White Savior/White Supremacist: Atticus Finch in Maycomb County and the United States

Katherine A. Novak
Springfield, VA

B.A. English & Media Studies, University of Virginia, 2019

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia
August, 2020

Atticus Finch has remained, over sixty years after his initial introduction to the public, a seemingly ubiquitous symbol of U.S. values. I have met pets named Atticus; legal journals have used Atticus as an example and case study for decades,[1] with many lawyers citing him as their inspiration in their choice of profession;[2] and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) is standard reading for many U.S. middle and high schoolers. The Pulitzer Prize and Academy Award winning success of *Mockingbird* in print and on screen has secured the story a lasting presence in classrooms and homes for generations. From PBS's "The Great American Read" to Oprah Winfrey, *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s recognition as a national treasure[3] speaks to the novel's lasting impact on U.S. culture. The novel's publication aligned well with industry trends, and the book and movie together succeeded contemporaneous to the Civil Rights Movement. *Mockingbird*'s follow-up, *Go Set a Watchman* (2015), was published as white nationalism in the United States became increasingly prominent, with groups within the alt-right rising to national attention the same year *Watchman* hit shelves.[4] The visibility of such hate groups coincides with *Watchman*'s renewed affirmation that Atticus, and Maycomb County, may be on the wrong side of history. *Watchman* and current social movements reframe *Mockingbird* and its characters to more accurately reflect who the Finches have been all along, and why so many have wanted to embrace them.

---

[1] See Ann Engar's piece "*To Kill a Mockingbird*: Fifty Years of Influence on the Legal Profession," included in Michael Meyer's *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird: New Essays* collection (pp. 56-79). Engar notes that both the book and the movie have featured prominently in bar association conventions, writings about pro bono work, and even in conversations on personal style.

[2] Keith B. Norman in, "Atticus Is Still Atticus for Many Alabama Lawyers" (*Alabama Lawyer*, 2016), notes a significant number of Alabama lawyers (roughly 30% of respondents) who agreed that Atticus Finch had some role in their pursuit of law as a profession.

[3] Casey Cep, "The Contested Legacy of Atticus Finch." PBS named *Mockingbird* America's "most beloved novel" based on viewer voting, and Oprah, with the authority of her book club leadership, declared it "our national novel."

[4] The Southern Poverty Law Center reports the rise of the alt-right began in 2015, and predicts a continued rise of white nationalist hate groups—particularly in those embracing violent tactics—in anticipation of the 2020 presidential election. See the "White Nationalist" page on the SPLC website.

White readers[5] and reviewers took issue with the revelations *Watchman* grants, though the outcry seemed to come from an unwillingness to accept the novel's fit in Lee's canon rather than a desire to interrogate its characters and themes. Problematic in its release, *Watchman* faced backlash from fans who objected to its progression, or perversion, of the Pulitzer Prize-winning, Gregory Peck-embodied story from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As *Mockingbird* has been described as one of the best-known contributors to the mythology of the white savior,[6] I see an obvious progression from white saviorism to the blatant white supremacy touted by an older Atticus in *Watchman*. However, general readerly responses to *Watchman* ranged from unsettled to dismayed.[7] This backlash may in part hinge on the passage of time that has occurred between the two publications, as a half-century of commercial success had established *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a mainstream, modern classic. Though Scout Finch maintains the narrative perspective in both novels, her father acts as her guide, and in turn her father seems to direct the changes in reception between *Mockingbird* and *Watchman*.

I will analyze representations of Atticus Finch as both a white savior[8] and an outspoken white supremacist. My attention to the ways in which each narrative structures Atticus's scenes and to the available contextual interpretations for his character will inform a discussion of the evolution, or rather the lack thereof, from a white savior to a white supremacist. I will examine both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* in addition to the 1962 film adaption and

---

[5] I do not want to assume whiteness as the universal; I intend to clarify when speaking generally about groups like popular readers—the same people that name their dogs Atticus—that the ones most interested in embracing Atticus are white, as am I.

[6] See Matthew W. Hughey's *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption.* Though his main focus is contemporary films that perpetuate visions of white saviors, he labels the 1962 *Mockingbird* film as perhaps the first—and most popular—white savior film (p. 13).

[7] Kelsey Squire, "Novel, Sequel, Draft: Classification and the Reception of Harper Lee's Go Set a Watchman." Squire surveyed numerous reviews from nationally-acclaimed news outlets, tracing patterns in the labeling preference for reviewers.

[8] Matthew Hughey defines white savior fiction as "the genre in which a white messianic character saves a lower- or working-class, usually urban or isolated, nonwhite character from a sad fate" (*The White Savior Film*, p. 1).

recent Broadway play (2018), considering patterns in reception as they may reflect the differences in content, particularly the differences in this one central figure, whose advice and actions feature prominently in his daughter's world-building. I hope to grapple with the extent to which portrayals of Atticus are unexpected or entirely predictable (and to whom) and to think about how these works reflect the sociopolitical landscape of the United States through the past century.

