to do the right thing under perilous circumstances. Consider what Uncle Jack says to Jean Louise Finch in the final pages of *Watchman*: “As you grew up, when you were grown, totally unknown to yourself, you confused your father with God. You never saw him as a man with a man’s heart, and a man’s failings – I’ll grant you it may have been hard to see, he makes so few mistakes, but he makes ‘em like all of us.”²³ These words are aimed at adoring readers as much as at Jean Louise. They’re not just about the Atticus of *Mockingbird*; they are about any Atticuses we might have known and loved in our lives: our fathers, grandfathers, teachers, coaches, and mentors. Lee may have had her own father, A. C. Lee, in mind. After all, he was, according to Lee’s biographer Charles Shields, “no saint, no prophet crying in the wilderness with regard to racial matters. In many ways, he was typical of his generation, especially about issues involving integration. Like most of his generation, he believed that the current social order, segregation, was natural and created harmony between the races.”²⁴ Yet A. C. Lee defended two black men charged with murder, just as Atticus defended Tom Robinson.²⁵

It simply isn’t true that *Watchman* establishes an “abrupt redefinition of a famed fictional character.”²⁶ For one thing, nuanced fictional characters like Atticus defy ready definition and simple categorization. It’s foolish to try reconciling the two Atticuses because there’s nothing to reconcile: Although there are two accounts of Atticus and questions remain as to whether we should read *Mockingbird* and *Watchman* as mutually exclusive stories or *in pari materia*, so to speak, there’s only one Atticus, an open-ended personality without fixed traits and determined behaviors.²⁷ Of course, in a work of fiction, Lee could have given us two Atticuses—a young Atticus and an old Atticus, the Atticus of *Mockingbird* and the Atticus of *Watchman*—but even the text of *Watchman* undermines that theory. Jean Louise herself believes that Atticus was a different man when she and he were younger,²⁸ a notion that parallels common reactions to the portrait of Atticus in *Watchman*. Readers appear to be as outraged as Jean Louise to discover that their understanding of Atticus was limited, sentimentalized, anachronistic, and glamorized. We now see the same Atticus under different social and political circumstances. Our reading of *Watchman* informs our reading of *Mockingbird*, and vice versa. In *Watchman* we have a more complete (and, arguably, more historically accurate) picture of Atticus that, in fact, does not contradict the

²³ HARPER LEE, *GO SET A WATCHMAN* 265 (HarperCollins, 2015).

²⁴ CHARLES J. SHIELDS, *MOCKINGBIRD: A PORTRAIT OF HARPER LEE* 121 (Henry Holt and Company, 2006).

²⁵ *Id.* at 120.

²⁶ Sam Sacks, *Book Review: In Harper Lee’s ‘Go Set a Watchman’ Atticus Finch Defends Jim Crow*, WALL. ST. J. (July 10, 2015), available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/dark-days-in-maycomb-to-kill-a-mockingbird-1436564966>.

²⁷ The notion that we should treat *Mockingbird* and *Watchman* as separate stories—two different texts, two different constructions, two different men called Atticus Finch—is supported by one important discrepancy: In *Watchman*, Tom Robinson is alleged to have been acquitted when Atticus represented him, whereas in *Mockingbird* Tom Robinson was convicted. It is also supported by the fact that Lee waited this long to publish *Watchman*.

²⁸ LEE, *WATCHMAN*, *supra* note 23, at 247–49. Jean Louise sarcastically tells Atticus, “I grew up right here in your house, and I never knew what was in your mind. I only heard what you said. You neglected to tell me that we were naturally better than the Negroes, bless their kinky heads, that they were able to go so far but so far only....” *Id.* at 247.

portrayal of Atticus in *Mockingbird*.

Most of us who were raised in the South knew or still know people of a certain generation who might have represented a Tom Robinson against manifestly false charges while also supporting the segregationist order of the day. We've also known liberal-minded people who worked toward racial justice and equality but became disenchanted when the federal government and political organizers from other regions, who were not familiar with local needs and concerns, replaced them, condescended to them, or ignored their questions and tactics. A racist, it must be added, can hate injustice just as he can soften or alter his racism in light of unsettling facts.²⁹ People can be ensnared by conflicting emotions and attitudes, uncertain about themselves and their competing drives and influences. They can even do good things at odds with their bad ideas. In light of these hard and troubling realities the Atticus of *Watchman* does not have to be different from the Atticus in *Mockingbird*. Indeed it would be a stretch to suggest that this same character, from this same town, was probably intended to be a different character with entirely different traits and an entirely different personality in the two novels.

