

## **Rethinking Atticus Finch: A Paragon Of Virtue Or Just Another Politician?**

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### **Abstract**

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is almost universally assigned reading for high school students in the United States. Its protagonist, Atticus Finch, is widely hailed as a paragon of virtue because he represents an African-American man falsely accused of rape. However, this paper will argue that the character of Atticus Finch should be re-evaluated, especially since, throughout the novel, he is known to espouse racist and sexist beliefs. Atticus Finch purports to be a man of the law, but there are several episodes that call into question his commitment to justice. These include Atticus' attempt to make excuses for the leader of a lynch mob, as well as his intentional deception of law enforcement in agreeing to cover up an act of homicide and not to have the murderer arrested. This paper will argue that, on balance, Atticus Finch merely purports to be a champion of the oppressed, but, in truth, is actually complicit in perpetuating the inequality and injustice that he claims to condemn.

**Keywords: Racism, Law, Justice**

### **1. Body of Paper**

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, set in 1930s Maycomb County, Alabama, tell the story of an African American man, Tom Robinson, who is falsely accused of raping a white woman named Mayella Ewell. Tom Robinson is presumed guilty by his entire community, and only one lawyer – Atticus Finch – steps forward to defend him. Atticus is forced to endure the animosity of many people in Maycomb County as a result of his decision to represent a man who is perceived as an unrepentant rapist. Thus, literary critics have crowned Atticus as a paragon of virtue and have hailed Harper Lee's novel as a masterpiece. This paper, however, will argue that Atticus is not the progressive egalitarian that some have made him out to be; he is an elitist Maycomb County politician who is not truly interested in promoting racial equality in his community. Behind Atticus' public facade of a cultured gentleman, there lies a bigot who participates, both actively and passively, in perpetuating a cruel system of racial oppression.

Upon first reading *Mockingbird*, it is not hard to empathize with Atticus Finch. When the respected legislator and self-taught lawyer takes on the defense of Tom Robinson, he instantly becomes a pariah in Maycomb County – a predicament that he manages to handle with grace. Both he and his children suffer physical and verbal attacks at the hands of their neighbors. Bob Ewell, the father of the purported rape victim, assaults Atticus and spits in his face, while Mrs. Dubose, a curmudgeonly old lady, refers to Atticus with derogatory epithets in the presence of his children as they walk by her house. Nevertheless, Atticus does not fight back against Bob Ewell, and he always tips his hat politely to Mrs. Dubose and bids her "Good morning." On the basis of these facts, one might conclude that Atticus is a hero who risks his social standing and reputation as a Maycomb County politician, and even his physical safety, in order to defend an innocent man.

In truth, however, this is not so. Atticus does not volunteer to defend Tom Robinson, Judge John Taylor appoints him to do so. Thus, Atticus is not truly risking his social reputation by defending the accused, but simply carrying out a task that the court had assigned to him – a task he "had to [do], whether he wanted to or not."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, failure to take the case as instructed would likely have resulted in Atticus' own imprisonment for contempt of court<sup>3</sup>. But that does not mean that Atticus wants the case, or that he is happy about having been assigned it. Reflecting on his appointment

as Tom Robinson's defense counsel, Atticus remarks: "You know, I'd hoped to get through life without a case of this kind, but John Taylor pointed at me and said, 'You're It.'"<sup>4</sup>

This remark indicated that Atticus Finch is not truly interested in combatting racial inequality in his community, and he does not seem particularly enthusiastic about the opportunity he has finally been given to do so. On the contrary, he is nonchalant, if not resentful, about the task he has been given. Atticus Finch is not ashamed to admit that he would have preferred "to get through life" without having to defend an innocent African-American. And now that he is defending Tom Robinson, he is doing so against his will – and only out of deference to Judge Taylor's orders. Thus, Atticus defends Tom Robinson out of a sense of obligation, but not because of any genuine feeling of empathy towards Tom or his family.