Mockingbird Flies Into Schools

No one can deny the immediate commercial success of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Within two years of its release, the book had won the Pulitzer Prize and had been adapted into an Academy Award-winning movie. An important but often overlooked factor in *Mockingbird*'s early days was the mass-market paperback, which escalated the novel's rapid rise and its sustained circulation. *Mockingbird* was actually not the best-selling book of 1960; it was only with the mass-market paperback edition that it gained traction in popular readerships and, perhaps most significantly, in schools.[9] The rise in cheap, easy-to-disseminate paperback novels was proving lucrative for the publishing industry, and *Mockingbird* fit right in. Much in the way critical and commercial responses frame the novel as meaningful for its contribution to its contemporary political landscape, the story's popularity in schools seems to combine the availability of paperbacks with the willingness of educators to use *Mockingbird* as a vehicle for discussing race and justice. Indeed, *Mockingbird* in its paperback form can be found in many high schools across the U.S., which has inspired a subset of pedagogical writings focused on how to best teach this novel.[10] In this essay, I argue that educators and readers should not, however, accept

[9] Phil Edwards, "The real reason To Kill a Mockingbird became so famous" (2017).
[10] Brooke Richelle Holland, "Classical Rhetoric in Atticus Finch's Speeches." This is just one example of the many resources available in this category. In her piece, Holland describes Atticus as "the ideal classroom guest" (p. 78).

Mockingbird as the gold standard for teaching race and rhetoric in classrooms. The tendency to place *Mockingbird* and Atticus on pedestals oversimplifies *Mockingbird*'s legacy and irresponsibly conflates successes among the novel, its subsequent movie,[11] and the Civil Rights Movement.

Recent contributions to the aforementioned body of pedagogical work have championed this perspective, refusing to accept blanket statements about *Mockingbird*'s universality and pushing back against hegemonic preferences for Lee's 1960 novel to supersede other works critical of U.S. race relations.[12] The simple fact is that *Mockingbird* was written for white audiences by a white author. Leader and politician Andrew Young noted that he did not need to read the book; as a civil rights activist he had lived that reality.[13] Naa Baako Ako-Adjei, writing on why schools should leave *Mockingbird* curriculum behind, charges that the novel feeds into white people's appetite for positive depictions of themselves that do not critically engage with the role all whites play in upholding white supremacy. With the addition of *Watchman*, she is able to expand upon *Mockingbird*'s problems:

---

[11] Edwards recognizes that the novel and movie both made the *Mockingbird* franchise more and more successful, but he traces these compounding factors back to initial paperback sales (that then led to movie production and dissemination).

[12] See Baggett's "'Tumbling Out of the Beautiful Dream': *Go Set a Watchman* and Harper Lee's Legacy." Baggett mentions alternatives that could similarly inspire secondary classroom discussions, like Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*. Coates, in his book, states that he has never read *Mockingbird* and that he has no intention to. Like Baggett, Ako-Adjei proposes authors like Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Zora Neale Hurston, whose works could be well-suited for instructional use in secondary schools. Though my project centers around a white author, writing about and for white people, white readers can and should look to non-white voices for accounts on race in the U.S. My high school taught *Mockingbird* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but is it enough to balance Lee with Hurston? Or should *Mockingbird* permanently take a backseat? These questions are large and my engagement here is not with pedagogy. On the process of canon-making feminist Lillian Robinson ("Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon") delineates two options: expand a problematic canon or form a new, counter-canon meant to amplify marginalized voices.

[13] In the documentary, *Hey Boo: Harper Lee and to Kill a Mockingbird* (2011), Young draws parallels between Tom Robinson and Emmett Till, saying that Till's murder was a recent and painful event for him and many other Black inhabitants of the mid-twentieth century United States.

> If we are honest with ourselves, *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s enduring place on middle and high school reading lists was never the result of any particular literary gifts that Harper Lee possessed. Its inviolable place on reading lists has always derived from its sentimentalized account of America's racist history. That *Go Set a Watchman* reveals that *To Kill a Mockingbird* was apologia for prolonging white supremacy will make no difference to those who teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* as gospel, rather than a mere work of fiction.[14]

Those who hold *Mockingbird* to 'gospel' heights can easily, alongside disgruntled fans, choose to write off *Watchman* as a draft and continue to purposefully misrepresent Atticus Finch as a hero in search of justice. The reality is that Atticus's initial appeal to moderate whites satisfied their passive desire to feel like they were doing their part against evil racists like Bob Ewell. While I agree that *Mockingbird*'s secure position in secondary education deserves scrutiny, the sixty years in which it featured prominently in whites' cultural imaginary has surely had lasting effects that also need to be understood. Many theories about *Mockingbird*'s success tend to assume the book landed at the right time,[15] riding the wave of the early Civil Rights Movement.[16] However, attributing *Mockingbird*'s achievement to its social context—and the parallel assumption that the novel shows *proficiency* in speaking to such events—reveals that such suppositions have been made by and about white people. These observers ignore both publishing industry trends, such as paperback production, and the influence in American literary culture of

---

[14] Ako-Adjei, p. 122.
[15] See Tom Santopietro, *Why* To Kill a Mockingbird *Matters: What Harper Lee's Book and the Iconic American Film Mean to Us Today* (2018), for a rather generous appraisal of *Mockingbird*'s timeliness, as he ascribes the success of the novel, the film and even Gregory Peck to combination of raw talent and a hefty amount of luck. Santopietro's description of this perfect storm is also very white-centered, as his context for early 1960s includes the availability of the birth control pill and the coinciding efforts within white feminism.
[16] The *Hey Boo* documentary describes this pairing similarly.

the reading habits and desires of white moderates, here, the need to find a hero in favor of incremental change instead of revolutionary action.

