

**The Evolution of Atticus Finch AND  
A Lesson on Civil Discourse  
from Harper Lee**

**Association of Corporate Counsel  
Houston**

**October 20, 2020**

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by putting them on the cover of its June 24, 2018, Book Review Section under the headline “Mockingbird Reconsidered.”

This character study is important because the Atticus Finch of *To Kill a Mockingbird* provided the legal profession with its ultimate role model for over half a century, until he fell out of favor after *Go Set a Watchman* came out in 2015. Thus, how Harper Lee's portrayal of her attorney-father character is ultimately perceived should have significance to those who aspire for lawyers to be viewed favorably in our society.

Connecting the dots necessary to understand this man requires an awareness of certain facts that serve to underlay a logical though inferential conclusion.

### There Is No Line Between Fiction and Non-Fiction in Assessing Atticus Finch and A.C. Lee

In the first four years after *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s release, Harper Lee allowed herself to be interviewed by the media until she fled her celebrity status and pulled off what Santopietro calls “one of the most famous disappearing acts in the history of American letters.” In her interviews, she repeatedly acknowledged that Atticus Finch had been inspired by her father.

Crespino's book makes it clear that A.C. Lee was far more than a mere inspiration for Atticus. They were basically the same man, and Harper Lee's two novels provide a biographical profile of many key parts in the life of her father. Both Atticus and A.C. were formal, principled gentlemen and dressed accordingly—wearing suits and ties in almost all their activities. On the domestic front, both acted as single parents,<sup>2</sup> allowing their adoring children to call them “Atticus” and “A.C.” instead of “Dad,” and relied on African-American housekeepers to keep the train on their homefront's tracks. On the legal side, both were highly respected small-town attorneys who served as lawmakers in the Alabama Legislature. Both also accepted the responsibility of representing innocent black defendants wrongly accused of committing felonies against white victims and despite their best efforts, lost their trials in verdicts handed down by all-white juries. On the subject of politics, both were moderate conservatives who called themselves “Jeffersonian Democrats” given their belief that voting was a right to be exercised only by those who fully understood the issues. Both favored gradualism when it came to social change, believed that there were real differences between the races besides skin color, favored law and order over equal opportunity, and opposed any outside interference from either the federal government or the NAACP in the administration of state and local affairs. Because of such beliefs, both were devastated by the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decisions in 1954 and 1955, where in the second opinion, the court held that public school integration should take place “with all deliberate

speed.” To the dismay of their daughters, both responded to *Brown* by joining the local chapter of the White Citizens' Council hoping to slow down the school integration timetable to a schedule more “deliberate” than “speedy,” though both were appalled by the militant tactics of the Ku Klux Klan aimed at stopping integration.

Because Atticus Finch *was* A.C. Lee, fiction and non-fiction must necessarily be interwoven in attempting to understand this real-life character.

### Like Abraham Lincoln, A.C. Lee's Perspective on Race Relations Changed Over His Lifetime

How could the same person demonstrate a high level of respect to the black people with whom he worked and also vigorously defend African-Americans in a criminal trial where the death penalty was on the line, yet oppose racial equality in educational opportunity?

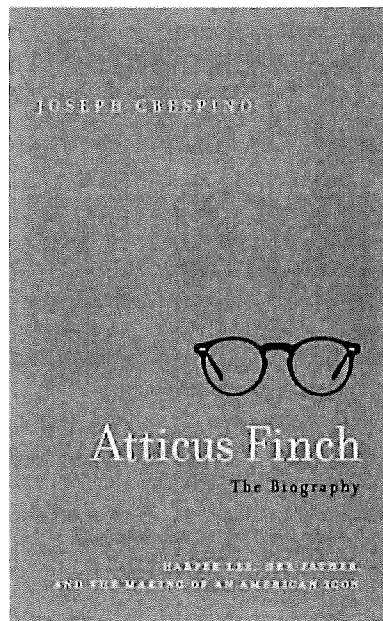
Crespino determined that like many deep-thinking, born-and-bred Southerners of his era, A.C. Lee found “the moral calculus of Jim Crow law and politics was considerably more complicated” until the time of his death, which occurred two years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 brought an end to Jim Crow. Along the same lines, Abraham Lincoln found the moral calculus of slavery and politics extremely complicated until the time of his death in 1865.