This would explain Atticus' reaction to the jury's verdict against his client. When the jury votes to convict Tom Robinson of rape, thus condemning him to death, Atticus simply collects his papers and leaves the courtroom as if his business is concluded and there is nothing more for him to do. From Atticus, there are no outbursts of vehement protest, as one would expect to hear from a true proponent of civil rights. While Atticus' son Jem weeps hysterically over the jury's verdict, his face "streaked with angry tears," Atticus stands "looking as though nothing had happened."<sup>5</sup> There is no question that Atticus appreciates the gravity of the jury's decision, but he does not appear to be too bothered by it. While Jem is visibly distraught over the injustice of Tom Robinson's conviction, Atticus accepts the racism of his community as an inevitable part of life, saying that his children "might as well learn to cope with it" because "[i]t's just as much Maycomb County as missionary teas."<sup>6</sup> Atticus tells his family that he is not bitter about Tom Robinson's conviction. When Jem confronts his father and demands to know how the jury could have rendered such an unjust decision, Atticus responds by telling him that "[t]hey've done it before and they did it tonight and they'll do it again and when they do it – [it] seems that only children weep."<sup>7</sup> Atticus then bids his family "Good night" and goes to sleep. Atticus' demeanor in the aftermath of the jury's verdict seems cold and indifferent, nonchalant and apathetic – hardly an appropriate reaction for someone whose client was just sentenced to death for a crime that he did not commit. For someone who purports to be a champion of racial equality, a more emotional response would certainly have been in order.

Atticus' position as a state legislator in Maycomb County likewise suggests that he accepts, tolerates, and even participates in the racial oppression of his community. At the very outset of the novel, the narrator records that Atticus "liked Maycomb," the place he was born and bred.<sup>8</sup> One wonders what there is to like in a community where systematic racism is the norm in every facet of life, a community where African-Americans are mistreated and are unable to receive a fair trial. Although Atticus has the capacity to effect legislative change, he does not think to complain that African-Americans attending court, including distinguished clergy, are relegated to the balcony. As a resident of Maycomb County from birth, Atticus no doubt permits himself to dine in segregated restaurants and to stroll through parks where signs say "No Dogs or Colored Allowed." Moreover, Atticus condones and excuses the blatant racism of others. For example, when his children ask him about the Ku Klux Klan, Atticus, an autodidactic man who spends most of his free time reading newspapers, replies:

[W]ay back about nineteen-twenty there was a Klan, but it was a political organization more than anything. Besides, they couldn't find anybody to scare. They paraded by Mr. Sam Levy's house one night, but Sam ... made 'em so ashamed of themselves they went away.<sup>10</sup>

Now, Atticus Finch tells his children, the Ku Klux Klan is gone and it will never come back. These remarks, of course, are patently false and a gross distortion of historical reality, especially for a man who is a state legislator, an attorney, and a prolific reader of local newspapers. In truth, the Ku Klux Klan was not simply a "political organization" that marched by the house of one person in 1920, but rather, an outright terrorist organization that burned crosses and targeted racial minorities throughout the South, including African-Americans and (in the case of Sam Levy) Jews. It is simply impossible that anyone familiar with 1930s Alabama would believe the story that Atticus Finch tells his children about the Ku Klux Klan.

Perhaps one could argue that Finch deceives his children about the Klan simply because he does not wish them to scare them. And, yet, that would be out of character for an attorney who presents himself as an advocate of truthfulness and who does, in fact, find other occasions to talk to his children about the evils of racism in their community. Finch's notion of proper parenting is that "[w]hen a child asks you something, answer him" because children can "spot an evasion quicker than adults, and evasion simply muddles 'em."<sup>11</sup> Based on Finch's self-proclaimed aversion to subterfuge, it cannot be said that he gave his children false information about the Ku Klax Klan because he wanted to shield and to protect them from the harsh realities of racism and violence. The only conclusion one can draw from Finch's remarks is that he truly believes the Klan to have been an innocuous and ephemeral entity, that he has no

problem with it, or – at the very least – that he is wholly nonchalant and blithely disinterested in the terroristic activities of that so-called “political organization.”<sup>12</sup>

Later, Atticus Finch tells his children that “one of these days we’re going to pay the bill” for decades of the discrimination against African-Americans, but he adds: “I hope it’s not in you children’s time.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, Finch hopes that the payment for racism (and, with it, justice for African-Americans) will not come in his children’s lifetime (Dare 243-44). He recognizes that eventually, the era of discrimination will come to an end, but he hopes that achievement of racial equality will be pushed off to later generations.

Atticus Finch excuses that leader of the lynch mob who comes to attack him as “basically a good man” who “just has his blind spots along with the rest of us.” Atticus tells his children that the members of the lynch mob are, in reality, “our friends” (Lee 157). When Atticus politely tips his hat to Mrs. Dubose, an avowed racist who vehemently condemns him for defending Tom Robinson, one has to wonder whether Atticus is acting simply out of gentlemanly courtesy, or if he silently agrees with her prejudiced sentiments. It is true that Atticus tries his best to get along with everyone in his community, but in doing so he blatantly lies to his children and defends people who espouse virulently racist views. If Atticus counts the members of the lynch mob among his friends and praises their leader as “a good man,” one has to wonder to what extent this white Southern politician shares their bigoted views.