Decades of writing on *Mockingbird* have glorified the story and its impact, explaining why Atticus and Scout are good primers for children[17] to learn about racial justice. Ako-Adjei is part of the shift away from such approval; more critical responses to Lee's works appear to increase after 2015. Readers should not have needed *Watchman* to launch queries at Atticus and Scout; the Finches showed audiences who they were in 1960. One white scholar wrote in 2016 in reference to *Mockingbird*'s value as a reflective tool: "[i]t is easy for us to forget what the Deep South was like."[18] The 'us' here clearly assumes whiteness—and a white liberalism that insists the Northern U.S. is free from racial prejudice, at that. The ability to 'forget' whole swaths of systemic aggressions suggests the dangerous echo chamber that can result from the centering of white experiences and myths. The white readers and commentators thinking of themselves as unraced,[19] naturalized members of the U.S.'s identity,[20] are exactly the target of Ako-Adjei's argument. Many Black people in the U.S., as Young attested, have not needed reminders of the regular and atrocious acts of anti-Black violence and systemic racism that permeate so many facets of life in the United States.

Some attempts to discuss *Mockingbird*'s context similarly disservice Black history by replacing specific historic events with those in the book. Scholars and biographers have noted many examples of events that took place during Lee's childhood and while she was likely

---

[17] White children, that is. Many Black children obviously do not have the privilege of waiting to learn about racism from Scout in a middle school literature course.
[18] Cornett, p. 31.
[19] See George Yancy, "Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body" (2005), on the assumption of invisible whiteness and the racing of Black bodies.
[20] See Devon Carbado, "Racial Naturalization" (2005), on how racialized bodies are 'naturalized' into U.S. identities, and how Blackness has been purposefully included in U.S. identities while Black people continue to be excluded from treatment as full citizens. Meanwhile, whiteness has expanded in allowing more to enter its category, and it naturalizes these bodies as both identifiably of the United States and enjoying all the privileges of citizenship.

beginning to write: the trial of the Ezells in the lynching of William Henderson Northrup in 1919, the 1933 trial of Walter Lett,[21] the Scottsboro cases of the 1930s, the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, and the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955.[22] While providing historical background for literature is common practice, attempts to contextualize *Mockingbird* often include white reviewers trying to assign any of these tragedies as the 'real life' case that represents Tom Robinson's.[23] This fixation on finding the 'inspiration' for Tom Robinson points to a distinct lack of connectivity or empathy with the historic and contemporary struggles[24] faced by Black people in the U.S. The tendency for readers to categorize Scout's life or Tom's trial as 'based on a true story' "link[s] the supposed authenticity of history with the standpoint of the white savior [Atticus] rather than with the points of view of the people of color supposedly being helped."[25] In attempting to align Lee with events of the early twentieth century or the Civil Rights Movement, these reviewers can risk attaching credit to white saviors like Atticus and even Lee herself while distancing the actual victims and those who campaigned tirelessly for social justice. The act of labeling the suffering of Black people in the U.S. as any kind of inspiration for Lee appropriates these struggles and contributes to figures like Atticus taking priority. In arguing that the white savior figure is synonymous with white supremacy, I hope to

---

[21] Charles Shields, *Mockingbird*, pp. 93-6. Shields argues for the obvious influence these two cases had on Lee, as both incidents occurred near her family home in Monroeville, Alabama. He frames the Ezells as parallels to the Ewells, and William Lett as a real-life Tom Robinson.

[22] Claudia Durst Johnson's *Reading Harper Lee: Understanding to Kill a Mockingbird and Go Set a Watchman* (2018) devotes much space to contextualizing Lee's writing process and the novels' releases.

[23] Though the cases such reviewers turn to have often been the most publicized, thousands of Black men, women, and children were murdered by white supremacists in the decades following the Civil War. The U.S. has a long history of allowing, in legally explicit or otherwise apathetic conditions, for the murder of Black people—from slavery to lynching. See the Equal Justice Initiative's report "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror" for an extensive history.

[24] Nikole Hannah-Jones's recent piece ("What is Owed," 2020) on reparations and the racial wealth gap outlines the economic exploitation and anti-Black laws that have shifted in form but not in purpose or malice, since the beginning of U.S. chattel slavery.

[25] Hughey, *The White Savior Film*, p. 65.

combat these idealized versions of Atticus that permeate schools and white readers' perceptions of history.

The publication of *Go Set a Watchman* kick-started this process, but many readers have been unwilling to interrogate their perceived hero. Before the Finches could become household names, Harper Lee had to set aside her original manuscript about the family. Tay Hohoff, an editor at J. P. Lippincott, signed Lee with the expectation that her work would need to undergo significant revisions.[26] The revised material became *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Nearly fifty years later and as the 2016 election cycle began, HarperCollins published that first version. Though various claims about *Watchman*'s origins have surfaced—from its discovery as a first draft of *Mockingbird* to Lee's lawyer Tonja Carter insisting that she had found an entirely new, second novel to add to Lee's body of work—the 2015 release appears to be some hybrid between first draft and sequel. There are echoes of *Mockingbird* in *Watchman,* which may make the latter feel incomplete and unfinished in parts.[27] *Watchman* features a grown-up Scout (or Jean Louise, having shed her childhood nickname) visiting Maycomb as a young adult, which prompts her to relive certain childhood memories.

