



Atticus Finch as Namesake: Roman Notable or Methodist Bishop?

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It is a commonplace of Harper Lee criticism that Atticus Finch, the hero lawyer of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, is named for the Roman notable Titus Pomponius Atticus ([Blackford](#) 60; [Davenport](#)). Lee herself made the claim in a January 1962 article in the *Birmingham Post-Herald* and it was repeated as recently as 2018 by Joseph Crespino in his book *Atticus Finch. A Biography*. There Crespino offers a truncated account of Lee's comment: the Roman Atticus, he has Lee declare, was a "wise, learned and humane man" (xiv). There are, however, at least two problems with this account.

In the first instance, while "wise, learned, and humane" are terms that most – but not all ([Kendi](#) 369) – readers might associate with the Atticus Finch of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, this is less true for the Atticus Finch of Lee's earlier-written but later-published novel, *Go Set a Watchman*. Featuring many characters and scenes that subsequently appeared in *Mockingbird*, *Watchman* depicts Atticus as an unreconstructed bigot and consumer of racist literature, as a person for whom the adjectives "wise, learned, and humane" would seem to be ill-suited. Accepting Lee's account of the origins of Atticus' appellation would require us to accept that she named her character long before he displayed the qualities that made him worthy of it.

In the second instance, Lee's knowledge of her fictional lawyer's supposed namesake, and of Antiquity more generally, would appear to be lacking. In the full quotation from the *Birmingham Post-Herald*, the article's author, Ramona Allison, observes: "Nelle said she named the lawyer 'Atticus' for the Greek known by that name – 'a wise, learned, and humane man.'" While Titus Pomponius was indeed a Grecophile who adopted the nickname Atticus to reflect his love for Athens – a city in which he spent a great deal of time – he was, as his name clearly indicates, a Roman. That Lee was ignorant of this most basic fact about the Ancient Atticus would seem to undermine her claim about the naming of her fictional one. Indeed, Lee's assertion, in the same article, that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is "a Greek tragedy in its simplest form" ([Allison](#)) suggests her overall lack of facility with the Classical world. None of the characters display the hubristic excess that mark the genre, nor do tragedies have happy endings. The suggestion that tragedies might, in any form, be "simple" is, moreover, deeply problematic ([Kaufmann](#)).

It is, of course, possible that Lee simply picked the name Atticus at random and that her claim about the Roman notable whom she misidentified as a Greek was a *post hoc* justification. There are, however, reasons to think otherwise. The author biography that accompanied the 1960 *Reader's Digest* condensed version of *To Kill a Mockingbird* concludes with a list of Lee's hobbies, the last one of which, and the only one purporting to be a direct quote from the author, is listed as "collecting the memoirs of nineteenth-century clergymen" (*Reader's Digest* 575). One of the most famous of such clergymen was Atticus G. Haygood, a Methodist Bishop and prolific author whose work helped to shape the Southern Methodist church of which Lee and her fictional lawyer were a part. There are a number of reasons why we might regard this Atticus as a more plausible origin of the name of Lee's lawyer.

Were Atticus Finch named for the Roman Atticus one might expect that *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* would be laden with Roman thought and themes. In this vein, a number of scholars have sought to identify what they perceive to be Atticus Finch's stoicism ([Lawler](#)). While there are, to be sure, arguments to be made here, it might be noted that Titus Pomponius Atticus was widely understood to be an

Epicurean not a Stoic (Lindsay 331). To that extent that it is possible to identify stoicism in the fictional lawyer's character it is more likely to be connected to the Southern stoicism identified by Walker Percy, or to the colloquial sense of the term, rather than directly to any particular Roman, let alone to the Epicurean Atticus (Percy). If the paucity of Roman thought and themes in Lee's novels might be thought to belie the claim that Atticus Finch was named after his Ancient namesake, then the abundance of Methodist thought and themes might be thought to constitute evidence for the claim that he was named after his ecclesiastical one.