But racism is not Atticus’ only weakness, he also permits himself to speak in ways that are blatantly sexist. When his children ask him why Alabama law prohibits women from serving on juries, Atticus tells them, in a tone of amusement: “I guess it’s to protect our frail ladies from sordid cases like Tom’s. Besides ... I doubt if we’d ever get a complete case tried – the ladies [would] be interrupting to ask questions” (Lee 221). It may very well be that such sexist attitudes were appropriate for the 1930s, and widely prevalent in that era, but it is surprising that this kind of response would come from an attorney who is ostensibly a progressive and a proponent of civil rights for minorities an attorney who is supposedly tolerant and kind in a way that is uncharacteristic for people of his time.

It is also noteworthy that in his closing argument to the jury, Finch dismisses First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt as “the distaff side of the executive branch in Washington” (Lee 205). While he encourages his son Jem to follow in his footsteps and to go into the practice of law, Finch does not similarly encourage his daughter. Perhaps this is because such career opportunities were not readily available for women in 1930s Alabama, but as someone who is portrayed as a paragon of virtue who transcends the limitations of his time and argues in favor of true equality, Finch would have done well to treat his daughter no differently from the way he treated his son.

Another disturbing feature of Atticus Finch’s character is that he is complicit in deceiving the police – and his own children – about Boo Radley’s coldblooded murder of Bob Ewell, the father of the allegedly raped Mayella Ewell. Boo Radley killed Bob Ewell after the latter had started to attack Atticus’ children Jem and Scout. Instead of blaming Boo Radley, however, Finch initially attempts to blame his own son for the murder, but eventually tells his daughter Scout that “Mr. Ewell fell on his knife” (Lee 276). Finch then proceeds to thank Boo Radley for defending his children – even at the expense of another man’s life (*ibid*). Even though it is clear that Boo Radley acted in defense of others, it does not seem right that an attorney should tell his own children a false narrative about an act of homicide and willfully refuse to place blame on the party that is responsible.

This is especially so when that attorney tells his daughter that she should not hate even Adolf Hitler because “[i]t’s not okay to hate anybody” (*ibid*, 246). And, yet, Atticus Finch feels justified in lying about the murder of Bob Ewell precisely because of his long-standing hatred and contempt for the Ewell family. Earlier in the novel, Atticus tells his daughter Scout his opinion of the Ewells, whom he describes as “the disgrace of Maycomb County for three generations. None of them had done an honest day’s work in his recollection. ... They were people, but they lived like animals” (*ibid*, 30). Scout recalls her father lambasting the Ewells and referring to them as “absolute trash,” and testifies that she “never heard Atticus talk about folks the way he talked about the Ewells” (*ibid*, 124; Lubet 1342).

It is no wonder, then, that Atticus Finch considers the murder of Bob Ewell to have been justified. After all, Finch insinuated at the trial of Tom Robinson that it was really Bob Ewell who assaulted and raped his own daughter (Lee 178). Afterwards, Bob Ewell attacked Finch in public, spitting on him, cursing him, and threatening to kill him (*ibid*, 217). Although at the time Finch did not even bother to defend himself, this incident surely solidified his earlier impression of the Ewell family as “absolute trash.” Even if Finch initially refused to defend himself against Ewell’s aggression, he could not have been too bothered by Boo Radley’s homicidal actions, and he preferred to falsely attribute Ewell’s death to suicide (i.e., falling on his own knife).

To Finch, the loss of Bob Ewell’s life at the hands of a murderer is no loss at all; the attorney and state legislator convinces himself that life can simply go on because the death of a racist villain need not be punished, and the county sheriff need not be told the truth. Finch told his daughter Scout on an earlier occasion that “[s]ometimes, it’s better to bend the law a little in special cases” (*ibid*, 30). Atticus clearly believes that the murder of Bob Ewell is one of those “special cases” where the law and the truth are not important – one of those cases where “reason” (i.e., one’s own personal understanding of right and wrong) must prevail over the law. In other words, “the end justifies the means”:

the most important thing is that Bob Ewell is dead, since he is “absolute trash,” even if it means covering up a crime perpetrated by Finch’s own neighbor (see Dare, “Lawyers, Ethics, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” 131-132). In the end, Finch has no moral compunctions about deceiving both the law enforcement in Maycomb County as well as his own daughter in order to cover up a murder that he knows the truth about, simply because he dislikes the victim of that murder and considers his death to have been justified.

