Atticus, Atticus, we hardly knew ye.

Atticus Finch has compromised his values. Oh, no! *Go Set a Watchman* by Harper Lee has upset the fans faithful to the fiefdom of Atticus Finch.

This is Atticus, who taught Scout that compromise is an agreement reached by mutual consent and that “you can 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.”¹ Vintage Atticus.

How, then, could this Atticus support the KKK and be against desegregation, as he is in *Watchman*?

People feel horrified and betrayed.

But not me. I was on to Atticus years ago. Allow me to elaborate before a mob comes for me, similar to the mob that came for Tom Robinson the night before the trial. Atticus epitomizes every conceivable ideal in that scene. He is one of the most revered characters in literary history.

So it is with a heavy heart that I must inform readers that Atticus openly contradicts his own values. How? He is complicit in a cover up of the truth with town sheriff Heck Tate. He allows Tate’s lies of the events surrounding the death of Bob Ewell, Town Drunkard and Public Bigot Number One, to stand as the truth.

Lee characterized Atticus’s flaws that derailed his fans in *Watchman* at the end of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Go back and check out the second-to-the-last chapter of *Mockingbird*. The groundwork is there for those who aren’t buffaled by Lee’s scintillating prose and emotionally wrought last chapter as Scout walks Boo Radley home. Lee sweeps us up, heaping climax after climax in those final chapters, but to the astute reader, Atticus displayed his hubris when he agreed to Sheriff Heck Tate’s cover up of Boo Radley’s killing of Bob Ewell. Remember that scene?

Granted, it took dozens of readings of *Mockingbird* before I had this revelation. As an English teacher, I’ve gone over passages in *Mockingbird* three times a day for more years than I care to advertise. I (thought) I knew Atticus as well as I knew any other person, living or literary. I thought he was the Absolute, the kind of Man I Aspired To Marry. And then one day, I came to fully know him as clearly as one sees a companion with whom one has lived over time in a new light. I wasn’t expecting this revelation, similar to Scout’s sudden awareness of reading and breathing: “Until I feared I would lose it, I never loved to read. One does not love breathing.”

¹ All direct quotes taken from Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird.*
Atticus was not all he cracked himself up to be, or rather, what his daughter Scout cracked him up to be. Little girls grow up and their worldviews and understandings of their dads grow up with them. Scout’s perceptions were bound to change as she reconsidered the events that happened when her brother Jem, who “was nearly thirteen . . . got his arm badly broken at the elbow.”

But there it is: Atticus has a fatal flaw. Undeniable.

Atticus, Atticus, we hardly knew ye.

That Atticus has a fatal flaw in itself should not be particularly disturbing. That’s the stuff of Greek tragedy. Honorable character plus fatal flaw equals tragic hero. Atticus seemed more like a tragic hero than an archetype of the ideal husband and father. What is new, then, is that *Mockingbird* needs to be classified as a modern Greek tragedy, in addition to (or as opposed to) its stature as the penultimate Bildungsroman (i.e., coming of age story. Pardon me for the technical jargon, but it is not often one has the chance to say “Bildungsroman” in context without sounding pompous, so I just had to go for it).

Enough years have gone by to enable us to look back on Atticus’s catastrophic fall from grace. I maintain that Atticus is a good man, but he’s not the irreproachable figure readers and Scout throned him to be. The readers were, after all, being led by a child (“And a child will lead them” Isaiah 11:6). That might work well in the Scriptures, but in reading a novel, one must be somewhat wary of a narrator who ages out at nine years old and who could be considered biased, since she’s writing about her own dad. Her brother Jem, who was four years her senior, isn’t a witness to the event that shows Atticus’s downfall, since he’s still unconscious during the seminal event. We never hear his reaction to Atticus’s spin on the fateful events on the night Boo Radley came out.

This isn’t some 21st century trope criticizing the fact that Atticus: 1) didn’t attend his own children’s school pageant; 2) allowed his minor children to walk unescorted at night to a school event; or 3) gave his children air rifles. No, no. That would be too cheesy and not worthy of reproaching Lee’s literary genius.

