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PRACTICE

Cross-Examining *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Three Questions Raised by *Go Set a Watchman*

SIERRA HOLMES

When Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman* was published this past summer, teachers who already teach Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* were faced with a decision about whether or not they would also teach the surprise sequel. With full curricula and already too little time each day, the simplest solution is to ignore *Watchman* and continue to teach *Mockingbird* as it has always been taught, as a stand-alone novel centered on the rectitude of Atticus Finch. Why teach another Finch family novel when teaching only one has worked just fine for so long? I argue, however, that *Go Set a Watchman* (*GSAW*) complicates the *To Kill a Mockingbird* (*TKAM*) narrative in a productive way, begging readers to revisit critical questions that are relevant to the world in which our students live. Those questions are presented not only as reasons to teach the novel, but also as lenses through which students might read it.

For me, and I suspect for many of you, *TKAM* is as much a part of each new school year as arranging the desks, organizing the book shelves, and filling the marker tray with twelve new Expos. It's just what I do. It is the main text in my school's first semester freshman English course and often my main concern every summer. Because for me, and I suspect for many of you, encouraging kids to not only read but also understand and engage with this novel is often one of the biggest challenges of the school year. I spend every summer thinking about what I could do differently or better this time around, and if online teachers' forums and social media are any indication, I am not alone. Those of us who are concerned with teaching *TKAM* well now have a new dilemma. Harper Lee's previously unknown novel, although written before *TKAM*, acts as a sequel, and a rather problematic one at that. What, after all, should we do with it? Must it inform our teaching of *TKAM*? Must we teach it with *TKAM*? If so, why? And if not, what do we lose by excluding it?

The answers to those questions depend largely upon our reasons for teaching *TKAM* in the first place. *GSAW*'s status as a sequel surely doesn't mandate its inclusion in our curricula. I am aware of many teachers who, over the past several years, have added Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* or Veronica Roth's *Divergent* to their curricula without also teaching *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay* or *Insurgent* and *Allegiant*. A sequel most always deals with some or all of the main themes of the first text, but that doesn't mean the first text does not, in and of itself, offer enough material for students to develop a deep(er) understanding of those themes. In my school, *TKAM* is taught as a coming-of-age story. It is meant to help students think through what makes them who they are and how both internal and societal conflicts shape an individual's character and beliefs. Certainly *TKAM* on its own provides a rich

context for discussion of those topics. But if *TKAM* is taught for the purposes of understanding how and why we become the people we are, as individuals and as a society, then it seems counter-productive to pretend it is the characters' entire story when we now know that it isn't. *GSAW* raises many of the same questions as *TKAM*, but it asks our students to develop more complex answers to those questions. The three questions discussed below, in particular, can be much more thoroughly answered by studying the two novels together than by studying *TKAM* alone.

What Does Racism Look Like?

Atticus is the noble, moral hero of *TKAM*, an embodiment of integrity in the face of overwhelming and sometimes frightening opposition. His legal defense of a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman earns him the ire of the community and forces him to face down a lynch mob. Nevertheless, he remains steadfast in his insistence that providing the accused with a competent defense is a moral obligation, even though it is well understood by all the characters—and all the readers—that no other attorney in Maycomb would be willing to do so. His words, more than any other character's, are etched in the memories of decades worth of readers. He tells Scout and Jem, "If I didn't [defend Tom Robinson] I couldn't hold up my head in town . . . Simply because we

were licked a hundred years before we started is no reason for us not to try to win” (pp. 75-76). It is his sense of personal responsibility for a case he knows he cannot win, and his impressive ability to rise above the violently racist attitudes of much of the community, that have made him an object of admiration since the book’s publication. On the surface, he does not seem to act like a racist, and his actions do not seem to be motivated by racism. How can he, then, be considered racist?

Some critics have pointed out that perhaps the widespread admiration of Atticus is undeserved. Monroe H. Freedman’s (1994) “Atticus Finch—Right and Wrong” points out that “Atticus Finch knows about the grinding, ever-present humiliation and degradation of the black people of Maycomb; he tolerates it; and sometimes he even trivializes and condones it” (p. 479). Freedman goes on to point out that Atticus did not, in fact, choose to represent Tom Robinson, but was instead appointed to do so. By defending Robinson, he is not being a hero but simply doing his job.

