
A Review of Go Set A Watchman

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Go Set a Watchman is a novel written by Harper Lee, writer of the American classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It was published on July 14, 2015. According to Amazon, it was the most pre-ordered book since Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows. The title is a Biblical allusion that comes from Isaiah 21:6; “For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth”. The epithet “watchman” refers to Jean Louise Finch’s father, Atticus Finch, whom she sees as the moral compass of Maycomb.

This novel set in the late 50s deals with racial discord and political unrest. It is also a novel of disillusionment and discovery of self. The protagonist, Jean Louise Finch, sets for home again. She is 26 now and no longer the tomboyish young brat in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She is a sensitive young woman who is full of radical ideas. For someone in the 50s, she is a revolutionary. She believes in civil rights for the blacks. Having witnessed the great turmoil and the power-struggle in the previous novel, she firmly believes in equal rights for all. The ‘watchman’ or the ‘moral

compass' that was her father is still the voice of reason in her head. She returns once more to her hometown with grand ideas in her head but what she sees shocks her.

'Hank', or Henry, her childhood sweetheart receives her at the station. In the novel, he currently works for Atticus Finch, a lawyer and former state legislator. Calpurnia has retired and Aunt Alexandra now runs the place. But soon enough, she finds that her father has a pamphlet called the *The Black Plague*. In the court, she observes him summoning a person who delivers a racist speech. This makes her disgusted both with him and with Hank. When she confronts Hank about this, he coolly tells her that they have to do what they have to do. Her father who has been listening to their conversation smiles sardonically and appears unaffected with her disgust of him. He tells her that the South is not ready for full civil liberty. She flees the

room and decides to leave town after vehemently telling Hank that she will not marry him. Her uncle meets her at her house and finally makes her see reason. He tells Jean that all her life she had let her father be her moral compass. She had placed him on a pedestal. It was time to look at him just as another flawed human being, he explains. She finally sees reason and tries to look at him in this new light. She decided to give Hank another chance and settles on a date with him.

Interestingly enough, *Go Set a Watchman* is not a sequel to *To Kill a Mockingbird* but is actually the first draft of the novel. In the first novel, we see a naïve Jean who hero-worships her father. Her father is seen as an all-powerful, absolutely moral and infallible entity. She is constantly impressed by him. He sees him as someone who stands up for the rights of the oppressed. He fights injustice no matter

what the cost. The concept of binary opposites come into play. Themes like good versus evil, black versus white and hegemony and suppression find a place there. But this novel is written through the eyes of the twenty-six year old Jean who finds the whole world a changed place.

The blacks are no longer portrayed as the victims and the whites as the bullies. Calpurnia's grandson accidentally runs over a man in a car accident and Hank informs her that though the Blacks can now afford cars, they never bother to get insurance or a license to drive them. Calpurnia herself whom Jean has always thought of as a mother figure now treats her with cold politeness. Maycomb itself has become transformed in this novel and we see a changed Jean. This disillusionment with the ways of the world, though painful at first, eventually gives her release from her anxieties and leads her to self-discovery.

She becomes her own person, no longer dependant of Atticus to give her answers to her questions.

This disillusionment extends to the 'meta-textual' level as many people who had elevated Atticus to a godlike status might feel hurt or betrayed when they observe that he is just as flawed as anyone else. The former novel was written at a time when the whole nation was looking for an idol, an example of pure goodness but this novel demolishes this idea and teaches the readers to accept people for what they are. Atticus had raised Jean to be color-blind but she cannot understand the new world's ideas that calls Blacks 'separate but equal'. Review after review points out that Atticus is now a racist. This novel is also significant because there are no prominent black people in this novel.

Jean finally discovers who she is. This does not lead her to hate her father,

though she initially did but she instead discovers that he is just like anyone else which makes her finally accept him. This novel teaches her about the innate dignity of people and advocates acceptance of all, just like the other one did. She emerges a better person out of this.

The following are some of the reviews of the novel:

“PHILLIP PRESTON: I mean, it is real as real. We all know these people, and we've all heard these things. You know, within family, friends, acquaintances, there's nothing new in here.”

“GASSIOTT: "Go Set A Watchman" was the first book Harper Lee submitted to a publisher. She and her editor reworked it

substantially to focus on Scout's childhood for "To Kill A Mockingbird," which went on to win a Pulitzer Prize. But Wayne Flynt says the characterizations in "Watchman" might just be truer to real life and Lee's personal experiences.”

“FLYNT: Our worlds are not perfect worlds. And we'll be much more comfortable with "Go Set A Watchman" than we were in the pretend righteousness in "To Kill A Mockingbird.””

“GASSIOTT: Flynt says that only when we understand that this was Harper Lee's original intention can we truly go home the way that Scout does

in "Go Set A Watchman."
For NPR News, I'm Kyle
Gassiot in Montgomery.”

The major theme of this novel is about the ‘toppling of idols’. One of the most unambiguously heroic figures in all of American Literary History had originally been conceived of as a segregationist, a famous online heading reads. In numerous pollings, the first novel has topped even the Bible as the most popular book ever and many stores had midnight outlets to cater to the demands but readers of this novel have given mixed reviews. The intellectuals and the level-headed commend this novel for breaking the iron cast of a hero. But for many who had loved the novel just as one might love in the primacy of pure goodness found their beliefs shattered. Reading this novel was like having something sour after a sumptuous meal, it left a bitter taste in their mouth and demolished the high-mindedness

and moral seriousness of what was once indisputably the greatest American Classic of all time. But this novel surpasses even the previous one in its literary merit and sheer rationality.

Bibliography:

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<http://www.wsj.com/articles/dark-days-in-maycomb-to-kill-a-mockingbird-1436564966>