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Shifting Sands: Loss of Innocence in Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*

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Abstract

Go Set a Watchman, an unexpected literary work from Harper Lee, the author of *Mocking Bird*, published amidst lot of speculation did not disappoint readers or critics. Lot of questions were raised on the reasons and timing of publication. The novel went on to be a success as it was read and re-read by critics and readers to discern the reasons behind its publication. The protagonist, Jean Louise Scout of *Watchman* is the much-loved child, Scout in the *Mockingbird*. She is a grown-up woman in the novel, who still idolizes her father. The article studies the fight between Jean Louise Scout and Atticus regarding the White/Black dichotomy apparent in Maycomb as depicted by Harper Lee in *Go Set a Watchman*. The publication of this novel leads to the loss of innocence at two levels. In the first case, the innocence present in the *Mockingbird* is lost as she encounters her father as a human being rather than the idol she created. With the help of her uncle, Jack she comes to understand the reality and the dichotomy in Maycomb. All the characters in *Mockingbird* appear gray rather than white on reading this novel. In the second case, Jean

Louise loses her innocent love for her father and comprehends that he is a human being and bound to err. The article attempts to briefly study the events that lead to the loss of the innocence and Jean Louise's efforts to come to terms with the new revelations.

Keywords

Loss of Innocence; *Go Set a Watchman*; Harper Lee; and Jean Louise Scout

Contrary to wide publicity given by the publishers, *Go Set a Watchman* is not a sequel to *To Kill a Mockingbird* but only an earlier draft of *Mockingbird* (2). *Go Set a Watchman* is based on a theme of discovery and disillusionment of bigotry. The novel is set twenty years after the time period in *Mockingbird*. The protagonist, Jean Louise Scout, is shocked after the chance discovery of a pamphlet, "The Black Plague" in her father's papers. She is extremely hurt and disappointed after overhearing her father's participation and introduction speech in the court house. Harper Lee uses a rare narrative technique of interweaving scepticism and compassion in this novel. The language Lee uses is exquisite, as in "[s]he touched yesterday cautiously, then withdrew" (142) and reminds the readers of *Mockingbird* at many places.

The title of the novel is based on a line in King James version of the Bible, Isaiah 21:6: "For thus hath the Lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth" [1].

On a Sunday, the minister of Maycomb's church, Mr. Stone, begins his address with a quote from the Bible: "He opened it [the Bible] said, "My text for today is taken from the twenty-first chapter of Isaiah, verse six: *For thus hath the lord said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth*" (95). God tells Isaiah, a prophet, to watch over Israel, guide the Hebrews, and show them the right path. Later on, after her understanding or misunderstanding of her father's intentions, she would recall Mr. Stone's sermon:

Mr. Stone set a watchman in church yesterday. He should have provided me with one. I need a watchman to lead me around and declare what he seeth every hour on the hour. I need a watchman to tell me this is what a man says but this is what he means, to draw a line down the middle and say here is this justice and there is that just justice and make me understand the difference. I need a watchman to go forth and proclaim to them all that twenty-six years is too long to a play a joke on anybody, no matter how funny it is. (182)

Eagerly awaited by a faithful audience, the novel did not disappoint the readers. Though the existence of the novel was surprising, and was published amidst chaos and controversies, the reception of the novel was remarkable.

Jean Louise's father, Atticus is described as "never a rich man, but he was the richest man his children ever knew":

"Integrity, humour, and patience were the three words for Atticus Finch. There was also a phrase for him: pick at random any citizen from Maycomb County and its environs, ask him what he thought of Atticus Finch, and the answer would most likely be, "I never had a better friend." (114)

But again in the narration it is given to understand that Calpurnia who worked for decades in that home is not happy with Atticus and his family. Jean Louise questions his integrity and the story is actually a confrontation between the father and the daughter regarding his deviation from the pedestal where he was put up by his daughter.

The plot of the novel begins when Jean Louise returns to Maycomb from New York on a two-week yearly visit only to find a transformed Maycomb:

Something that looked like a giant black bee whooshed by them and careened around the curve ahead. She sat up, startled, "What was that?"

“Carload of Negroes.”

“Mercy, what do they think they’re doing?”

“That’s the way they assert themselves these days,” Henry said.

“They’ve got enough money to buy used cars, and they get out on the highway like ninety-to-nothing. They’re a public menace.”

“Driver’s licenses?”

“Not many. No insurance either. ”

“Golly, what if something happens?”

“It’s just too sad.” (80)

This dialogue occurs immediately after Jean Louise and Henry go on an outing to Finch’s land at night. On a whim they end up swimming in the river with their clothes on. The next day the town is agog with rumours that Jean Louise and Henry were swimming naked in the river. Jean Louise is from New York and it is given to understand that she lunched in restaurants frequented by African Americans. Given this background, the prejudice of Jean Louise in wondering about the black people’s audacity becomes interesting. This is a preamble to comprehend Scout’s naivety that she expects to find Maycomb unchanged from her childhood.

This dialogue is immediately followed by her discovery of a questionable pamphlet “The Black Plague” on her father’s table. Jean Louise argues with her aunt, Alexandra who says that there is a lot of truth in the pamphlet and the book written by Dr. Joseph Goebbels, a German politician and close associate of Adolf Hitler. Jean Louise’s cynicism comes out in this dialogue:

Yes indeed,” said Jean Louise wryly. “I especially liked the part where the Negroes, bless their hearts, couldn’t help being inferior to the white race because their skulls are thicker and their brain-pans shallower—whatever that means—so we must all be very kind to them and not let them do anything to hurt themselves and keep them in their places. Good God, Aunty— (102)

From these two dialogues, the readers can understand that though Scout is arguing for the African Americans, it is evident that she did expect Maycomb to remain unchanged from her childhood.

