

Of course Atticus Finch is a racist

By [David Henson](#)

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Of course Atticus Finch was a racist.

Atticus didn't defend Tom Robinson [because he was some great advocate for racial justice, but because it was his duty](#) to the law and a judge forced him to.

Atticus believed in the law first, not in equality.

And the law during *Mockingbird*? It allowed for segregation and overt white supremacy. Remember, it was an era of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, not *Brown v. Board of Education*.

And that context matters. Because Atticus never challenged the racism inherent in the law. He sought always to support it as ethically as he imagined possible. He never considered that in a racist legal system supporting the status quo of law itself was unethical.

And that's because, as we now know and should have always known, Atticus was a racist. He was born into a system of racism that was upheld and buttressed by the courts. His country and culture told him he was so superior by the color of his skin that he couldn't even share a water fountain with a black man. These racist assumptions, codified in the law, made the false accusations against Tom believable to the whites who held all the legal and cultural power in Maycomb.

In other words, the law Atticus so beloved and pledged his fealty to was a law rooted in white supremacy. It ensured no matter what Atticus did, nothing would ever truly change.

Justice would never be served.

Because Atticus aimed to uphold the law, not challenge its racist, violent, and unjust premises.

Eventually, the law turned against Atticus and people like him to an extent when it ruled to end segregation.

And so, like many white people, Atticus apparently turned against the law when it no longer ensured his overt racial supremacy. That's the context of *Go Set a Watchman*, Harper Lee's new novel.

Set against desegregation and the demand for racial equality in the U.S., *Watchman* reveals Atticus as an overt racist in the decades that follow *Mockingbird*. The reaction from many whites to this revelation has been one of abject horror and lament at the loss of this fictional white man.

Atticus has long been lauded as a white man who stood for truth and justice, an emblem of a white man who uses his privilege for good and makes a difference.

But I think this new novel and the reaction to it may reveal to us what Atticus really has stood for in the white imagination all these years.

He has been a symbol for the white savior complex.

And he remains the classic embodiment of the toxic and quietly racist idea that white people need to save helpless black people, and they can do it through the respectable means of the law. Atticus is the white hero who undoes an injustice, who stands against one instance racism, and who helps poor black folk all in a suit and spectacles.

He isn't just the white savior embodied. He [represents the understanding that white people can save the world one act of kindness at a time](#), one offer of charity that does more for one's image than for the world or the oppressed.

In truth, Atticus makes no lasting or structural difference. Segregation still stood after he defended Tom, and I would wager Tom wasn't the last man in Maycomb who would have been unjustly accused and tried for crimes solely because his skin color made him suspect.

I mean, how many more Toms have we seen just in the last year?

There are scores of these kinds of injustices and worse that continue to unfold today.

And how many more Atticus Finches have we seen, too—well-meaning white folks relying on law and order, feigning colorblindness to mask structural racism, and insisting on reserving judgment until all the facts are in and the courts have had their say?

No, Atticus didn't do much as a white person with social and economic power. In fact, he centers his very motivation in defending Tom on maintaining his own reputation and power in the town. And yet this tiny thing—following the rules of a law that upheld white supremacy—earned him the title of social justice warrior and even real-life statues erected in his honor.

So yes, Atticus is racist. And this white savior remains a hero to many white folks even today. And that's a problem now.

Because I'm convinced *To Kill a Mockingbird* isn't actually complete anymore without *Go Set a Watchman*.

And perhaps that will be the genius of Lee's *Watchman*. Maybe it will call white folks to grow up in terms of systemic racism and look at its violent complexity.

In *Mockingbird*, we see Atticus through the eyes of a child who believes her father a good and moral man who can save the world and bend it toward justice for black people.

In *Watchman*, it seems, we will see Atticus through the eyes of an adult who sees her father's true allegiance—white supremacy and segregation.

I only hope [that white people will follow Scout's lead and take a long, hard look at our assumptions and our heroes](#), to wake up from our naivety and fragility so that we can mature and grow up too.

When it comes to racism, may we white people live up to Harper Lee's description of Scout in *Watchman* and be a people who "when confronted with an easy way out, always took the hard way."

Originally posted at [Henson's blog](#)