

# Atticus Finch's Societal Changes and the Racial Dynamics of Southern America: A Comparative Study of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*

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**Abstract**—*To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee published in 1960 is still considered to be one of the most effective criticisms of racial prejudice depicting Atticus Finch as an example of a righteous person. However, the subsequent *Go Set a Watchman* (2015) has a different Atticus who seems to have changed his stand on race issues. This research employs Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism with comparative analysis to trace the development of Atticus Finch's approach to racism in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and *Go Set a Watchman* (2015). This research examines the major social changes in the mid-20th century American South through Atticus' transformation from a hero for racial justice to a segregationist and racist. It explores how social pressures and personal struggles influence people's beliefs. This research further examines Jean Louise Finch's disenchantment with her father's changing views on race that portrays the generational and moral conflicts triggered by social transformation. The findings of this research are anticipated to offer profound understanding of how literature can mirror societal changes and offer valuable prescription for how the relation between history and literature can be understood.

**Index Terms**—Harper Lee, Shift of Views, racism, genetic structuralism, southern America in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literature occupies a critical role in society, serving both as an artistic expression and as a reflection of the cultural and historical contexts from which it emerges. As Ryan and Rivkin (2017) suggest, literature not only mirrors the society that produces it but also provides insights into the lived experiences and values of its time. It is a medium through which authors express thoughts and emotions, often rooted in their reflections on social phenomena (Junaid et al., 2024; Suma et al., 2024; Sahib et al., 2019). In this light, literature is more than a creative act—it serves as a lens to understand the complexities of social, political, and cultural conditions. According to Fauziyati and Sulistyansih (2020), the imaginative quality of literature arises from the author's interactions with their social environment, allowing for a deeper understanding of themes such as racism.

Racism, a pervasive issue throughout history, is often explored in literature as a means of exposing and critiquing social injustice. Defined as the belief in inherent racial hierarchies, racism is tied to broader social systems that marginalize certain groups while privileging others (Smedley, 2021). Literature, particularly when examined through the lens of sociology, becomes a powerful tool for understanding and challenging such biases. Rahman and Weda (2018) argue that literature functions as a social document, offering readers valuable insights into the historical and cultural realities of its time. This is particularly relevant in the study of works like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), where themes of race, justice, and morality are central.

In literary studies, one of the most prominent approaches to examining the connection between literature and society is genetic structuralism. This method, as developed by Lucien Goldmann, emphasizes the relationship between the structure of a literary work and the broader social structures that shape it. According to Goldmann (1981), literature is a meaningful structure that reflects societal norms and conflicts, revealing underlying social realities (Asha et al., 2022). By applying genetic structuralism to literary works, scholars can explore how narratives are shaped by and respond to their historical and social contexts.

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* is celebrated for its moral stance against racial injustice, with Atticus Finch standing as a symbol of virtue and empathy in the fight for equality. However, the publication of *Go Set a Watchman* (2015) complicated this image by presenting Finch as a character with deeply conservative and even racist beliefs. This

shift in Atticus Finch's portrayal has sparked critical debates about the evolution of racial themes in Lee's works and the complexities of moral progress in the American South.

The objective of this research is to analyze Atticus Finch's evolving views on racism as depicted in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), and to understand how this transformation mirrors the broader societal changes in mid-20th-century Southern America. Previous studies, such as Youssef (2018) and Sanmartín (2018), have explored the contrasting portrayals of Atticus Finch, while Nugraha et al. (2020) have examined character development from psychoanalytic perspectives. Asha (2022) focuses on anti-racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. While these studies offer valuable insights, this research will take a more comprehensive approach by applying Goldmann's genetic structuralism to connect Atticus Finch's changing racial attitudes with the social realities of the time.

By utilizing this approach, the research aims to offer new insights into how societal structures influence individual consciousness within literature. The study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how Harper Lee's works reflect the complexities of race and identity in American society, providing valuable perspectives for educators, policymakers, and social activists. Through a comparative analysis of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*, this research seeks to illuminate the broader cultural and historical forces shaping these iconic novels.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review serves to contextualize the current research within the existing body of knowledge and demonstrate how previous studies have addressed similar themes. This review highlights the scholarly consensus that literature is not merely an artistic form but also a social document that reflects and critiques societal conditions. Wellek and Warren (2014) argue that literature arises from the lived experiences of individuals, functioning as a medium through which authors engage with societal issues, including social values, norms, and prejudices. In particular, the sociology of literature views literary works as deeply embedded in the social fabric, providing insights into the conditions and values of the time in which they were created (Asha, 2022; Rahman & Amir, 2019; Sari et al., 2019).