The overlap between *Mockingbird* and *Watchman* is significant, and the spaces where the two stories diverge affect what readers want to accept as canonical fact. Kelsey Squire posits that the available interpretations for each book depend on the base assumption that *Watchman* is either a 'sequel' or a 'draft.' She notes that "reviewers who wanted to defend Atticus as a noble character often dismissed *Watchman* as a draft, insisting that the Atticus who appeared in *To Kill*

[26] Cep hints that Hohoff encouraged these edits in order to avoid explicit reference to politics contemporary to the late 1950s, while Hannah Epperson, in "'A Love Story Pure and Simple': Harper Lee and Atticus Finch," suggests Hohoff is the reason why readers could interpret Atticus as more progressive. These two takes do not necessarily need to be mutually exclusive to be true.
[27] Maureen Corrigan, "Harper Lee's 'Watchman' Is A Mess That Makes Us Reconsider A Masterpiece" (2015).

a Mockingbird was the 'real' one."[28] Some of these readers, resistant to what they disliked in *Watchman*, cited that Carter and HarperCollins took advantage of Lee in her advanced age.[29] If Lee was not able to consent to the publishing of *Watchman*, they argued, then the book could not present any *real* challenge for how they wanted to read *Mockingbird* and Maycomb. Accusations of elder abuse should be taken seriously; however, an Alabama investigation found no evidence of such.[30] Nevertheless, these rumors give the unhappy reader reason enough to dispute *Watchman*'s validity and discredit uncomfortable parts of the text due to its incompleteness. But instead of questioning *why* they are uncomfortable with *Watchman*, readers—in particular, white readers—have chosen to discount the text entirely.

Though Squire provides useful material for understanding how some readers may choose to explain their reading experiences, I have no desire to claim a 'real' or 'fake' Atticus. A stylistic comparison completed by Polish researchers[31] put forth the notion that *Watchman* could be more 'original' than *Mockingbird*, with fewer editorial interferences.[32] This threatens any attempt to separate the themes or characters in *Mockingbird* from those of *Watchman*. I suggest that the desire to simply discredit or ignore the changes (or conversely, the content not changed) between *Mockingbird* and *Watchman* is irresponsible. Any impressions of *Watchman* 'feeling'

---

[28] Squire, p. 22.
[29] Judy M. Cornett, "Four Reasons Why Readers Hate *Go Set a Watchman* (and One Reason Why I Don't)," p. 26.
[30] Katia Hetter, "No Elder Abuse Found in Harper Lee Case," (2015).
[31] Maciej Eder and Jan Rybicki, "Go Set A Watchman while we Kill the Mockingbird In Cold Blood" (2015). Eder and Rybicki intended to address rumors about *Mockingbird*'s authorship. Likely pairing with sexist bias against female writers and the fact that *Mockingbird* was Lee's only published novel for decades, the rumor that Truman Capote also wrote *Mockingbird* persisted into Lee's later life. With another novel to add to Lee's body of work, the study compared Lee and Capote and even included a number of other novelists from the Southern U.S. Lee and Capote did not place near each other; when comparing most frequent word usages Lee's two novels are more similar to each other than they are to *In Cold Blood*, a novel Lee was known to have helped with. When the study compared scores for Lee's corpus (*Mockingbird* and *Watchman* combined) with each novel individually, *Watchman* as a whole was a better match to the corpus's score. Although it is nearly 30,000 words shorter than *Mockingbird*, *Watchman* appeared truest to Lee's style. The researchers posited that changes made in the publishing house may have played a greater role in *Mockingbird* than in *Watchman*.
[32] Shields, a biographer of Harper Lee's, has put forth—as historical and biographical fact—that *Watchman* was the first draft that Lee sent to Hohoff.

different may be valid when considering that it is less heavily edited, but Atticus has not changed. His actions in *Mockingbird* point to his desire to uphold white supremacy, and his attitudes in *Watchman* simply make this more obvious to readers.

Structuring Hero-Worship: How Narratives Prioritize Atticus

Many objections to *Watchman* stem from a sense of surprise at familiar characters' 'new' behaviors. However, characters like Scout and Atticus do not change from *Mockingbird* to *Watchman*; rather their shortcomings become more apparent. In order to explore what was imperfect about Atticus prior to 2015 I want to think about the biases built into both *Mockingbird* and *Watchman*. Since both novels closely follow Scout, a reader could choose to align themselves with her point of view, which excludes critical thought on important flaws in Atticus's character. Scout—the convincing yet unreliable narrator and protagonist—encourages readers to accept many of the Finches' faults, literally creating structures in which white saviorism thrives.