Methodism is a thread that runs through both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*. In the former, it is introduced on the very first page: it is Simon Finch's Methodism that precipitates his arrival in the United States (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 3); the John Wesley, founder of Methodism, is mentioned on the second page (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 4); Methodism helps to structure town sports (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 105); encourages missionaries (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 264); provides solitary spiritual respite for Atticus Finch (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 169); and even drives the lawyer's decision to defend Tom Robinson (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 120). Methodism plays an even larger role in *Go Set a Watchman*. In addition to the appearance of the Finches' English Methodist ancestor (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 71), the text is marked by gatherings of Methodist women (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 36); by the accusation that Henry Clinton is trying to usurp Atticus Finch's "place in the Methodist Church," an allegation that seems more serious than the claim that he is trying to take over Atticus' law practice (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 36); and by the suggestion that internecine conflicts "were a living part of Maycomb Methodism" (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 93). Chapter 7, moreover, is given over entirely to the depiction of a Methodist church service and to a controversy over the Doxology. The new Doxology is said to have been imposed by a music instructor from New Jersey and is directly paralleled with the perceived Northern imposition of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 96). That the novel's title is taken – by way of the Bible – from the sermon delivered in this chapter further suggests the centrality of Methodism to the themes of the book. Indeed, Methodism also intersects with the novel's racial concerns: recounting Atticus Finch's alleged reasons for joining the Ku Klux Klan, Henry Clinton notes that the "Wizard happened to be the Methodist preacher" (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 229). It is, perhaps, unsurprising then, that the lawyer and the bishop share remarkably similar views about America's racial politics.

While the Atticus Finch of *Go Set a Watchman* is, in contrast to his ecclesiastical namesake (Haygood 12, 129), somewhat ambiguous about where he stands on the question of the inherent racial inferiority of African Americans, both men are committed to the view that blacks are a backward people who need to be elevated. "Negroes down here," this Atticus tells Jean Louise, "are still in their childhood as a people. You should know it, you've seen it all your life. They've made terrific progress in adapting themselves to white ways, but they're far from it yet" (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 246). Likewise, Haygood observes, "One of the saddest facts of their lot is that most of them are very ignorant. The vast majority of them are untaught" (Haygood 14). Both men are similarly concerned with the dangers of the premature political enfranchisement of this supposedly underdeveloped race. Laments Haygood of Reconstruction, "nearly a million of men, who had been slaves, were made voters before they could read. They were told to vote upon the most difficult and complicated of all questions, questions of public policy, involving the interests of half a continent and of nearly 50 millions of people, before they could read or understand the Constitution under which they were governed" (Haygood 77–78). The Atticus Finch of *Watchman* fears a recurrence of the same. "Now think about this," he tells his daughter. "What would happen if all the Negroes in the South were suddenly given full civil rights? I'll tell you. There'd be another Reconstruction 'Would you want your state governments run by people who don't know how to run 'em?'" (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 246) Both men are, nevertheless, committed to upholding the legal rights of black citizens. Finch successfully defends a black man against the charge of raping a white teenage girl "because he knew his client to be innocent of the charge, and he could not for the life of him let the black boy go to prison because of a half-hearted, court-appointed defense" (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman*

109).; while Haygood asserts, “that free negroes, at least, have many ‘rights that white men are bound to respect’” (Haygood 21).

Given her commitment to Methodism and her interest in the memoirs of nineteenth-century clergymen, it seems highly likely that Lee would have been aware of Haygood and his views. This, plus her seemingly limited knowledge of the Classical world, might be thought to support the claim that the bishop, rather than the Roman, is a more likely source for her fictional lawyer’s nomenclature. Within the world of the text there are, moreover, further reasons why Haygood might be a more plausible namesake for a baby born to Methodist parents on a plantation in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Haygood was elected bishop in 1890 and died in 1896. He would, therefore, have been featured in the Methodist newspapers around the time of Atticus Finch’s fictional birth. On plantations, furthermore, Classical names were commonly given to slaves – usually as a form of condescension (Kolchin 45) – and, as such, “Atticus” might have been chosen by the lawyer’s parents in ignorance of its Ancient origins, in much the same way, perhaps, as it may have been chosen by the author of the text in which it appears.¹