We should not unconditionally condemn Atticus for being a man of his time, a product of the culture in which he lived and breathed, any more than we should disregard the complicated aspects of actual figures like, say, Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator who nevertheless appears to have decried interracial relationships,³⁰ pronounced a belief in the inferiority of blacks,³¹ and campaigned

²⁹ This seems to be Uncle Jack's explanation of Atticus: "The law is what he lives by. He'll do his best to prevent someone from beating up somebody else, then he'll turn around and try to stop no less than the Federal Government. . . . [B]ut remember this, he'll always do it by the letter and by the spirit of the law. That's the way he lives." *Id.* at 268.

³⁰ "There is a natural disgust in the minds of nearly all white people at the idea of an indiscriminate amalgamation of the white and black races." *Quoted in*, JOSEPH R. FORNIERI, ABRAHAM LINCOLN: PHILOSOPHER STATESMAN 139 (Southern Illinois University Press, 2014).

³¹ "I have no purpose to introduce political and social equality between the white and the black races. There is a physical difference between the two which in my judgment will probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality, and inasmuch as it becomes a necessity that there must be a difference, I ... am in favor of the race to which I belong, having the superior position." *Quoted in* ABRAHAM LINCOLN: SPEECHES AND WRITINGS 1859-1865 32 (Library of America, 1989). During the fourth Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Lincoln stated:

I will say then that I am not, or ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, — that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will for ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.

Id. at 636.

on a promise never to end slavery.³² Such apparent contradictions should not mystify us because American history is full of them. Abolitionists such as the philosopher John Fiske, for instance, championed antislavery while adhering to forms of Darwinian evolution that exalted the supposed superiority of whites.³³ Ralph Waldo Emerson remains my hero in part because he advocated emancipation and the abolition of slavery, but he would be considered an ardent racist today, believing as he did in the innate superiority of white men.³⁴ This makes him a figure to be studied and understood: someone whose flaws can reveal blind spots in our own limited perspectives. Emerson, like Atticus, has something to teach us if we are willing to take him on his own terms, in light of his own moment in time and sensitive to the pressures and struggles that confounded him and his generation. Seeking the endearing or agreeable qualities of people who espouse views we despise enables us to ascertain why such people appeal to others and build followings, why they are not universally denounced or disparaged even if the ideas they embrace have been discredited. If we cannot learn to step into *their* skin and look around, we can expect deep-rooted social problems to persist.

Nor should we let people or characters like Atticus off the hook for adhering to the widely held racial attitudes of their time and place. The claim that “Atticus’s views are not, in themselves, alarming for their time”³⁵ betrays a needlessly harsh perspective: alarming to whom? Certainly his views would have alarmed the Tom Robinsons and Calpurnias of the period. Yet I understand the commentator’s point: Atticus should not be used as a pretext for abstracting into grand, systematic theories or generalizations replete with simplistic labels and closed categories that are ascertainable to us but would have baffled our predecessors.

This business about being on the right or wrong side of history is anti-intellectual and misguided. History has no sides; it’s not a finite shape with tangible boundaries; it’s not a rudimentary dialectic or a rational teleology. It’s rarely if ever a Manichean struggle between obviously good and evil forces. History just is. Sometimes the people who by general consensus are considered “good” have irredeemable flaws; sometimes the people who by general consensus are considered “bad” have redeeming traits. We do a disservice to ourselves and our posterity by mining the past for good guys and bad guys, and repurposing people and events for dualistic, ideological narratives that our predecessors would not have recognized or understood. It’s more promising and fruitful to look at history in its complex variety, appreciating the intricacy and multiplicity of human motivation, examining the confused network of shifting allegiances and divided opinions, and asking questions about evolved attitudes and changed conditions without sifting the historical record through the unsuited moral filter of the present. Polishing or taking liberties with the past, while understandable and well-intentioned, can make us unwittingly complicit in the perpetuation of bad ideas by obscuring the root causes and true sources of our problems. Atticus should be treated as Atticus, the

³² “I have no purpose directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so and I have no inclination to do so.” *Quoted in id.* at 32.