Mockingbird, which follows a young Scout, utilizes the first-person voice, placing Scout as the source of information and—assumedly—accuracy. The novel opens with Scout telling the reader: "When he was nearly thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow."[33] The distinctive beginning[34] of *To Kill a Mockingbird* firmly places the audience alongside Scout, who is looking back on her childhood in the early 1930s from some immeasurable distance. The narrative is almost so good at providing young Scout's point of view that it can be tempting to

[33] Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Apple Books ed. (J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1960), ch. 1. According to the 8th edition of the *MLA Handbook*, device-specific numbering should be avoided when citing an electronic edition of a published book. In following section 3.3.3 of the handbook (on when page and paragraph numbers are not available), I will cite all quotes from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Apple Books Edition) and *Go Set a Watchman* (also the Apple Books Edition) by specific sections of the e-book, which are in this case chapter designations.
[34] These are the first lines of the Broadway play, as well.

forget that this story is being told from an older Scout retrospectively. In the opening of *Mockingbird*, the narrator continues: "When enough years had gone by to enable us to look back on them, we sometimes discussed the events leading to his accident."[35] Some non-specific amount of time has passed in order for Scout to be able to reflect on this story. This future-Scout oftentimes fades into the background, but readers must remember that though the story features a young Scout, the narrator has the privilege of hindsight and distance. Without knowing the specific number of years that have passed I cannot pinpoint the narrator's exact age, but the events she chooses to describe will all relate to Jem's broken arm. By beginning the novel in this way, the narrator makes Jem's broken arm the end that readers are working toward. Tom Robinson's trial becomes a small contributor in the rising action, racing toward a climax that focuses on the Finches. With the voice of a child centered in the narrative from the beginning, the information she deems important weighs heavily in the tale.

Certain scenes, like when Scout and Jem build an androgynous snowman and Scout mishears her neighbors calling it a "Morphodite,"[36] serve to establish Scout's youth and eliminate evidence of the future-Scout. The narrator, looking back at the past, is able to nearly disappear in these tales, as dramatic irony and other characters step in to do the explanatory or analytical work for Scout. Adults around Scout often indicate how a scene may be interpreted when the young Scout does not grasp the weight of a situation. Miss Maudie moderates the snowman incident, as Scout describes her "star[ing] down at me, her lips moving silently. Suddenly she put her hands to her head and whooped."[37] Readers can assumedly understand that Maudie finds Scout's childish mixing of words funny, and the narrator has not explicitly

[35] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 1.
[36] *Id.*, ch. 8.
[37] *Ibid.*

intervened to explain. That the narrator includes this and other vignettes indicates an awareness from the future-Scout, knowing that these happenings are humorous or significant when looking back. However, as Jennifer Murray points out, scenes in which the Finches fail to fully realize antiracism tend to lack such adult interference and introspection from the narrator.[38] Murray presents Scout calling Tom Robinson "just a Negro" as a moment in the text in which the narrator chooses not to address bigoty.[39] The narrator selectively chooses to explain what she deems important, and glosses over what others could find unsavory. Scout is an unreliable narrator and not only because she was young during the events of the story; the older narrator purposefully creates a story in which she and her family enjoy implicit immunity from any scrutiny or question.

The narrator is especially unreliable when she describes Atticus. When Scout asks Atticus about what kids in school have been saying about his defense of Tom Robinson, she uses the N-word, and Atticus's objection to her language is to not say the N-word because "[t]hat's common."[40] As the adult imparting knowledge, Atticus's objection to racial slurs is not that they are offensive and rooted in white supremacy, but rather that one appears low-class when using slurs. Atticus conceptualizes racism to be the fault of poor white people, distancing himself and other well-off townspeople from their roles in white supremacy. Whether this is a conscious effort on Atticus's part or not, he exercises both racial and class privilege here. He passes this privileged mindset to Scout, who poses no further questions on the topic. The narrator does not intercede either because she has learned from Atticus to accept these explanations at face value.

---

[38] See Jennifer Murray's "More Than One Way to (Mis)Read a 'Mockingbird'" (2010). Murray posits that *Mockingbird* is a Bildungsroman for Jem.
[39] This conversation between Scout and Dill happens in chapter 19 of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
[40] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 9.

This interaction is brief, but indicative of the narrator's shortcomings in confronting anti-Black racism, particularly when it is Atticus perpetuating such behavior.

Mockingbird's storyteller purposefully orders the narrative so that Atticus can shine, as his parenting advice (along with Jem's broken arm) helps to organize the novel. Atticus's rule for practicing empathy—to "climb into [another's] skin and walk around in it"[41]—acts as a framing mechanism that the narrator adopts. Scout first hears this platitude when Atticus tries to have her sympathize with a teacher who reprimanded her. Though Scout tries this exercise throughout the book, she appears most successful in the novel's penultimate chapter. After their elusive neighbor, Arthur Radley, has helped save Scout and Jem from Bob Ewell's attack, Scout escorts Arthur back to his home. From the Radley house, she imagines:

> Summer, and he watched his children's heart break. Autumn again, and Boo's children needed him. Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough.[42]

Scout experiences time passing as she thinks Arthur/Boo Radley would have; it is in this moment that she is fully able to practice Atticus's earlier words. Arthur's perspective (as Scout sees it) revolves around the children and has nothing to do with Tom Robinson. Tom's trial—the event that supposedly signifies Atticus's upstanding morals—and his murder are just things that leave the kids heartbroken. Scout wants to see more of herself and her family as she tries to practice Atticus's brand of empathy, managing to make this reflection about her rather than any co-feeling with others. The novel closes after this, with the narrator assuming that Atticus's guidance was impactful and that Scout's application of his advice reflects meaningful maturity.

---

[41] *Id*., ch. 3.
[42] *Id*., ch. 30.