One of the primary themes explored through literature is racism, a belief system that categorizes individuals based on race and perpetuates social hierarchies. According to Soudien (2015), this mindset fosters oppression and inequality, leading to the domination of certain racial groups over others. By examining literature within its sociological context, researchers can uncover how such biases are woven into cultural narratives and how these narratives both reflect and challenge social prejudices. This is particularly relevant in the case of Harper Lee's novels *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), both of which depict racism and its impact on Southern American society during pivotal historical moments.

The settings of these two novels reflect significant societal shifts in Southern America, particularly with regard to racial relations. Patterson (1996) discusses how the Great Depression exacerbated existing racial inequalities, while Klarman (2004) and Brinkley (2000) examine how landmark events in the 1950s, such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, signaled the intensification of civil rights struggles. Against this backdrop, *To Kill a Mockingbird* portrays Atticus Finch as a moral hero advocating for racial justice, while *Go Set a Watchman* complicates this image by presenting him as holding racist beliefs. Kakutani (2015) and Murphy (2015) note that this shift in Finch's character forces readers to confront the complexities of racial prejudice in the South, while Nocera (2015) argues that these contrasting portrayals should be viewed as part of Harper Lee's exploration of moral and racial complexity.

Several key studies have further examined the shifts in racial attitudes and character development in Lee's works. Youssef (2018) contrasts the idealistic Atticus Finch of *To Kill a Mockingbird* with the more pragmatic, and even prejudiced, character in *Go Set a Watchman*. This shift highlights the challenges of maintaining moral ideals in a society rife with racial tension. Similarly, Sanmartín (2018) analyzes Finch's transformation in the context of broader American themes of heroism, social class, and racial identity. Both studies underscore the sociopolitical factors influencing character evolution.

Nugraha et al. (2020) adopt a psychoanalytic framework to explore Jean Louise Finch's emotional, cognitive, and moral development across both novels. Although their approach differs from the current study's use of genetic structuralism, it similarly emphasizes character evolution in response to social and familial influences. Asha's (2020) research, focusing on anti-racism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, adds another layer to the conversation by identifying acts of resistance to racism in the novel. However, it does not address the transformation in racial attitudes between Lee's two works, a gap the present study aims to fill by employing Lucien Goldmann's genetic structuralism.

By building upon these studies, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how Harper Lee's portrayal of race evolves between *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*. Utilizing genetic structuralism allows for an exploration of how the worldview of a particular social group is embedded in literary structures, offering fresh insights into the dynamics of race, identity, and social change in Lee's novels. This approach not only examines the literary works themselves but also situates them within the broader historical and social context, thus contributing to the ongoing discourse on race in American literature.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This research examines Atticus Finch's change of thought regarding racism in two novels by Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* published in 1960 and *Go Set a Watchman* published in 2015 to have a broader projection of the portrayal of American South in mid-20th century. Besides, this research focuses on discussing how technically Atticus Finch's change of his attitude towards racism not only symbolizes his personal transformation but also representing the dynamic of race, justice, and equality. Furthermore, this research also concerns the ways in which Harper Lee's narratives interlink between the enactment of the clashes between the representatives of the civilizing process and the newly acquired consciousness and the changes in the novels' characters and their relations.

The research adopts Goldmann's genetic structuralism that was later merged with comparative analysis. Goldmann's approach provides a method for showing how aspect of society impacts character and thematic development in literature. On the other hand, comparative analysis places side by side the representation of racism, character relationship, and narrative strategies which both novels use to describe the process of the change of Atticus Finch's attitude to race and how it had evolved dynamically.

#### IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

##### A. Atticus Finch's Shift of View on Racism in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960) and *Go Set A Watchman* (2015)

In *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Atticus is shown as a man of strong principles and unwavering ethics. He believes in justice and equality, and he demonstrates these values in his defense of Tom Robinson, an African American man falsely accused of raping a white woman. Despite the community's prejudice and hostility, Atticus stands firm in his commitment to provide Robinson with a fair trial.

###### Data 1

*"I'm simply defending a Negro—his name's Tom Robinson. He lives in that little settlement beyond the town dump. He's a member of Calpurnia's church, and Cal knows his family well. She says they're clean-living folks. Jean Louise, you aren't old enough to understand some things yet, but there's been some high talk around town to the effect that I shouldn't do much about defending this man. It's a peculiar case—it won't come to trial until summer session. John Taylor was kind enough to give us a postponement..."* (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, p. 68)

As we can see above, Atticus chooses to defend Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman. His defence of Tom is based on the principles of justice and equality. Atticus knows the racial prejudice within the legal system will likely lead to a conviction, yet he persists in defending Tom to uphold justice and truth.