³³ See RICHARD HOFSTADTER, *SOCIAL DARWINISM IN AMERICAN THOUGHT* 15, 176–78 (Beacon Press, 1944).

³⁴ See generally Peter S. Field, *The Strange Career of Emerson and Race*, 2 *AMERICAN NINETEENTH CENTURY HISTORY* (2001).

³⁵ Wood, *supra* note 18.

man he was, even in fiction, but not as an improbable demigod of our eager imagination.

Atticus was never a liberal hero or a racially progressive icon. He was never divorced from social and historical context, a lone and singular exception to the prevailing ethos of white rural society during an era burdened by poverty and racism. Nor was he, as Natasha Trethewey ironically labels him, “a kind of national hero, a progressive thinker who espoused the noble belief in equal rights.”³⁶ Those labels were not intrinsic to Atticus; they were conferred upon him through general consensus and collective admiration. Trethewey knows better. She’s alive to the stark multiplicity in Atticus’s character. She recognizes fully the paradox underlying *Watchman*, a paradox that, she says,

many white Americans still cannot or will not comprehend: that one can at once believe in the ideal of ‘justice for all’ – as Atticus once purported to – and yet maintain a deeply ingrained and unexamined notion of racial difference now based in culture as opposed to biology, a milder yet novel version of white supremacy manifest in, for example, racial profiling, unfair and predatory lending practices, disparate incarceration rates, residential and school segregation, discriminatory employment practices and medical racism.³⁷

Paradox if not contradiction has always defined America to a large degree, especially with regard to race. We are a country founded as much on principles of freedom and liberty as on the atrocities of human bondage, slave labor, and racism. “How is it,” quipped Dr. Samuel Johnson, “that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?”³⁸ Thomas Jefferson, author of the *Declaration of Independence* and champion of equality, nevertheless possessed slaves and speculated about racial inferiority in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*.³⁹ When Frederick Douglass escaped slavery and gained his freedom in the North, he grew disenchanted with the racism of Northerners, even abolitionists, and it wasn’t until he visited England that he truly sensed freedom.⁴⁰ Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., fought for the Union Army as a soldier in the Twentieth Massachusetts, which included Southern sympathizers—Copperheads—and which returned fleeing slaves to Southern forces.⁴¹ In the

³⁶ Natasha Trethewey, *In Harper Lee’s ‘Go Set a Watchman,’ a Less Noble Atticus Finch*, WASH. POST. (July 12, 2015), available at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/12/go-set-a-watchman-review-harper-lee-to-kill-a-mockingbird>.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ Quoted in JAMES BOSWELL, *THE LIFE OF SAMUEL JOHNSON, LL.D.* 372 (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, & Haffelfinger, 1878).

³⁹ See Allen Mendenhall, *Jefferson’s Laws of Nature: Newtonian Influence and the Dual Valence of Jurisprudence and Science*, 23 CAN. J. L. & JURIS. (2010); see also Allen Mendenhall, *From Natural Law to Natural Inferiority: The Construction of Racist Jurisprudence in Early Virginia*, 23 CAN. J. OF L. & JURISPRUDENCE 20–21, 27–28, 33–34 (2010).

⁴⁰ FREDERICK DOUGLASS, *MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM* 369–74 (New York, Miller, Orton & Mulligan 1855).

⁴¹ MARK DEWOLFE HOWE, *1 JUSTICE OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES: THE SHAPING YEARS, 1841–1870*, 82–88, 111, 136–39, 296 (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957).

twentieth century, while Woodrow Wilson was championing liberal reform and human rights, he was also screening *The Birth of the Nation* in the White House, a film that valorized the rise of the Ku Klux Klan.⁴² The United States went to war with Nazi Germany and, in effect, ended German experimentation with the very forms of eugenics that Americans had first created and promoted.⁴³ We do not like to remember these fraught elements of American experience just as we prefer to remember Atticus in a purely positive way. In light of these troubling if extreme examples of American self-contradiction, however, Atticus appears not as an aberration or an outlier in his commitment to seemingly antithetical positions and conflicting moods and mindsets: He is American, through and through. That he is also Southern makes him a more complex case.