This allows the story to come full circle in its last chapters and for readers to feel a sense of fulfillment when they finish the book. Readers see little critical reflection on Atticus's 'golden rule,' how Scout applies it, or the Finches' impact on others like Arthur Radley because the narrator chooses not provide such insights. Atticus's words contribute to the way the narrator frames *Mockingbird*, implying the trust that Scout places in her father and the extent to which he has contributed to her worldbuilding (and the narrator's choices in storytelling). Many readers have also placed their trust in Atticus, unwilling to see past Scout's comfortable interpretations of the novel's action.

Not only does Atticus's guidance bookend the story, but his words also permeate many of the novel's events. His perspective and conscience drive Scout's behavior, and this in turn allows Atticus to shape more of the story. When Mrs. Dubose yells insults at Scout and Jem, Atticus tells the kids that they "can't hold her responsible for what she says and does" because she is "a sick old lady."[43] While emphasizing that Mrs. Dubose should not be accountable for her actions, Atticus scolds Jem for retaliating against her; he calls Jem's actions "inexcusable"[44] and prompts both Scout and Jem to visit with Mrs. Dubose to apologize. The 'turn the other cheek' lesson the Finch kids are supposed to learn from this incident highlights both how consistently Atticus attempts to impart his values onto Scout and Jem and the flaws in those values. Just as he does with other neighbors, Atticus pardons Mrs. Dubose's vile prejudice and extends empathy into complicity. Atticus holds his children responsible for their actions, but unevenly expects accountability from others. In making exceptions for people like Mrs. Dubose, Atticus encourages the narrator to pity this woman rather than challenge her troubling beliefs and behavior. The narrator also does not address Atticus's problematic acceptance of his neighbors,

---

[43] *Id*., ch. 11.
[44] *Ibid*.

or the excuses that he makes for racist speech. The narrator conforms to Atticus's expectations, and readers can assume that Scout agrees with Atticus's perspective.

Since Atticus is Scout and Jem's only living parent, their deference to him may be understandable, but the narrator continues to defer to Atticus assumedly well after childhood. Mrs. Finch passed when Scout and Jem were young, though Calpurnia fills the role of surrogate mother that Black women so frequently had to take on as domestic workers. While Cal is keenly aware of the position she occupies,[45] the children also seem to recognize this, as Atticus, not Calpurnia, guides their consciences. The narrative thus allows for Atticus to similarly guide willing readers. Scout uses her father as her default point of comparison when judging other adults; during the trial she thinks "in their own way, Tom Robinson's manners were as good as Atticus's."[46] That Scout feels the need to qualify Tom—*in his own way*—reveals the racist mentality that is also on display later when she refers to him as 'just a Negro.' By almost measuring up to Atticus, Scout judges Tom to be a "respectable Negro."[47] Scout manages to discount Tom while also assuming that respectability is the only means by which Black men can prove their worth. The narrator might not realize how troubling her assumptions are, how entrenched in white supremacy her thinking is, but she implicates Atticus by using him to form her unachievable ideal. Atticus is the key by which Scout judges others, and her unwavering support for her father does not change over time. Scout—both the child and the narrator of *Mockingbird*—internalizes Atticus's expectations in her conscience formation and worldbuilding. The narrator does not simply admire her father, but she wholeheartedly believes in him, assuming him to be without fault.

---

[45] *Id*., ch. 12. Calpurnia begins to call Jem "Mister Jem" as he reaches puberty. Calpurnia, though she has helped raise the Finch children, is acutely aware of her social status compared to theirs.
[46] *Id*., ch. 19.
[47] *Ibid*.

If *Mockingbird*'s Scout gives the narrative the uneven and unreliable blinders of childhood and white privilege, *Watchman*'s third-person narrator reflects a slightly more mature, but no less privileged, Jean Louise. Ako-Adjei writes that while the "coming-of-age story" is no longer present, "*Go Set a Watchm*an is simply *To Kill a Mockingbird* stripped of its sentimentalism and other artifices."[48] *Watchman* starts with a 26-year-old Jean Louise "Scout" Finch[49] on a train, where "[s]ince Atlanta, she had looked out the dining-car window with a delight almost physical." [50] Reviewers have noted that Jean Louise parallels the modern reader as she returns to Maycomb after some time away. Despite the delight she (and readers) may feel, Jean Louise quickly learns that her father has been organizing with other Maycomb residents to form a White Citizens' Council. Jean Louise understands, as she begins to doubt him, the extent to which Atticus has impacted her moral compass and that she "never questioned it, never thought about it, never even realized that before she made any decision of importance the reflex, 'What would Atticus do?' passed through her unconscious"[51] She manages a modicum of self-awareness (and agrees with the above assessment of *Mockingbird*), but this only happens after she has uncovered irrefutable evidence that Atticus, at the very least, freely associates with outspoken white supremacists. Jean Louise had noticed earlier that "Maycomb's appearance had changed, [but] the same hearts beat" in town,[52] and this observation applies to Atticus especially.