For someone seeking to analyze why A.C. Lee and Lincoln found the combination of the hot button racial issues of their day and politics “complicated” requires the analyst to fulfill the admonition Atticus Finch gave Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

That empathetic challenge is particularly difficult when the subjects under scrutiny lived in the distant past. Many otherwise intelligent people in the 21st century look back on some of America's historic figures and view them only with a modern-day social consciousness, especially when it comes to examining the lives of those who spent time on the political front lines in America's struggle with race relations.

History reveals that some of our most enlightened thinkers on race relations often began their life journeys as products of their times, influenced by upbringings and environments overloaded with racial prejudice and the treacherous political realities of their eras. Well before Abraham Lincoln gained clarity on ending slavery he made statements and took racist positions that are alarming to those disinclined to climb into Lincoln's skin as a human being in his time and place and instead want to evaluate him only with their 21st-century social consciousness.

Only four years before Lincoln gained emancipation enlightenment in 1862, he made the following statement during the fourth Lincoln-Douglas debate in Charleston, Illinois, on



September 18, 1858:

"There is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality ... While they do remain together there must be a position of superior and inferior and I am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race."

Harvard Business School professor Nancy Koehn provides a tight chronology of the evolution of Lincoln's thoughts and deeds on slavery in her recent book *Forged in Crises: The Power of Courageous Leadership in Turbulent Times* (Scribner 2017). She begins by recognizing that his life journey of thinking on the issue did not start in a good place since he "had grown up among other whites who, at worst, hated Negroes, and at best, tolerated them. Not surprisingly, Lincoln absorbed and reflected these prejudices, even as he expressed antipathy toward slavery." Then, during his political career, in the seven years between the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and when he made the decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Lincoln "built the structure of his thinking brick by brick" and "amended his judgment" in an attempt "to get right with himself about the meaning of slavery and what he should do in regard to this momentous issue."

Lincoln's statement at the debate mirrors what A.C. Lee told his daughter in 1956 in the aftermath of the *Brown* decision, when he called African-Americans "backward people" who were "still in their childhood," and most were not "responsible" enough to know how to vote. Coming from that perspective, Atticus Finch asked Jean Louise in *Watchman*, "Do you want your children going to a school that's been dragged down to accommodate Negro children?"

How could Lee say such things? Analysis surely should begin with his growing up in southern Alabama, where he had grown up among other whites who, at worst, hated African-Americans and, at best, tolerated them, and had absorbed and reflected these prejudices.

Just as Lincoln gained clarity as his mind evolved in the midst of a rapidly changing world, so too did A.C. Lee's on the most prudent course of action for advancing race relations as he amended his judgment and finally got right with himself about civil rights amidst certain events that occurred between 1957 and 1960—i.e., after the time his daughter portrayed him in *Watchman*. Santopietro relies on Auburn University professor Wayne Flynt's memoir, *Mockingbird Songs: My Friendship with Harper Lee* (Harper 2017), and historian Charles Shields' well researched biography, *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee from Scout to Go Set a Watchman* (Henry Holt & Co. 2016), in describing how A.C. Lee changed his perspective on race relations during the time his daughter wrote *Mockingbird* from the fall of 1957 until she turned in the final product to her publisher in November 1959:

"He spoke out against the Ku Klux Klan, bluntly telling a reporter interviewing his daughter that the reapportionment of voting districts to help black voters was important: 'It's got to be done.' In the view of Wayne Flynt, 'His Methodist

upbringing had persuaded him that the Kingdom of God was as much concerned with justice in Alabama as with heaven in the hereafter.' Said Charles Shields, 'By the time *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published, A.C. counted himself an activist in defending the civil rights of Negroes.'"

Unfortunately for A.C. Lee's legacy, *Watchman* was the last book written about his life's final years, and it chronicled his thinking on race only as it existed in 1956. His daughter never wrote anything else that expressly detailed his consciousness transformation in his post-*Watchman* years during the late 1950s.