Finch’s understanding of the notion of empathy is troubling. While he advises his daughter Scout that she will get along a lot better” with people if she tries to “consider things from [their] point of view,” Finch himself does not do so (Lee 30). The “empathy” that Atticus Finch feels for the Ewell family could be more accurately characterized as a kind of patronizing contempt. The Ewell family is on the lowest level of the totem pole in Maycomb society because Bob Ewell “spends his relief checks on green whiskey” (ibid, 31). Atticus Finch’s diction suggests that he speaks from a position of privilege, as an self-educated and articulate man, a prominent attorney, and a state legislator. Finch is an accomplished and respected man: he has a son who aspires to be a lawyer, and both of his children address him as “sir”; Bob Ewell, on the other hand, has children who attend school only one day a year (ibid). To Atticus Finch, in his privileged view, the Ewells are worthless, low-life, good-for-nothing individuals who are a burden on society, people who live like animals, unlike the “decent folks” of Maycomb County who ought to be honored and respected (Lubet 1342). As for Mayella Ewell, Finch concedes that “[s]he is the victim of cruel poverty and ignorance,” but he refuses to pity her because she is white (Lee 203). According to Finch’s narrative, Mayella was sexually assaulted by her father; by his own admission, she and her family have been destitute, mostly illiterate, and the disgrace of their community for generations. And, yet, Finch publicly asserts that this poor, battered, and downtrodden woman, who has a violent alcoholic for a father, should not be pitied – simply because she is white.

Atticus Finch claims that he tries to love everybody and that no one ought to be hated, but his own behavior suggests otherwise. His attitude towards the Ewell family is one of vehement contempt that, perhaps, masquerades as empathy for their predicament and their low standing in society (“Being Atticus Finch,” 1687). When Finch cross-examines Mayella Ewell during the trial of Tom Robinson, he forces her to reveal to the jury the embarrassing circumstances of her family life: “The jury learned [that] their relief check was far from enough to feed the family, and there was strong suspicion that Papa drank it up anyway” (Lee 183). Atticus fails to appreciate how humiliated the young Mayella feels as a result of being interrogated about her miserable life; the girl’s distress and pain are most evident when the defense lawyer suggests that it was actually her father who raped her.

In defending Tom Robinson against charges of rape, Atticus Finch uses an argument that has come to symbolize contempt for women – the “she wanted it” defense. According to Atticus, it was Mayella who initiated her sexual interaction with Tom Robinson. She planned out a day when she would be able to get the Ewell children out of the house; then, she invited Tom into her house, jumped on Tom, hugged him, and asked him to kiss her (Lubet 1345). In other words, the whole situation was Mayella’s fault because, in Atticus’ words, “[s]he tempted a Negro” (Lee 203). Finch fails to realize that blaming the victim of sexual assault is demeaning and insulting; it is surely not the mark of a progressive and liberal attorney.

Atticus asserts that the prosecution has failed to produce “medical evidence” of rape (Lee 203). Of course, testimony is regarded as wholly legitimate evidence, but Finch does not consider Mayella’s testimony to be legitimate since she is just an ignorant girl from a family that he considers to be “absolute trash.” Finch tells his children that, in his opinion, before a defendant is convicted, there should be “one or two witnesses” to the crime. In this case, there were, in fact, two witnesses – Mayella and Bob Ewell. But, for Atticus, the testimony of the Ewells is meaningless and worthless. For Atticus, the quintessential privileged attorney, what they say does not matter at all (Lubet 1351).

Even though Atticus Finch has been painted by many as a hero and hailed as a valiant defender of the oppressed, the time has come to re-consider this personage and to look at the disturbing details of his interactions with other characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Finch lies to his children; he lies to the police; he publically humiliates a destitute victim of sexual abuse; he goes about life with an extraordinarily privileged air and little true empathy for the suffering of others. Literary critics would do well to stop lionizing Atticus Finch as an icon and a role model. No one likes to be disillusioned, but for the sake of intellectual honesty, we ought to come to terms with Atticus’ darker side. We ought to acknowledge that our so-called hero largely shares the sexist, racist, and class prejudices of his time and place. We ought to accept that Atticus is not a beacon of enlightenment and tolerance, but just another unsavory lawyer who, like many in his profession, has a penchant for distorting the truth. We ought to admit, at long last, that Atticus is not a paragon of virtue, but just another politician (Lubet 1340).

## 2. Acknowledgments

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