

“All is not well in Maycomb”: The Rise and Fall of Atticus Finch

James Wills

Published in 1960, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains one of the most widely read twentieth-century U.S. novels. At the centre of its literary fame is Atticus Finch: a small-town Southern lawyer seemingly so analogous with the ideals of ‘justice,’ ‘fairness,’ and a nation’s ‘color blind’ Constitution, that his oft-quoted dialogue has even reached the heights of recent presidential rhetoric. Since 1990, though, Atticus has fallen on hard times, as a series of commentators have condemned his somewhat limited sense of legal progressivism; Christopher Metress concluding that “novel and hero are, at best, morally ambiguous or, at worst, morally reprehensible.” What is more, the publication of *Go Set a Watchman* in 2015 only hastened to recast Finch more insistently in light of contemporary racial politics and historical revisions. The once heroic attorney now appears an aging, crotchety racist, sympathizing with the ideals of regional segregation.

Focusing on both ‘versions’ of Atticus Finch, this paper considers Lee’s contesting visions of the Southern lawyer because they so neatly describe the competing and often contradictory forms of U.S. legal and racial progress that have endured in post- Second World War histories of the region. First, I consider *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s portrayal of the Alabaman lawyer: not only the way Lee depicts the attorney as symbolic of legal progressivism, but also interrogate the spate of re-evaluations pertaining to Finch’s role in the novel. Second, attention turns to *Go Set a Watchman*. Fundamentally unshackling the character from his idealistic former persona, I contend this iteration of Atticus develops the fictional lawyer of the U.S. South with a sharp and critical focus; as a character far more representative of an increasing scepticism regarding national legal frameworks providing merely universalist – and thus flawed – solutions to the race problem in the post-war era.