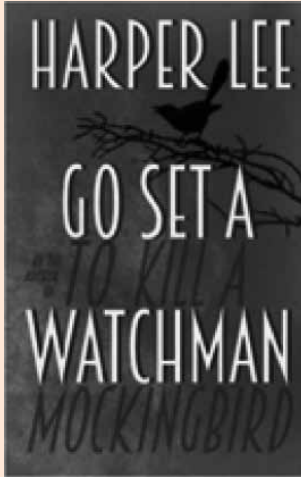


Go Set a Watchman: A Reflection of the Present

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Go Set a Watchman

Harper Lee

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The publication of Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman* caused a huge uproar in 2015. The critics and readers alike debated whether the author was coerced into publishing the novel which should not have seen the light at all. Some wailed over the loss of their hero Atticus Finch from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (hereafter, *TKAM*) who, from a cultural hero, seems to have turned into a bigot at old age. When I took up my pen to compose this review, I kept on wondering if it was necessary to write another one. But then I am reading it from a different world with this gnawing feeling that it could not have been published at a more perfect time, when the entire world is engulfed in meaningless terrorist activities, in bigotry.

The manuscript of *Go Set a Watchman* was discovered in late 2014, and Lee correctly called it a parent book of her award winning novel. This was the manuscript originally received by Harper Lee's editor Tay Hoholf in 1957 who identified the brilliant strokes, but suggested revisions. Now more than half a century later, the original has come out and any reader would agree that Hoholf's suggestion was absolutely right. I started reading it this summer and before long I realized that I had forgotten a lot about the Maycomb community and their eccentricities and had to revert to the original Harper Lee book to understand this one better. To be honest, as a novel, *Go Set a Watchman* does not come close to *TKAM*. It could not have stood on its own and I would have stopped reading after the first ten pages if I had not wanted to see what happened with my childhood favorites, and why there was such a controversy surrounding it. And then when I started rereading, I found that there were chunks of prose taken directly from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I laughed at myself—I am an English teacher alright, one who has had years of experience in teaching composition courses.

Go Set a Watchman can be called a coming of age book, even though the central character Jean Louis is 26. She is the adult version of the much loved “Scout” of *TKAM*. And most of the time I felt that she has not changed much—still an emotionally volatile young woman who looks at the world as a great place where “papa” is still a hero. She does not realize, as both her childhood friend Henry and Uncle Jack suggest, that she belongs to a privileged class. She observes and judges her neighbors, old acquaintances, and even her father from this superior height that she takes for granted. And naturally, her world crashes when she finds it to be very different from the one etched in her memory. Much of the novel deals with her disillusionment about her Maycomb community. She is not willing to accept the changes as her Uncle Jack offers: “Human birth is most unpleasant. It’s messy, it’s extremely painful, sometimes it’s a risky thing. It is always bloody. So is it with civilization” (199-200). She cannot concede that when a new world is about to be born from the older one, the older heroes become the villains, or the ones who resist the new heroes. She also believes that hers is the only correct way to look at the world, for which, while her stance is admirable, she also appears immature.

Yet I would also say that the book is strangely reflecting of the time it came out. Fanatics of different kinds have taken hold of not just the US but the rest of the world as well. It is a world when lifelong friends suddenly change color and appear as strangers. There are so many extremist activities and Lee almost suggests that the difference is always there; it just awaits the right time to reveal itself. Scout saw her father as a hero championing a wronged black man. As a grown woman she sees that he is still willing to fight for a black man; this time however, the black man has become a “nigger” and he is doing it because he is afraid that the case will be taken up by another group who will use it against the southerners. The adult Scout, who now lives in New York and is used to sitting with colored people at the next table, is horrified at the change. But during the heated argument between the father and daughter, it becomes quite clear that the kind of racial rhetoric that both the Finches believe in is complex in itself. Both of them carefully distinguish it from the white-trash bigotry. Atticus is one belonging to older generation of Southerners that want to preserve the old ways of life that would protect the black people, but would not allow them to rise over their white brethren. The Southern agrarians did and still believe in a certain way of life that make them hospitable, earnest, neighborly, and by the same token, suspicious of anything that does not follow their line of tradition. Harper Lee’s novel certainly projects that tension when black people were fighting to establish their rights as equal human beings, and the white people were exhibiting a “paternal concern” saying that they were not ready. Neither of them was wrong, and that was the root of all the conflicts.

In some fundamental ways, *Go Set a Watchman* also reflects the conflict between the old and the new. But then the racists would never see themselves as racists. Scout probably accepts it in the end as a difference between two generations. The questions, however, remain. What makes human beings who they are? Who was Atticus? Did he ever believe in championing the black people? Or did he fight the case because it was filed by a member of the white-trash class, and not people of his own class? Or maybe because he knew that Tom Robinson

would lose anyway? Or maybe the gradually changing surroundings make him question the civil rights and the place of his own world in it? It is difficult to tell, but at the same time, *Go Set a Watchman* makes him more human and credible with all his prejudices.

The novel is not an easy read and I could not finish it in one sitting. Obviously, it is not as witty and polished as *TKAM*. But it did make me think of the present world. One last thing, it would be an excellent idea not to compare it too much with the other book. It does have its merits, and it would be good to remember that reality is never as good as the ideal.