After the argument with her aunt, Jean Louise follows her father to Maycomb Citizens' Council meeting and is aghast when her father introduces a man who aggressively conveys his racial ideas to the assembled citizens. Jean Louise comprehends that her father is supporting the ideology and is horrified to realize that her father is a racist. Jean Louise's world is torn asunder by this revelation:

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. (113)

Lee lays bare the average American's conscience in the backdrop of American Supreme Court's decision to award full civil rights to all citizens irrespective of race and gender and the clamour of NAACP.

As the story progresses, it is learnt that Calpurnia's grandson, Frank, killed a drunken white pedestrian while speeding in his car. Vested interests are attributed to Atticus agreeing to defend Calpurnia's grandson like avoiding the involvement of NAACP. When Scout goes to visit Calpurnia, she understands that she is not welcome. She senses that Calpurnia and her family do not have trust in her father or her anymore.

The town, Maycomb, plays an important role in the narrative, as in the *Mockingbird*. When Jean Louise watches her father in the court house, she turns to Maycomb for solace, which fails to come.

She walked down the steps and into the shade of a live oak. She put her arm out and leaned against the trunk. She looked at

Maycomb, and her throat tightened: Maycomb was looking back at her.

Go away, the old buildings said. There is no place for you here.
You are not wanted. We have secrets. (111)

Talking about her childhood friend, Henry also does not help her much. He enquires whether she is aware that men should “conform to certain demands of the community they live in simply so they can be of service to it?” (230).

Uncle Jack, Atticus’s brother plays a major role in resolving the conflict between Jean Louise and her father. He is a surprise element in the novel; as Jean Louise spars with Atticus, he emerges to bring semblance of sanity in their minds and hearts. At the end of the novel, adding yet another poignant note to the narrative, it is revealed that Jack was in love with Jean Louise’s dead mother and thus has the children’s best interests at heart. He tells her that “[e]very man’s island, Jean Louise, every man’s watchman, is his conscience. There is no such thing as collective conscience” (265). He makes her realize that she confused her conscience with her father’s conscience. He makes her understand that she put her father on a pedestal and confused him with God. Uncle Jack’s talk helps enlightenment dawn on her as she realizes that her father is a human being and is bound to make his own decisions based on his conscience and is vulnerable to make blunders sometimes.

Uncle Jack also helps her understand the situation that developed in Southern America, especially in Maycomb, immediately after the American Supreme Court sanctioned the civil rights for all the citizens. The controversy between NAACP and the biased white, Jack enlightens as: “Prejudice, a dirty word, and faith a clean one, have something in common: they both begin where reason ends” (271). He urges her to return to Maycomb, telling her that Maycomb needs her and friends need her when they are wrong. He says that it takes “a certain kind of maturity to live in the South these days.” He further

tells her that she does not possess it yet but has the “shadow of beginnings of it” (273). “Remember this also: it’s always easy to look back and see what we were, yesterday, ten years ago. It is hard to see what we are. If you can master that trick, you’ll get along” (269)

In truth, he is urging her to be the watchman of Maycomb, set the people on the right path before the town and the townsmen are destroyed by the malevolence they are nurturing in their hearts. He explains to Jean Louise that throughout the South, men like her father are “fighting a sort of rearguard, delaying action to preserve a certain kind of philosophy that’s almost gone down the drain. . .” (188).

In reality, Uncle Jack’s arguments overpower her and complicate matters for her. Eventually, when she really understands her father, Jean Louise says to herself, “Dear goodness, the things I learned. I did not want my world disturbed, but I wanted to crush the man who’s trying to preserve it for me” (277). Finally, she grasps, with the help of Uncle Jack that Atticus and he knew long before that this situation would arise and they wondered how it would resolve. Atticus knew that Jean Louise modelled her conscience on her father’s conscience and it would break her world if she did not understand what Atticus was actually trying to do in Maycomb. Uncle Jack helps her to a certain extent to come to terms with life and the changing circumstances. These incidents are the reason for Jean Louise to lose her childhood love and faith in her father and comprehends that he is a human being with flaws.

Apart from Atticus falling down from the scales of his daughter, Jean Louise; the greatest disappointment with the novel is, the totally unexpected and unwarranted death of Jem, Jean Louise’s brother and the absence of Dill, their creative friend. The novel doesn’t explain the death of Jem or the coming to terms of Scout regarding his death.

Studies reveal that the novel *Mockingbird* was developed from the novel *Go Set a Watchman* [2]. Also some critics voiced that the publishing of

Watchman actually obliterated the innocence present in *Mockingbird*. Lee first wrote *Go Set a Watchman* and submitted it to Tay Hohoff [2], and on Hohoff's insistence worked for around two years to bring out *Mockingbird*. The change of a plot from a novel with a theme of confrontation between a father and daughter to a warm story of a Southern household which pulls at the readers' heart strings is absolutely astounding. *Mockingbird* a novel whose origin is *Watchman*, brings out humanism to the core whereas *Watchman* emphasizes on the skepticism and distrust among townsfolk. Critics like Michiko Kakutani find this development of the novel very interesting. This could actually be a promising topic of research for many further studies.

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