What’s more, Freedman argues, is that in all his time in the legislature, Atticus has, as far as we know, made no effort to improve the plight of Alabama’s black residents. He might be slightly more willing to properly defend a black man than his contemporaries, but he is no more eager to do so than they are (pp. 480-481). The implication seems to be that Atticus’s disinterest in actively working against racist laws and ideologies is just as indicative of racism as the actions of the group of men who threaten him outside the jail while he attempts to protect Tom Robinson. Their racism is active and his is passive, but he, like them, helps to propagate a racist social system.

If *TKAM* can, in and of itself, help students have a conversation about whether racism must include blatantly racist acts or whether it can also be composed of inaction, *GSAW* might seem unnecessary. Except it isn’t. Every time I’ve taught *TKAM*, I’ve asked my students to read David Margolick’s “At the Bar; To Attack A Lawyer In ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’: An Iconoclast Takes Aim At A Hero” (1992), in which Margolick summarizes some of Freedman’s arguments as expressed in his column in the *Legal Times*, pointing out a seemingly endless string of evidence to suggest that Atticus is not only racist but also sexist. My students invariably react strongly to the article—they are,

after all, strongly attached to the idea of Atticus as an upstanding, honorable, anti-racist hero. They hope they, if faced with the same situation, would handle it the way he does. I know, because they tell me so regularly in their assignments.

For that reason, it’s easy to imagine that my students would be just as shocked as Scout, who in *GSAW* often goes by her given name Jean Louise, to hear her father’s reason for accepting another case that requires the defense of a black man. This time, that man is the grandson of the Finch family’s beloved former maid, Calpurnia. Scout is relieved to hear that Atticus will take the case, assuming he is motivated by a

desire to help a family that means a great deal to his own and ensure a proper defense of a man who would likely not otherwise receive one. Readers can almost feel her jaw—and their own—hit the floor when Atticus tells her he is accepting the case so that a lawyer from the NAACP will not become involved and do what the organization has done in other cases: “demand Negroes on the juries...subpoena the jury commissioners...ask the judge to step down,... [or] get the case into a Federal court where they know the cards are stacked in their favor” (p. 149). In other words, by taking the case Atticus can ensure that Calpurnia’s grandson gets an adequate defense—but not one that might advance the broader cause of fair treatment for black citizens in a courtroom. His choice to take the case appears to be motivated by egalitarian sentiment, but it isn’t. His actions don’t speak nearly as loudly as his words.

But is it as easy as that? Are readers supposed to reclassify Atticus as a racist so quickly? Near the end of *GSAW*, his brother, Jack, tries to help Scout understand her father’s actions:

...the Klan can parade around all it wants, but when it starts bombing and beating people, don’t you know who’d be the first to try and stop it?...The law is what he lives by. He’ll do his best to prevent someone from beating up somebody else, then he’ll turn around and try to stop no less than the Federal Government . . . (p. 268)

The question is, does that explanation adequately explain away Atticus’s racist ideas? Does the fact that he believes in doing his lawyerly duty—and no more—excuse his participation in and facilitation of the institutionalized racism in the legal system? Is his devotion to the law just a convenient

mask for racist sentiments? Students who wrestle with the difference between the Atticus in *TKAM* and the Atticus in *GSAW* have an opportunity to form a much deeper understanding of the complexities of racism than those who read *TKAM* alone.

How Does Power Affect Personal Relationships?

Perhaps one of the most unusual relationships in *TKAM* is that between the Finch family and their maid, Calpurnia. Atticus treats Calpurnia with more respect than readers might expect a southern white employer to have for his black maid in the 1930s, even telling his obstinate sister that Calpurnia is “a

faithful member of [the] family” who will be welcome in the Finch home for as long as she chooses to work there (p. 137). Scout and Jem are clearly attached to Calpurnia, which makes sense as she functions as their primary caregiver. Although Scout sometimes laments how strict Calpurnia is, she

also knows Cal cares very deeply for her and Jem.

For a teenage reader, it is easy to see the relationship between Calpurnia and the Finch family as evidence that not all white people were racist, and that it is entirely individual attitudes, not societal hierarchies, that determine the quality of relationships between people of different races.

In other words, the relationship between Calpurnia and the Finch family in *TKAM* can be read in such a way that it reinforces the narrative the kids in my classroom, understandably, often believe: as long as they are kind to people

of other races, they are not complicit in the existence of racism.