Nor is this a discussion of the symbolism of the novel, though a brief note about the role of the mockingbird is fitting. Earlier in the novel, Atticus gives the children air rifles and tells Jem it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird. All they do is sing their hearts out for people. Enter: Boo Radley. He’s the human form of the mockingbird, an innocent recluse who would not hurt anyone…

…unless you’re Bob Ewell and you’re after Boo’s precious neighborhood children.

As the children walk home from the pageant, they are attacked by Bob Ewell, who hates Atticus since Atticus defended African American Tom Robinson against Ewell’s false claims that Robinson raped his daughter Mayella Violette. Robinson is killed in a prison escape attempt, but that’s not enough for Ewell. Atticus shamed Ewell in court and Ewell wants his own justice: revenge. Boo Radley, the children’s reclusive neighbor whom they have never seen,
saves the children by killing Bob Ewell as Ewell attacks them. Later that night, Sheriff Heck Tate discusses the events with Atticus and compares Boo to an innocent mockingbird. Tate demands that the agoraphobic Boo be protected from the customary gesture of neighborly visits from Southern women bringing angel food cakes supposedly in thanks, but who really want an excuse to peer into the shut-in’s life.

Mr. Tate is protecting Boo and punishing Bob. It all seems so justifiable, and Tate tells Atticus that Bob Ewell’s death cancels out Ewell’s role in Tom Robinson’s death. Tate tells Atticus that this time the dead can bury the dead.

Hmmmm . . . This is the kind of justice that Atticus has spent his life fighting against: the justice of people using their own reasons to render decisions, as opposed to using the facts. Tate stresses to Atticus that as sheriff, he gets to make the call. If Atticus tries to do anything otherwise, Tate will call Atticus a liar to his face.

Did Atticus back down because he was afraid to be called a liar? Atticus, you’re tougher than that!

To his defense, Atticus tries to explain his position to Tate saying that a hush up will be a denial of all he’s tried to teach his kids. He needs to be able to look his children in the eye or he’ll lose them.

Tate isn’t convinced.

Atticus continues being Atticus and says that when his kids are grown, he’ll be an old man and if they don’t trust him, they won’t trust anybody. He says he can’t live one way at home and another way downtown.

It’s classic Atticus.

But Heck Tate is on the precipice of covering up a murder and, quite frankly, he must be feeling heady as heck. How often does a small town sheriff get to craft conspiracies with the local hero, Atticus? He tells Atticus that Atticus can’t put two and two together and that they have to get their stories straight right now. Tomorrow will be too late, he cautions.

Can you say Conspiracy?

What happened to the preaching Atticus, the one who told his children that “before [he] can live with other folks [he’s] got to live with himself. The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience.” Atticus, you’re not living to your own creed!

During his exchange with Heck Tate, Atticus is near a total collapse, as described by Scout, the uber-aware nine-year-old who, quite frankly, has been a little inconsistent, if not annoying. Lee has two narrators: the Child Scout and the Adult Scout. Child Scout is a mighty perceptive nine-year-old who can discern her father’s movements, even after attempts were made
on her life not even an hour before. No wonder we took her at her word. She seemed reliable to the point of astute.

But sometimes Child Scout is a little too perceptive, and it can be hard to warm up to a kid who has better insight than do most adults.

Scout says that Atticus looks limp, tired, with hands dangling. Poor Atticus. Granted, he is having a tough night. Someone tried to kill his children and now he has to be part of a conspiracy.

After Tate leaves, Scout takes matters into her own hands and ties up everything in a neat bow: the sheriff is right. Boo Radley is like a mockingbird and it would be a sin to have the neighbors ringing his doorbell. What a horrid fate, to have to ignore a doorbell (Note: Boo has been ignoring doorbells for over twenty years already. He’s really good at it).

Atticus thinks this is great. He rubs Scout’s hair and when he gets up to thank Boo for his children—a classy act, staged perfectly by Gregory Peck in the movie—we’re thinking that darn ol’ Atticus is just the smoothest, most suave guy around. In fact, Lee describes that Atticus’s youthful step had returned.