What happened that could have changed A.C. Lee's thinking on race after 1956 at a time when he was well into his life's seventh decade? As Crespino details in his book, many circumstances in those years likely influenced him. In Monroeville, Alabama, the moderate, young leaders of the White Citizens' Council, who initially aspired to peacefully delay integration of their schools, ultimately became dominated and radicalized by militant Klan segregationists. Beginning in 1957, the Klan tried intimidating their opponents by burning crosses at strategic locations in Monroe County, firing shots into black-owned businesses, marching into revival meetings, and parading around Monroeville like Nazis. Then John Patterson—supposedly supported by the KKK—was elected governor of Alabama in 1958. Then the *Monroe Journal*—which had featured thoughtful editorials of its then-owner A.C. Lee from 1929 to 1947—in the late 1950s became filled with racists' rants. The final straw may have been in 1959 when area bigots sought to exclude African-Americans from marching in Monroeville's annual Christmas parade, which led to its cancellation. Such activities not only turned A.C. Lee's stomach, but they also changed his mind about who was in the right and who was in the wrong about the need to advance civil rights.

On the national scene during A.C. Lee's transformational years, the most important event was President Eisenhower's sending troops to Little Rock's Central High School in September 1957 to effect integration and thereby enforce the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision. Since A.C. Lee had supported Eisenhower in the 1952 and 1956 elections, he surely concluded that if Ike interpreted the Supreme Court's ambiguous ruling (that school integration should take place "with all deliberate speed") to mean that it should begin two years after the decision came down, in time for the start of the 1957 school year, then it no longer made sense for anyone to advocate for a longer timetable. Thus, case closed, and the time had come to move forward.

The fact that the historical record regarding A.C. Lee and the literary record of his alter ego Atticus Finch's perspective on race relations did not stay in a mode of constant enlightenment during his adult life, but rather evolved over time, is surely what caused playwright Aaron Sorkin to create a new version of the character in the production of *To Kill a Mockingbird* slated to open on Broadway in December 2018. Sorkin's script originally called for Atticus to transform himself during the play from being a defender of the segregated status quo (i.e., like his character in *Go Set a Watchman*) into the civil rights crusader he was from beginning to end in *Mockingbird*. Upon reading Sorkin's new multi-dimensional spin on Atticus,

lawyer Tonja Carter initiated a lawsuit on behalf of Harper Lee's estate this past March seeking to enjoin the show's opening on the grounds that the playwright had materially changed the show's leading character, in violation of the contract Harper Lee had signed shortly prior to her death that authorized the play's being produced and performed. The parties resolved the suit a few months ago under the terms of a confidential settlement agreement, meaning the world now waits to see whether Jeff Daniels' portrayal of Atticus Finch on Broadway this winter will align with Gregory Peck's saint-like depiction of him in the movie or else be more nuanced such that he will appear as a man whose position on civil rights and equal justice has a dark side for at least the first part of the play.

### A.C. Lee's Transformation on Race From 1957 to 1959 Surely Impacted How His Daughter Described Him in *Mockingbird* as She Wrote Her Book

A.C. Lee's higher level of consciousness on race relations emerged during the exact time when his daughter typed away on *To Kill a Mockingbird* under the watchful eye and sharp pencil of her esteemed editor, Tay Hohoff, who guided the author in rewriting the novel three times from 1957 to 1959. The final product made no mention of her father's having seen the errors of his 1956 White Citizens' Council ways, since the story in *Mockingbird* took place during the Great Depression when Jean Louise "Scout" Finch was a young girl and Atticus practiced law in the prime of his career, more than 20 years before *Watchman's* setting in 1956. Regardless of the earlier time setting in her second memoir-novel, *Watchman* clearly portrayed a dramatically different lawyer and father figure than the man portrayed in her first book. In *Mockingbird*, unlike in *Watchman*, Atticus Finch was a man whose *only* thoughts as far as African-Americans were concerned were to treat them with total respect and do his best to provide them with equal justice.

In his every word and deed in *Mockingbird*, through his young daughter's eyes, Atticus Finch was not the racist Jean Louise had called him in *Watchman*; rather, he was the moral exemplar to his entire community. Yes, admittedly, young children usually view their parents more favorably than how they see them a couple of decades down the road. Still, in *Mockingbird*, Harper Lee gave Scout-Jean Louise two different personas: the girl protagonist who's less than 10 years old and the mature grown woman who looks back at her life and narrates the book intermittently. This elder version of Jean Louise in *Mockingbird* (who we know from *Watchman* did not regard her father as having a morally perfect heart and mind) nonetheless presents a civil rights-equal justice parable where her father makes no mistakes at all in every circumstance he encounters and every word he speaks.