Other than that, Atticus is aware of the racial injustices and how they affect individuals like Tom Robinson. He articulates the irrationality of racism, particularly the community's response to anything involving a black person.

###### Data 2

*"Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don't pretend to understand... I just hope that Jem and Jean Louise come to me for their answers instead of listening to the town. I hope they trust me enough..."* (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, p. 81)

Furthermore, in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Atticus is acutely aware of the pervasive racial injustices that affect individuals like Tom Robinson. He understands that racism is not just a personal bias but a systemic issue that influences every aspect of society, including the legal system. Atticus's defence of Robinson is rooted in this awareness. He recognizes that Robinson's trial is not just a legal matter but a reflection of the broader societal prejudice against African Americans.

However, in *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), Atticus Finch's views on race and segregation supremely contrast with his portrayal in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). In the earlier novel, Atticus is depicted as a champion of justice and racial equality, but in *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), he is shown to hold segregationist and racist beliefs. His comments suggest that he supports the maintenance of racial segregation and doubts the feasibility of racial integration. For instance, when he questions:

###### Data 3

*"Have you ever considered that you can't have a set of backward people living among people advanced in one kind of civilization and have a social Arcadia?"* (*Go Set a Watchman*, pp. 160-161)

The data above shows that Atticus implies that racial segregation is necessary to preserve what he views as a harmonious society. Furthermore, Atticus's racist views are further highlighted by his objection to racial integration in public spaces. His question to Jean Louise:

###### Data 4

*"Do you want Negroes by the carload in our schools and churches and theatres? Do you want them in our world?"* (*Go Set a Watchman*, p. 163)

Atticus's statement above shows a deep-seated belief in racial hierarchies and a fear of integrating black individuals into white-dominated social institutions. This rhetoric reveals his alignment with the prejudiced attitudes of the time and contrasts sharply with the principles of equality and justice he espoused in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960).

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On another occasion in *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), Harper Lee shows Atticus Finch's opposition to organizations like the NAACP and his stance on voting rights for black individuals reflect his entrenched segregationist views and his perception of racial dynamics in the Southern America. His comments reveal a deep-seated resistance to social change and a belief in racial hierarchies.

**Data 6**

*"Then the NAACP stepped in with its fantastic demands and shoddy ideas of government — can you blame the South for resenting being told what to do about its own people by people who have no idea of its daily problems?"*

*"The NAACP doesn't care whether a Negro man owns or rents his land, how well he can farm, or whether or not he tries to learn a trade and stand on his own two feet—oh no, all the NAACP cares about is that man's vote."*

*"So, can you blame the South for wanting to resist an invasion by people who are apparently so ashamed of their race they want to get rid of it?" (Go Set a Watchman, p. 164)*

Atticus's criticism of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in *Go Set a Watchman* (2015) reveals his disdain for the organization and its efforts to advance civil rights. When he refers to the NAACP's "fantastic demands and shoddy ideas of government", he is expressing a belief that the NAACP's advocacy is out of touch with the realities and needs of the South. Atticus perceives the organization as an external force imposing solutions on a region with its own unique set of challenges. His comments suggest that he views the NAACP's efforts as misguided and detrimental to the social order he values.

In conclusion, the evolution of Atticus Finch's character from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) to *Go Set a Watchman* (2015) reveals a significant contrast in his views on race and justice. In the earlier novel, Atticus embodies the principles of equality and justice and stands firmly against racial prejudice by defending Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of rape. However, in *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), Atticus's character takes a drastic turn by expressing segregationist and racist beliefs that align with the prejudiced attitudes of his time. His opposition to racial integration and criticism of organizations like the NAACP highlight his deep-seated resistance to social change and reveal a complex character whose views on race have shifted significantly which then challenges the idealized image presented in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960).

**B. Jean Louise's Struggle With Atticus's Contradictory Values**

Harper Lee's novels cannot be separated from Jean Louise, the daughter of Atticus Finch who narrates both stories and undergoes a transformation in how she views her father. In *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Jean Louise sees Atticus as a moral hero and admires Atticus's unwavering commitment to justice and equality. Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson, a Black man falsely accused of raping a white woman, is essential in shaping Jean Louise's respect for him and her understanding of right and wrong. Atticus consistently teaches Jean Louise and Jem, Jean Louise's brother, the importance of empathy and respect for all people regardless of their race.