Unlike Scout's continuity between childhood and narration, *Watchman*'s Jean Louise creates tension previously unknown to readers as she resists the potential existence of racism she

---

[48] Ako-Adjei, 199.
[49] I will refer to Jean Louise as such when discussing *Watchman*, as this is how the narrative refers to her. I do not mean to suggest that Scout and Jean Louise are different people, or that either could be considered the 'real' one. Just like how the character of Atticus Finch is viewed holistically, the same will be true for Scout/Jean Louise.
[50] Harper Lee, *Go Set a Watchman*, Apple Books ed. (HarperCollins, 2015), ch. 1.
[51] *Id*., ch. 9.
[52] *Id*., ch. 4.

herself has identified. She contradicts herself and the novel's narrator when she refuses to accept that her family and town have always shown evidence of racism:

> What was this blight that had come down over the people she loved? Did she see it in stark relief because she had been away from it? Had it percolated gradually through the years until now? Had it always been under her nose for her to see if she had only looked? No, not the last.[53]

The moment of free indirect discourse at the end of these musings ties the narrator and Jean Louise together as they deny the possibility that Maycomb has always been steeped in racist attitudes and policies. Jean Louise quickly shoots down her own questions in order to maintain her blinders. This attempt to discredit evidence of racism reveals a desire for such problems to be passing trends or sudden developments, ignoring the harm that Jean Louise's family and peers have always allowed and continue to perpetrate against Maycomb's Black residents. When she and the narrator decline the potential for prejudice to exist without them realizing it, they hint at the discomfort many white liberals have when recognizing both that anti-Black racism is prevalent in many aspects of U.S. life, and that they implicitly benefit from such systems of oppression.[54] These structures enabling bigotry and hate were in place in the 1930s and are only apparent twenty years later to the reluctant Jean Louise.

Like Lee's novels, the big-screen adaptation of *Mockingbird* also contributes to the legend of Atticus Finch through narrative bias and inherited historical constructs. According to

---

[53] *Id*., ch. 12.

[54] Hughey in *White Bound* (2012) observes that the dichotomy between white antiracists and racists is a rigid method of placing blame on others, with the potential danger that the antiracist sees themselves as outside of a racist history (p. 9). Essentially, these antiracists insist that they would have been on the right side of history when enslaved persons were publicly auctioned and abused but do little to understand how they have personally benefitted from white supremacy. The antiracist who wipes their hands clean of the violence of the U.S. imperial project, or decades of Jim Crow, lacks essential insight as to how they and professed white nationalists all currently profit from such oppressions.

biographer Charles Shields, "about 15 percent of the novel is dedicated to Robinson's rape trial, whereas in the film, the trial scenes add up to more than 30 percent of the two-hour running time."[55] Shields suggests that Gregory Peck required such distortions to the story's timeline in order to shift attention more fully towards himself as Atticus. In turning the movie-goer's eye to Atticus, Peck was able to win an Academy Award, but the film also exacerbated the extent to which the story valorizes Atticus. Though the movie was critically and commercially successful[56] at the time, scholarship on white saviorism recognizes it as "one of the first white savior films" that "gave 1960s audiences an overt cinematic take on race relations not seen since D.W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* (1915)."[57] Matthew Hughey positions *Mockingbird*'s movie as an inheritor of the KKK propaganda piece to illustrate the filmmaking industry's limited progress in the treatment of race. During the fifty years between the two films, *Birth of a Nation* disseminated and popularized the image of the criminally inclined Black man who was a threat to all white women.[58] Though the *Mockingbird* film does not contain any overt references to the KKK or *Birth of a Nation*, anxieties about miscegenation and the accompanying myth of the Black rapist are surely at play in Tom Robinson's trial and in the resulting 'guilty' verdict.[59] Neither the book nor the movie versions of *Mockingbird* address this inheritance, and though the

---

[55] Shields, p. 188.
[56] *Hey Boo* (2011) attributes much of the book's lasting success to the film. The documentary prominently features those involved with the film, like Mary Badham who played Scout, and spends significant time on the casting and production of the *Mockingbird* film.
[57] Hughey, *The White Savior Film*, pp. 13-4. Hughey's book focuses on later cinema, but he does begin his review of past white savior films with 1962's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.
[58] *13th* includes *Birth of a Nation* as a key media text that amplified and continued perceptions of Black men as criminals, to the benefit of prison systems that needed bodies to continue work that had previously been carried out by enslaved persons. By criminalizing Blackness and emphasizing the threat Black men posed to white women (while ignoring the prevalence of white male violence and sexual abuse against Black women), media and legal systems worked together to continue the oppression of Black communities.
[59] See Patrick Chura, "Prolepsis and Anachronism: Emmet Till and the Historicity of *To Kill a Mockingbird*" (2000), for more on how the continued panic over miscegenation was the driving motivation behind the opposition of any kind of desegregation, whether in schools or on buses, and the continued presence of the black male rapist myth.

Finches believe Tom to be innocent, they do not debunk or challenge the stereotype of Black sexual deviance. The 1962 film continues to take advantage of racist tropes, crafting a wildly successful white savior piece that further emphasizes Atticus's heroics without questioning his unwillingness to truly confront racism in his community.

Both of Lee's books and the *Mockingbird* movie design narratives in which Atticus can succeed, as his words and action carry significant weight in the stories. *Mockingbird* and *Watchman* possess narrative frameworks that enable Scout/Jean Louise to ignore and deny the presence of racism in her world. Neither Atticus nor Scout are infallible—and it is apparent that they never have been. Audiences today, at least the people who name their pets or even children after Atticus and the readers who want to preserve *Mockingbird*'s reputation, must decide if they will acknowledge what has been under their noses since 1960: Atticus is no hero.