Really? His youthful step? It is disappointing that Atticus rebounded with a bounce after ascribing to a conspiracy. Atticus would have been more sympathetic, given the situation of having nearly lost both his kids a mere hour prior, if he had kind of dragged himself into the house, resigned to the fact that all he had stood for all those years had just been vanquished by the sheriff of a one-horse (if that many) town. But when Lee describes that Atticus’s youthful step had returned, it’s hard to take. Were the reader privy to Atticus’s thoughts, one could almost hear his saying, “That was easy.” It seems so diametrically opposed to all Atticus had represented. The least he could have done was rue the cruel vagaries of Fate for one hour, if not for the whole night as he sat in Jem’s room, waiting for Jem to wake up the next morning.

If the reader wants to take a broad view of the thing, then he or she must ask himself what exactly it was that Atticus told Jem the next morning to hush Jem up about the real facts of the event in question: that Bob Ewell did not fall on his kitchen knife, that Arthur Radley killed Bob Ewell, and that Heck Tate and Atticus were no better than Mr. Cunningham and the other eleven men in the jury who convicted Tom Robinson based on their own reasons and not on the facts.

Far more uncomfortable than realizing that Atticus has fallen from grace is to realize that the reader, too, has fallen victim to not realizing how closely he or she is in sync with Bob Ewell and Tom Robinson’s jurors. Now hold on, there! How dare I compare the readers of Mockingbird with the prejudiced men in the mob at the courthouse the night before the trial, those men who convicted innocent Tom Robinson in blatant disregard for the facts that Atticus pried out of Mayella and her Pa who, according to Mayella, never touched a hair on her head? How dare I?

Well, it’s just that it’s not my dare—it’s Lee’s adept use of irony and trickery. Lee had studied law and English literature, and she had learned well the subtleties of irony and the ways
of “tricking lawyers like Atticus Finch,” as discerned by Bob Ewell. For Lee has used irony to trick her readers—not to shame them, but to educate them—into realizing how insidious is the quicksand of prejudice. That is the other hidden jewel Lee delivers which eclipses most readers: to agree with the decision Heck Tate and Atticus make is to be like the men in the jury box who convicted Tom Robinson, because if you decided that Bob Ewell was too despicable to deserve that his killer be put on trial, then you’ve used your own reasons and not the facts to justify your decision. That is the exact standard Bob Ewell and Company used to sentence Tom. That is the exact standard Atticus spent his life eradicating. That is, until that evening on the porch with Sheriff Tate.

The sequel to *Mockingbird* should be titled, *The Morning After*. The powerful, painful, proverbial “Morning After” is not exclusive to literature. Everyone, everywhere has had a “Morning After.” Time to face and accept consequences in the harsh light of day.

So, the morning after Heck Tate convinces Atticus to conspire to submerge the facts from the previous evening, how did Atticus backtrack all that he had spent his life teaching his children? What did he say to Jem? Now there’s the sequel we all awaited.

The novel comes full circle and ends where it began, with Jem’s broken elbow. After the initial disappointment in Atticus, I came full circle and realized that Atticus wanted what was best for all concerned. In that regard, he stayed true to himself. But even Atticus had to admit that black and white are not always black and white.

We can hear Lee to her own Atticus now: “Gotcha!”

In another master stroke of irony, Lee forces her readers to apply Atticus’s advice to Scout to Atticus himself, about how 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. After reading *Watchman*, Atticus might be making our skin crawl, so readers need to “climb into his skin” to fathom why he did an apparent volte face on his values.

Readers will undoubtedly hold Atticus accountable for attending Klan meetings and supporting segregation as being non-negotiable. How does one reconcile these stark contrasts? Atticus taught Scout about compromise, which is good. But that’s not the same as compromising oneself, which is bad. If Atticus has further compromised his values in *Watchman* as he did with Heck Tate in *Mockingbird*, then we cannot blame Lee of doing a volte face in her characterization of beloved and befallen Atticus. Within her two novels taken as a whole, Lee has masterminded the complexities of the human heart and has deftly forced her readers to reassess their reactions to the seminal events in *Mockingbird*. Just as Atticus uses the oldest lawyer’s trick to corner Jem into admitting the children’s attempt to send a note to Boo Radley (chapter five in *Mockingbird*), Lee corners readers who are stunned by Atticus’s apparent volte face and forces them to climb inside their own skin for a personal reevaluation. Atticus, we hardly knew ye because we hardly know ourselves.