The argument I am making here nevertheless raises at least two questions: why Lee kept the name Atticus for her lawyer when she wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird* and why she later dissembled when asked about its origins. The answers to these questions are, I believe, related. Lee must have been aware when naming her lawyer, of the political and ecclesiastical baggage associated with a relatively uncommon name such as Atticus. Thus, it seems safe to assume that she wanted the Atticus Finch of *Go Set a Watchman* to carry that baggage. While the Atticus Finch of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is generally seen as a paragon of liberal tolerance, and thus devoid of the values of his Methodist namesake (Johnson 96), a number of critics have recently suggested otherwise (Gladwell; Henninger). Among them, little attention has been paid to the scene in which Atticus makes Jem read the speeches of Henry W. Grady (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 166–167). Grady was Haygood’s secular intellectual twin, and they are often discussed in tandem (Kwilecki 60; Kendi 265). Assuming that Atticus would not expose his son to views which he found repugnant, *Mockingbird*’s Atticus might still be thought have some of Haygood’s baggage in tow. It is this remaining baggage which may suggest why the author dissembled when asked about the origins of her lawyer’s name.

To Kill a Mockingbird was a publishing sensation. Even before it was printed it was selected for the prestigious Book-of-the-Month-Club, the popular *Reader’s Digest* condensed book series, and selected by the Literary Guild for its subscribers. In 1961, the novel won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and by January of 1962 was already being turned into an Oscar-winning film. In a March 1964 interview with Roy Newquist, Lee described her reaction to *Mockingbird*’s success as “one of sheer numbness. It was like being hit over the head and knocked cold” and, later in the same response, “frightening” (Newquist 405). Nevertheless, Lee initially appeared to be willing to do what was required of her to make the novel a success, just as she had rewritten her original manuscript under the firm hand of her editor Tay Hohoff. As Lee observed in 2015, “I was a first-time writer, so I did as I was told” (Mahler). Her initial pliability, along with her own desire to see the book succeed, may have encouraged her to suppress the more complex aspects of Atticus Finch’s racial views in favor of the simpler take on the character which had so caught the public imagination. Suppressing the connection between Atticus Finch and Atticus Haygood in favor of the Roman Atticus was no doubt instrumental in helping her achieve this goal. It is an explanation for Lee’s dissembling which may draw credence with the way in which Atticus Finch came to be seen as fictional version of her father with whom, as Crespino notes, Lee had a complex relationship. The intensely private Lee was, perhaps, unwilling to put her ambivalences on public display by connecting her father, and his sometimes-unfortunate views on race, to an Atticus who might expose her father to wider scrutiny. Certainly, Amassa Lee seems to have been closer in his racial views to the Atticus Finch of *Watchman* than he was to the Atticus Finch of *Mockingbird* (Crespino). As recent rereadings of the novel have suggested, moreover, there are more than a few traces of the earlier version of Atticus present in the later one. Indeed, Lee’s ongoing ambivalences about her father might be suggested by her giving Atticus her mother’s family name and situating her father’s within that of the novel’s villain: Robert

E. Lee Ewell (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 193). In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch's relationship to his Methodist namesake and his racial views is not, it might be argued, severed so much as better hidden.²

Notes

1. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we learn that the Finch housekeeper, Calpurnia, was born at Finch's Landing, the Finch family plantation. Although she would have been born after the formal end of slavery, conditions in Alabama, and elsewhere, were such that little changed for those ostensibly freed by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment. Calpurnia was, of course, the name of Julius Caesar's wife (Stow).
2. Lee considered the possibility of such an alternative reading in a letter to her friend Wayne Flint: "I wonder what their reaction would have been if TKAM had been complex, sour, unsentimental, racially unpaternalistic because Atticus was a bastard" (Flynt 92–93).

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