GSAW turns that narrative on its head. Upon learning of Calpurnia’s grandson’s case, Jean Louise decides to visit Calpurnia’s home. *TKAM* readers who remember the care with which she treated Scout in her childhood might be expecting a very warm welcome for the adult Jean Louise, but that isn’t exactly what happens. Everyone is polite, yes, and welcomes her into their home, but it is Calpurnia herself in whom Scout notices a change. She quickly recognizes that Calpurnia is more distant toward her than she has ever been in the past, speaking and carrying herself the way Scout has always seen her do in the presence of “company,” namely white adults who expected her to behave submissively toward them. Scout cannot bear the change, crying “Cal, Cal, Cal, what are you doing to me? What’s the matter? I’m your baby, have you forgotten me? Why are you shutting me out? What are you doing to me?” (p. 159). Calpurnia’s response shatters Scout even more: “What are you all doing to us?” (p. 160).

Calpurnia makes it abundantly clear that she is part of a group Jean Louise can never join and whose oppression Jean Louise can never fully understand, because she is one of the oppressors. Certainly Jean Louise wants the best for Calpurnia’s family, and certainly she has never done anything to directly hurt that family. The issue is not what she herself has done, but what she and other white people have done and can do. Jean Louise belongs to a racial group that has used its power to make life incredibly difficult for Calpurnia’s racial group, and continues to do so. Their relationship is tainted by the unequal balance of power. That Calpurnia would identify Jean Louise as part of the problem might

surprise students who see Jean Louise’s disgust with the community’s racism as evidence of her lack thereof. In that way, *GSAW* asks students to consider how, in times of social conflict, power might be interpreted as responsibility. It requires them to consider how outside forces can and do impact individual relationships.

Can We Really Overcome Society’s Influence?

Individualism is a central tenet of American culture. Children are admonished to be themselves, be unique, and be unafraid to stand out. You decide who you are, says the conventional wisdom, and your behaviors and beliefs are a choice for which nothing and nobody is responsible but you. In *TKAM*, Atticus is the character who has most risen above societal influence. He treats the black population with respect other members of the community do not feel they deserve. His actions and his words are an indictment of the prevailing attitudes of the time and place in which he lives. But all human beings, Atticus included, are situated within a complex social system. *GSAW* reveals just how much that system influences him. His motives are not always pure, and his actions do not always speak for themselves.

In *GSAW*, it is Jean Louise, not Atticus, who seems to have gained the moral high ground. Her father’s actions during her childhood, and her childhood perceptions of what those actions meant, have left her with much stronger anti-racist convictions than his own. Readers eager to hold onto the idealism of *TKAM* can cling to moments like the one when Scout rails against the ignorant claims made in a racist pamphlet she discovers in her

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father's house (p. 103). And those readers are likely to feel just as ill as Scout does when she witnesses her father's participation on a hate-mongering citizen's council (pp.110-111). It would be easy to transfer the hero worship many readers direct toward the Atticus of *TKAM* to the Scout of *GSAM*. But even she admits to her uncle that she does not "especially want to run out and marry a Negro or something" (p. 270).

Despite her revulsion at the more vehement racism by which she is surrounded, she does maintain certain prejudices of her own. She is not completely free from the power of societal influence, but she initially gives no indication that she recognizes her own statement as indicative of that prejudice. If Atticus is still driven by the prevailing ideology of the time and place in which he lives, and if Jean Louise, even after spending a significant amount of time outside Maycomb, has not been able to completely extract herself from that ideology, student readers are left to wonder whether anybody, even someone who actively dislikes the dominant culture, can ever really escape it.

Teachers and schools that currently teach *TKAM* will have to choose whether to teach *GSAM* in full, in part, or not at all. Since none of us have all sorts of extra class time to be filled, the decision will not be an easy one. There is no question that *TKAM* is a worthwhile text on its own and that the teachers who have been teaching it well for decades can continue to do so in a way that benefits their students. That said, given that our students are coming of age in an era when racial inequality, in all its forms, is a regular topic on the nightly news, there is benefit to complicating *TKAM*'s narrative. There is benefit to asking our students to grapple with complex questions about the nature of

racism and the relationships between race, power, social pressure, and individual conscience. *TKAM* first provided our students a basis for answering those questions. *GSAM* gives them a good reason to revisit—and revise—their answers.

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