Though by all accounts, Harper Lee viewed her father as a highly virtuous man during her childhood, he definitely had fallen from grace in her eyes during 1956 when she spent much of the year in Monroeville taking care of him after he suffered a heart attack—though he still managed to attend White Citizens' Council meetings and speak his mind on why immediate school integration was the wrong thing to do. Her bitter disillusionment toward her father from their arguments

over school integration and his Citizens' Council participation somehow evaporated as she described him in *Mockingbird* from 1957 to 1959.

Clearly, *something happened* to inspire Harper Lee to elevate her father back up onto the pedestal where he had been before he started opposing school integration. The most obvious and logical changed circumstance that could have inspired the budding author to change her assessment of her father and put herself back into a mode of hero worship was her recognition of his new enlightened perspective on civil rights that not coincidentally aligned squarely with her position as she had expressed it in *Watchman*.

Although Harper Lee's publisher Lippincott rejected *Go Set a Watchman* in 1957, Hohoff saw in the young author the potential to create a powerful and potentially important book at a flashpoint in civil rights history if the young Alabamian could find a way to use her ample literary skills not to argue politics but to tell a carefully plotted, nuanced tale about simmering black-white tensions from an earlier time that would still pack real punch during America's racial uncertainty of the 1950s and 1960s.

When *Mockingbird* became Harper Lee's first published book in July 1960, the country's racial powder keg had started to ignite following Martin Luther King Jr.'s protests and jailings, which prompted the Freedom Riders to arrive and get pummeled in 1961, which led to George Wallace's advocating "segregation forever" in early 1963, which set the stage for Bull Connor's fire hose and attack dog war on African-Americans in Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963. National racial strife reared its head, the likes of which had not been seen since the Civil War.

Just as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stirred the nation's soul about the evils of slavery in the 19th century, the release of *Mockingbird* in 1960 followed by the blockbuster film in late December 1962, triggered a viral wake-up call that raised consciousness throughout the country about racism's evils and the need to put civil rights and equal justice on a faster track in the 20th century.

This message to the multitudes rang out loud and clear because the character Atticus Finch had the rare combination of being an appealing, flesh-and-blood, morally perfect White Knight, and, thus, a man wholly untarnished by his baggage detailed in *Watchman*, which by 1960 had died an anonymous death and been buried in a Monroeville bank's safety deposit box where it would lay dormant until Harper Lee's lawyer Tonja Carter found it in 2014. **TBJ**

### Notes

1. Mr. Crespino spoke of his book as a keynote speaker at the 2018 State Bar of Texas Annual Meeting on June 21, 2018, in Houston.
2. The mental illness of Harper's mother (i.e., A.C.'s wife) removed her as a maternal influence in the Lee home.



### TALMAGE BOSTON

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## Go Set a Watchman: Thoughts on Civil Discourse

1. Don't judge others by their words or actions until you know their motives.
2. A man can condemn his enemies, but it's better to know them.
3. Hypocrites have as much right to live in the world as anybody else, particularly because "men tend to carry their honesty in pigeonholes."
4. If a person refuses to take time to understand a person holding different views, he or she will never grow.
5. A person's maintaining civility and humility when being engaged in disagreements has a transforming effect on the person on the other side of the argument.
6. Addressing confrontation over conflicting ideological positions is "like an airplane.

One side is the drag, the other is the thrust, and together they can fly – though too much of the thrust makes it nose heavy and too much drag and it's tail heavy – it's a matter of balance."

## Texas Lawyer's Creed; Thoughts on Civil Discourse

1. Civility and courtesy are expected and are not a sign of weakness;
2. Communications between lawyers are to be courteous, civil, and prompt;
3. Lawyers can disagree without being disagreeable. Effective representation does not require antagonistic or obnoxious behavior; and
4. Lawyers and judges owe each other the duties of respect, diligence, candor, punctuality, protection against unjust and improper criticism and attack, and protection of the dignity and independence of the court and the profession.