We can hear Lee to us now: “Gotcha!”
Dear Editors,
I am writing to clarify whether I can submit more than one piece, as long as it is in one file. One part of the directions says this: “Teachers may submit one piece of writing with a maximum of 20 single-spaced pages.”

On the submission page, the directions say this: “Please note: If you are contributing more than one piece, you must merge the files. The system will only allow you to upload one document.”

I have sent an email to NCTE to clarify whether I can send two articles in one document, but I have not had a response and since the deadline is in three hours, I am going to submit one document with two articles. The second article appears after this note.

If I have misunderstood the directions and only one article can be evaluated, please use the first article that appears in this document, the one titled, “Atticus, We Hardly Knew Ye. The Compromised Atticus.” The second article (and second choice, if only one article can be submitted, is called “Literary Terms at Play on the Basketball Court.”

Thank you. I apologize in advance for any confusion I had about the directions. My number, in case you need to reach me is 603-918-0109. My email is maoconnor@sau16.org.

Sincerely,
Mary O’Connor

The second article beings on the next page.
“Literary terms at play on the basketball court”

I’m an athlete. I practice my craft daily; everything I’ve learned from my sport is transferrable to every aspect of my life, both personal and professional. I have never had an injury, nor it is likely that I will ever sustain one. I will not age out of this sport. I will be able to participate for the rest of my life at the highest level of acuity, without having to join a senior tour. Each person engages in this same sport as a matter of course, though few realize it as, in fact, a sport. My sport is sadly underrated. It is not on any Olympic venue, nor does it achieve status at any division level in the NCAA. What is my sport?

Reading.

Reading is a skill, a craft, a character builder. It demands the same commitment as does any other athletic adventure. Furthermore, it can save lives.

Since it lacks any sort of gridiron, field, court, diamond, or rink, I have to be creative in immersing my students into this most ubiquitous of adventures.

And so I turn to the sports pages, and use the lofty, lively, vivid metaphors, images and analogies of the professional sports writers as my texts.

I have learned that there is much that I teach about understanding great literature that corresponds to watching an athletic game. Following is a preview about one of games in the 2015 Final Four of the NCAA Division 1 Men’s Basketball tournament. It is a summary of the lesson plan I used with my students the day before the game between the Kentucky Wildcats and the Wisconsin Badgers.

The beauty of looking to sports to teach the elements of literature is that every game, on any given day, in any given sport, at any level and age (use games from your own school!) provides a lesson plan. Game on!

“Literary Terms at Play on the Basketball Court”

It'll be raining cats and dogs in Texas, come Monday.

Kentucky’s Wildcats beat the Wisconsin Badgers on Saturday, and not surprisingly: earlier this week, Kentucky beat the Michigan Wolverines. Badgers and wolverines are part of the same family (Mustelidea) and the Wildcats had already shown last week how they manhandled the Michigan Wolverines.

For their part, the UConn Huskies pushed back the Gator attack.

So in the championship game, it will be cats (Kentucky Wildcats) vs. dogs (UConn Huskies) in the NCAA Championship game. A classic archetypical conflict.
Did someone say "archetypical"? Quick, call an English teacher.

The NCAA basketball tournament parallels great literature/nonfiction by dramatizing literary elements: conflict, complication, character, suspense, foreshadowing, irony, resolution, point of view—technical foul vs. flagrant foul? An English teacher can use game plans as lesson plans during March Madness.

Basketball covers all the conflicts:
- man vs. self (Need to play my best game in a single-elimination tournament)
- man vs. Nature (Gotta push harder and play through any injuries)
- man vs. Society (Half the people in this arena are rooting against me)
- man vs. Unknown/Fate (Who's gonna foul out? Who's gonna win?)
- man vs. Man is a defensive strategy in basketball

The players are all sympathetic characters with great backstories, complete with the Mom Angle. According to the TBS announcers, six years ago in 2008 Kentucky's Julius Randle confided to his mom that he wanted to play in the Final Four when it came to his home state of Texas in 2014. Or UConn's Shabazz Napier, who promised his mom he would graduate after all she had sacrificed for him. Coach Calipari knows the Power of Mom: “Go hug your mom and dad,” he told Arron Harrison.