As depicted in Harper Lee's first novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Atticus actively corrects Jean Louise when she uses derogatory language or displays prejudice. For instance, when Jean Louise is upset by being called names and expresses her frustration, Atticus takes the opportunity to teach her an important lesson about dignity and respect. As can be seen below:

**Data 7**

*"I certainly am. I do my best to love everybody... I'm hard put, sometimes—baby, it's never an insult to be called what somebody thinks is a bad name. It just shows you how poor that person is, it doesn't hurt you" (To Kill a Mockingbird, p. 100)*

Atticus's response above reflects his belief that the true measure of a person's character is how they respond to others' negativity. Furthermore, when Jean Louise asks Atticus about defending African Americans and uses the derogatory term "nigger," Atticus responds by correcting her language. Atticus tells Jean Louise:

**Data 8**

*"Of course I do. Don't say nigger, Jean Louise. That's common." (To Kill a Mockingbird, p. 68)*

This correction above is significant because it depicts Atticus's belief in maintaining a standard of politeness and respect regardless of prevailing social norms. By addressing the term as "common," Atticus underscores that using such language is beneath the values he wishes to instill in his children.

However, In *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), Jean Louise's perception of Atticus undergoes a dramatic shift. As an adult returning to Maycomb, she discovers that her father holds segregationist beliefs and opposes civil rights advancements.

Atticus's support for racial segregation and his criticisms of organizations like the NAACP profoundly disillusion Jean Louise. She is confronted with the reality that the man she idolized and the values she associated with him are not as consistent as she once believed. This revelation causes Jean Louise to question her own values and the moral foundation she grew up with. Jean Louise's anxiety begins when she finds a racist pamphlet entitled "The Black Plague", which shocks Jean Louise and indicates a departure from his previously portrayed values.

**Data 9**

*"On its cover was a drawing of an anthropophagous Negro; above the drawing was printed The Black Plague. Its author was somebody with several academic degrees after his name. She opened the pamphlet, sat down in her father's chair, and began reading. When she had finished, she took the pamphlet by one of its corners, held it like she would hold a dead rat by the tail, and walked into the kitchen."* (Go Set a Watchman, p. 66)

As inferred from the scene above where Jean Louise finds Atticus' collection of racist pamphlets entitled The Black Plague, it represents a significant and troubling shift from his previously portrayed values in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Jean Louise's reaction to finding the pamphlet is one of shock and disgust. Her response, "handling the pamphlet as if it were a dead rat and then discarding it" symbolizes her revulsion and the deep sense of betrayal she feels. This moment marks a profound emotional and ideological conflict for Jean Louise, as it challenges her previously held admiration for her father and forces her to confront the reality of his beliefs.

Jean Louise's disappointment is escalated when she found that Atticus is a member of the Citizens' Council which then contributes to her sense of betrayal. It challenges her understanding of her father as a moral figure and forces her to confront the reality of his beliefs. This moment deepens her disillusionment and complicates her view of the values she was raised with. As we can see below:

**Data 9**

*Alexandra was talking to her: "I told you. It's something your father brought home from a citizens' council meeting."*

*"From a what?"*

*"From the Maycomb County Citizens' Council. Didn't you know we have one?"*

*"I did not."*

*"Well, your father's on the board of directors and Henry's one of the staunchest members."*

*Alexandra sighed. "Not that we really need one. Nothing's happened here in Maycomb yet, but it's always wise to be prepared. That's where they are this minute."* (Go Set a Watchman, p. 67)

Jean Louise is deeply disappointed and feels betrayed by her father's actions and associations. Her trust in Atticus is shattered as she grapples with the realization that he condones racist views. The man she had always seen as a moral exemplar, holds and condones racist views, profoundly affects her. The trust she had placed in him as a paragon of virtue and integrity is shattered. This betrayal is especially painful because Atticus was the one person she believed unequivocally embodied the principles of fairness and justice.

The realization that Atticus supports segregationist and racist views leaves Jean Louise feeling deeply disillusioned.

**Data 10**

*"The one human being she had ever fully and wholeheartedly trusted had failed her; the only man she had ever known to whom she could point and say with expert knowledge, 'He is a gentleman, in his heart he is a gentleman,' had betrayed her, publicly, grossly, and shamelessly"* (Go Set a Watchman, pp. 73-74)

The depiction above captures the intensity of her emotional response. Her sense of betrayal is not just about her father's actions but also about the dismantling of the moral foundation she had built around him. The betrayal Jean Louise feels is not just personal but ideological. Her father's participation in such a group feels like a betrayal of the principles of justice and equality that she thought he stood for. This moment encapsulates as she realizes that the people she idolized including her father are flawed and that she must navigate the moral complexities of adulthood on her own terms.