Watchman is not about “the toppling of idols,” even if “its major theme is disillusion.”⁴⁴ It’s a nondidactic lesson about understanding people in good faith and with a clear head, attentive to their individual anxieties and motivations. This latest portrait of Atticus challenges us to consider him in the manner in which he considered Mr. Cunningham in *Mockingbird*, after young Scout has revealed the emotional power of childhood innocence on the steps of the jailhouse. “A mob’s always made up of people,” Atticus says, “no matter what. Mr. Cunningham was part of a mob last night, but he was still a man.”⁴⁵ It turns out Atticus himself was involved with unsavory groups and causes, including white citizens’ councils and the Ku Klux Klan, but he, too, was a man—one whose seeming contradictions should be accepted and analyzed to prevent our own failings and errors.

Michiko Kakutani asks a series of rhetorical questions that reveal the kind of errant presuppositions and ahistorical idealism that underscore any indignation over Atticus’s alleged transformation from the bigot in *Watchman* to the hero in *Mockingbird* (*Watchman* was purportedly written first):

How did a lumpy tale about a young woman’s grief over her discovery of her father’s bigoted views evolve into a classic coming-of-age story about two children and their devoted widower father? How did a distressing narrative filled with characters spouting hate speech (from the casually patronizing 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, in the words of the former civil rights activist and congressman Andrew Young, for giving us “a sense of emerging humanism and decency”?

How did a story about the discovery of evil views in a revered parent turn into a universal parable about the loss of innocence — both the inevitable loss of innocence that children experience in becoming aware of the complexities of grown-up life and a cruel world’s destruction of innocence (symbolized by the mockingbird and represented by Tom Robinson and the

⁴² JOHN MILTON COOPER, *WOODROW WILSON: A BIOGRAPHY* 272 (Vintage Books, 2011).

⁴³ See generally STEFAN KÜHL, *NAZI CONNECTION: EUGENICS, AMERICAN RACISM, AND GERMAN NATIONAL SOCIALISM* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴⁴ Sacks, *supra* note 26.

⁴⁵ LEE, *MOCKINGBIRD*, *supra* note 5, at 180.

reclusive outsider Boo Radley)?⁴⁶

The answer to these questions is easy: there is no contradiction between the two stories save for the consistent inconsistency that reckless readers (including me) failed to see in *Mockingbird* but that is unmistakable in *Watchman*. Everyone is, like Atticus, characterized in some manner by inherent contradictions. Depending on who you are and what you do, your contradictions may manifest themselves in different ways. Who among us has not clung to competing views, prized incompatible ideals, accepted irreconcilable premises, advocated positions that undermined other positions we valued, changed our minds, updated our reasoning, revised our habits of thinking, doubted our most cherished beliefs, or insisted on courses of action that we knew were wrong or unstable?

The narratives of Jean Louise in *Mockingbird* and *Watchman* are as consistent as lived experience, which is marked by disruption and contingency, ambiguity and rupture, fragmentation and complexity. Only the careless would have accepted Jean Louise and Atticus as one-dimensional, self-contained figures unspoiled by the mores, customs, and vocabularies of their white discursive community. Such a sanitized view of Jean Louise and Atticus erases and rewrites rather than represents history in its disturbing, enlightening variety and complexity. Jean Louise and Atticus are not stock character types; their thoughts and behaviors are irreducible and inexhaustible.

Watchman does us a great service by asking us, in Trethewey's words, "to see Atticus now not merely as a hero, a god, but as a flesh-and-blood man with shortcomings and moral failing, enabling us to see ourselves for all our complexities and contradictions."⁴⁷ *Watchman* admits us into the interior worlds of Jean Louise and Atticus with rare intensity and perhaps even horror and revulsion. It's more racially charged than most of today's Southern literature, and its tensions and resolutions are ambiguous and at times perplexing. For all her disgust at Atticus's racial views, for instance, Jean Louise seems to share them to no small degree. She was "furious" after learning about the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954),⁴⁸ which caused her to stop "at the first bar she came to and [drink] down a straight bourbon."⁴⁹ She says "of course" she agrees with Atticus that "you can't have a set of backward people living among people advanced in one kind of civilization and have a social Arcadia."⁵⁰ She purports to agree with Atticus, although perhaps sarcastically, that African Americans are "backward, they're illiterate, that they're dirty and comical and shiftless and no good, they're infants and they're stupid, some of them."⁵¹ And yet this young woman who holds such racist notions is vexed and outraged by her father's racism. If Atticus is a bundle of contradictions, so is Jean Louise.