Dad’s turn: Wisconsin’s Traevon Jackson’s dad was a superstar for the 1992 Ohio State team that tried to eliminate the Other Five Freshmen in NCAA tournament history—the Michigan Wolverines. Father and son get the same chance to stop a phenom of talented newbies (irony).

With seconds left in the Kentucky-Wisconsin game, Jackson is fouled by Harrison #5 in the three point range and if Jackson goes three-for-three, he can all but seal a Wisconsin win. Only one second had remained on the shot clock, and now Jackson can take his time at the free throw line (Irony). He’s gotta think the basketball gods are smiling on him. Especially since statistically, the Badgers are 100% from the free throw line this game. But the three Weird Sisters of Fate (allusion) come for everyone: Jackson misses the first of his three shots.

That set up the Wildcats to need a 3 point shot to go ahead. Harrison #5--yes, the same Harrison who just caused the foul (irony)—passes the ball to Harrison #2, who has only had 2 points the whole game. Statistically speaking, he’s not the go to guy for this game, right? (Complication)

But in the previous two games against Louisville and Michigan, Harrison #2 had hit the three-pointer in the last second. So… (Suspense)

Swish (Onomatopoeia). Kentucky is ahead.

Back to Jackson who has about 3 seconds to make his own three pointer, to avenge his missed shot, to avenge his father’s team that lost to five freshmen 22 years ago (before any of the players on the court were born), to avoid feeling like Bill Buckner (simile) for an interminable
off-season...His shot looks exactly like Harrison’s did a few seconds before...and...and...(Suspense).
No swish. Kentucky wins (Resolution). Aaron Harrison saved his team with his seconds-left shot heroics for the third time in three games (Repetition). He’s like a Greek hero (simile), at first failing his team by only scoring 2 points previously in the game and then compensating for his failings.

The ball downright danced around the rim (personification). What unseen force bounced it out? Either the laws of physics or the basketball gods (Deus ex machina—more on that later) ricocheted that ball right out of the rim. Huh?

How did that happen? Enter: English teacher. “Saturday’s missed shot by Traevon Jackson is an example of Deus ex machina, referred to by Horace in his Ars Poetica, when he cautions writers against using a ‘god from the machine’ to resolve their plots unless it’s worthy of a god's help. Greek tragedy often had a machine bearing a god who resolved conflicts, which sometimes seemed unbelievable.”

But we have to believe what we just saw. No contrived, finagled ending. Reality television at its best.

I’m an English teacher who knows more about Euripides than I do about basketball, but I think Horace himself would agree that the Kentucky-Wisconsin game was worthy of a god’s ending.
The UConn-Florida game had its literary moments, too. Florida wins 30 games in a row (repetition). Florida loses to UConn in December and repeats that performance last Saturday (Foreshadowing. Repetition. Irony). It’s especially enticing to English teachers when literary elements dovetail.

In the final (literary) analysis, come Monday, when it’s raining cats and dogs (cliché), it will be a 7th seed vs. an 8th seed. Which literary moment will prevail? Scenario 1: 7th seeded UConn, who beat 8th seeded Butler for the championship in 2011, beats Kentucky, this year’s 8th seed (Foreshadowing). UConn wants that (Repetition). Scenario 2: UConn beat Kentucky 56-55 during the 2011 tournament and beats Kentucky again (Foreshadowing). Scenario 3: Kentucky avenges the loss by being the 8th seed that beats the very team that voided the last 8th seed’s chance (Irony).

Suspense. Foreshadowing. Conflict: Man vs. Unknown. Theme: truth is stranger than fiction. Literary terms at play on the basketball court. And your nearest English class has a front row seat. Improbable as it sounds, your English teacher might just be your best color commentator. Irony, indeed.

It’s anyone’s game. See you at tip off. (Cliffhanger).