This realization is a significant moment in the novel, as it underscores the theme of moral complexity and the painful process of growing up. It challenges the black-and-white morality that Jean Louise once believed in and forces her to see her father as a human being with all the contradictions and imperfections that come with it.

**C. How To Kill a Mockingbird (1960) and Go Set a Watchman (2015) Portray the Complexities of Southern America in Mid-20th Century**

**(a). Societal Changes**

The transformation of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and *Go Set a Watchman* (2015) symbolically reflects the fluctuation of society and its conflicts in the Southern States during the mid-20th century. In the 1930s, the time of the action described in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), the society became more conscious of the African-Americans' rights but racism was still very present in the country. It is within this framework that Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson embodies the fight for justice. Even in the fifties and sixties, the time of *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), the conditions in the South became considerably tense due to the Civil Rights Movement. It is relevant that Atticus was

involved in the Citizens' Council and was a conservative because it shows that the Southerners were afraid of the progressive changes that were happening.

Thus, this change in Atticus's character reveals the brutality of the conflict between an individual's convictions and changing social paradigms. The theme of the Americans as a nation with heritage and tradition underlies the confusion of people including Atticus Finch when challenging racism. His evolution from a man of virtue to a racist illustrates how assumptions can remain rooted in once honorable individuals. In addition, the social tensions are well exemplified by Jean Louise's conflict with her father's new perception of the world, as it simultaneously helps her challenge her own values and belief systems. This signifies the major dilemma of many people to deal with the clash that existed between the received culture and morality and the progressive culture and morality of the new generation.

#### (b). *Moral Complexity and Internal Conflict*

The two representations of Atticus Finch illustrate the controversies of the character and his struggles within himself. Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is portrayed as a moral compass, who tries to remain truthful and fair in the face of hatred and prejudice. He is motivated by the belief that as a leader, he ought to do the right thing. However, in *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), Atticus becomes more conservative and politically torn. This indicates the shift from his earlier ideals which shows the complexity of grappling with societal change that alters his perception.

How Atticus changed over the course of the novel relates to the idea of the conflict between morality and social norms. It shows the limits in sustaining a perfectly moral approach to a situation throughout a paradigm shift based on the social context he is exposed to. It portrays a crucial conflict between personal morality and social expectations of which is characteristic of how societies' static values can come into contact with dynamic socio-cultural environments that compel a person to re-evaluate and sometimes reject the values that were once dear to them.

#### (c). *Generational Conflicts*

By being a young, educated woman, Jean Louise represents how the new generation horrified at what her father and so many others of the previous generation want to impose on their society. In a way, this generational strife is quite similar to the struggle typical for the Civil Rights movement where young people called for change and equality in the society.

Jean Louise for that matter was only able to grow up with the images and teachings of Atticus as her moral compass; thereby, having to deal with the harsh reality of his prejudices even if she only comes to realize it in the end that helps her to question her role in society. This is a microcosm of many people's dilemma regarding the increasing conflict between loyalty to his family and the change of mind set due to the advancement in the society. The transformation of Atticus's character also shows the difficulty to come to terms with deeply ingrained racism in one has considered to be a righteous man. This basically provides the essence of the challenges of exercising change at personal and societal level while dealing with traditions and beliefs that have been in existence for even generations.

### V. CONCLUSION

*To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and *Go Set a Watchman* (2015) depict two different characters of Atticus Finch, which reflects change in his personality and transformation in the social structure of the mid-20th century Southern America. To be more precise, Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is a perfect example of how a man of integrity and justice can act in the middle of racism of the 1930s. This can be seen through his efforts of supporting an African American man, Tom Robinson and teaching his children not to consider color but to consider a man as equal to them.

On the other hand, *Go Set a Watchman* (2015) portrays Atticus as a more traditional and in fact, a segregationist of the 1950s. This change in his character shows the struggle of an individual between his principles and the society's expectations during the period of social change. It also focuses on the theme of generational gap between Atticus and his daughter, Jean Louise who is disappointed by her father's transformation.

This transformation shows the struggle within the person and in the society during the period of Civil Rights movements together with the clash between the old and the new generations. The disappointment that Jean Louise feels towards her father can relate to the individual crises that people experienced when trying to adapt the received values to the changing realities. Finally, the contrast representations of Atticus Finch in these two novels serve to demonstrate the ethical dilemma of the struggle to live in the society that is in the process of transformation with the emergence of new values and the fight for their recognition.

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