I have written elsewhere about how my grandfather grew up with Harper Lee and Truman Capote in Monroeville, Alabama.⁵² I was born into *Mockingbird* as

⁴⁶ Kakutani, *supra* note 19

⁴⁷ Trethewey, *supra* note 36.

⁴⁸ LEE, *MOCKINGBIRD*, *supra* note 5, at 238.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 239.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 242.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 251. Jean Louise also calls African Americans "a simple people" and expressly claims that she thinks she believes in the same "ends" as Atticus.

⁵² Allen Mendenhall, *Harper Lee and Words Left Behind*, STORYSOUTH, Spring 2014,

others were born into money. For a decade I read *Mockingbird* every year as a sort of ritual. I admired Atticus and aspired to be an attorney like him. I named my dog after him. Were it not for Atticus I would have never attended law school. I share these biographical details to demonstrate that I take no delight in learning that Atticus truly is the man I always, at some level, suspected him to be: He could not transcend the evils of his time and place, but he gave himself over to principles of justice and law that were, in fact, timeless; that did, in fact, transcend the unavoidable limitations of his present moment. The depiction of Atticus in *Watchman* teaches us that we as humans may and ought to disagree—sometimes passionately—but that it's worthwhile to contemplate *why* and whether there are any points on which we *might* agree, as well as to search out and understand the sources of hateful and hurtful ideologies. We might question whether the ideas we find abhorrent might be different if circumstances and conditions were different, if our surroundings and contexts could be altered.

The methodical and conscientious study of history explodes many agreed-upon terms and rhetorical niceties that have developed out of poor attempts to construct in our imagination a society free from racial conflict, to liberate ourselves from the burdens of a past that must be fully realized if any constructive momentum is to be achieved. One astute critic has observed that *Watchman* “is a much less likable and school-teachable book,”⁵³ which, in my view, is the highest praise the novel could receive. *Watchman* is not didactic or simplistic; it's not an easy script of moral instruction. In *Watchman* we've traveled from *Songs of Innocence* to *Songs of Experience*. Daniel D'Addario submits that “by striving to see [Atticus] with the eyes of an adult,” Jean Louise “can come to understand what she stands for.”⁵⁴ “*Mockingbird* was written through the eyes of a child,” says another critic, adding that “*Watchman* is the voice of a clear-eyed adult.”⁵⁵ I concur. We've grown up—all of us—and now, after *Watchman*, we can more judiciously and astutely read *Mockingbird*, like mature and sober adults, for the dark and unsettling portrait of society that it was, not for the idealistic *bildungsroman* that we wanted it to be.

Thank you, Ms. Nelle Harper Lee, for our treasured infancy, but thank you, even more, for teaching us hard and painful lessons about growing up. Those lessons enable us to get along and make sense of the terrible, puzzling humanity that we all have in common.

available at <http://www.storysouth.com/2014/03/harper-lee-and-words-left-behind.html>.

⁵³ Mark Lawson, *Go Set a Watchman Review - More Complex Than Harper Lee's Original Classic, but Less Compelling*, THE GUARDIAN (July 13, 2015), available at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/12/go-set-a-watchman-review-harper-lee-to-kill-a-mockingbird>.

⁵⁴ Daniel D'Addario, *Go Set a Watchman Review: Atticus Finch's Racism Makes Scout, and Us, Grow Up*, TIME (July 11, 2015), available at <http://time.com/3954581/go-set-a-watchman-review/>.

⁵⁵ Thomas DiPiero, *Forget the Controversies—'Go Set a Watchman' is Worth Reading*, N.Y. POST (July 12, 2015), available at <http://nypost.com/2015/07/12/forget-the-controversies-go-set-a-watchman-is-worth-reading/>.