Defending Tom and a Racist Town

Atticus Finch and his fans have idealized a losing battle for one's personal principles, rather than aiming to actively dismantle systemic, anti-Black racism. Praise for Atticus—especially from the generation of lawyers he inspired—focuses on the fact that he represents Tom, not on the strength of his case[60] or the potential for it to succeed. Atticus says that his defense requires him to "fight . . . [his] friends,"[61] which implies that Atticus could lose clients or personal acquaintances if he were to support a Black man's word over that of a lower-class white family. *Mockingbird*, in print and on the silver screen, frames this as a great personal sacrifice, an

[60] In "Reconstructing Atticus Finch" (1999), Steven Lubert's criticism of Atticus is unique as one of the first to question his ability as a lawyer. Lubert argues that Atticus's defense is not very strong and instead overly relies on the assumptions that: 1) Tom's handicap makes him impotent and incapable of being a predator 2) 'she was asking for it,' painting Mayella as the sexually deviant one (as a white woman seeking out a Black man, and as a potential victim of incest).

[61] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 9.

undertaking that showcases Atticus's courage and moral rectitude. The Finch children are certainly punished for their father's legal practices, as they are harassed at school and in their neighborhood (by Mrs. Dubose, notably). These superficial interpersonal tensions theoretically indicate the Finches' sacrifices for justice.

However, the text makes obvious Atticus's reasons for representing Tom, and they do not stem from a place of solidarity or empathy. Maycomb's Judge Taylor appointed Atticus to Tom's defense and thus Atticus "had to [take the case], whether he wanted to or not,"[62] though he had "hoped to get through life without a case of this kind."[63] Atticus's grand gesture of white saviorism shows a lack of agency and choice, as he did not willfully put himself in this position. If he had not been assigned to the case, Atticus indicates that he would not have chosen to involve himself. He would have had no reservations about watching Tom's case from the sidelines. Atticus could have said no to Judge Taylor when he requested that Atticus work Tom's case, so it is worth noting that when asked to intervene, he does. But Atticus's motivations for accepting this appointment focus on himself rather than Tom; Atticus tells Scout that if "I didn't I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent this county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again."[64] Once in place to defend Tom, Atticus conceptualizes this defense as some supremely moral act; he does not directly refer to Tom in his explanation to his children. He imagines this trial as a fight to maintain his own clean conscience, and *Watchman* similarly features a flashback to a trial similar to Tom's[65] in which the "only reason [Atticus] took this [case] was because he knew his client to be innocent of the

---

[62] *Id.*, ch. 16.
[63] *Id*., ch. 9.
[64] *Ibid*.
[65] The details are quite similar, but in this case Atticus "accomplished what was never before or afterwards done in Maycomb County: he won an acquittal for a colored boy on a rape charge" (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman*, ch. 8). This inconsistency

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."[66] Atticus seems to recognize that Tom—who is assumedly this unnamed defendant in *Watchman*—does not deserve to be on trial, and Atticus's belief in his innocence allows Tom at the very least a public forum for the truth to be told. But Atticus seems to focus on the need for truth-telling and not on the final result. Tom's life is at stake in *Mockingbird* since rape was a capital offense in 1930s Alabama, but Atticus appears to want to protect the honor he believes to exist within the legal system more so than fully preventing an innocent man's death. If Tom or any other client were innocent but found guilty after Atticus had tried to defend them, then would Atticus consider the trial to still be a fair execution of justice? He concentrates on himself and his profession as things worth protecting, and seems less concerned for Tom's final outcome.

More so than his career and his perception of his own dignity, Atticus chooses to respect the problematic behavior of his peers and other clients. He allows his fellow white Maycombians to perpetuate deeply flawed attitudes and behaviors in his campaign to extend empathy to everyone no matter the cost. Atticus's purposeful ignorance of bigotry and racist acts is most obvious in his dealings with the Cunninghams. Scout diffuses tensions between her father and a mob of men outside the jailhouse the night before Tom Robinson's trial begins. Atticus had stationed himself as a deterrent for these men, but Scout interrupts, unaware of the gravity of the situation. When she finds someone she recognizes, she calls out but thinks "[t]he man did not hear me, it seemed. 'Hey, Mr. Cunningham. How's your entailment gettin' along?' . . . He seemed uncomfortable; he cleared his throat and looked away."[67] Scout does not realize that she has interrupted a lynch mob, but she is interested because she followed Atticus there. The

---

[66] *Watchman*, ch. 8.
[67] *Id.,* ch. 15.

decision to stand with Atticus is an easy one for Scout to make, especially as she does not seem to understand what is at stake. Mr. Cunningham, however, does understand. He orders the other mob members to go home after Scout accidentally pressures him into feeling embarrassed. Readers cannot know exactly why Mr. Cunningham feels uncomfortable: is it because he does not want to expose a child to violence? Or perhaps he flustered, not having expected for anyone to single him out as an individual amongst an anonymous crowd. Whatever the reason, the text does not hint that it is connected to a respect for Tom's life. Future-Scout and child-Scout meld here, with the threat of race-based violence implied, though not specifically identified. Readers can choose to feel aligned with Atticus and Scout for deterring a lynching, but the mob can also be glossed over as Mr. Cunningham's change of heart humanizes him; the other men and their intentions literally fade into the night.

Atticus's willingness to do business with people like Mr. Cunningham or Mrs. Dubose after they reveal themselves to be enthusiastically upholding white supremacy speaks to Atticus's desire to prioritize personal and professional relationships over any real social justice work. Scout and Jem ask if Mr. Cunningham is a friend to the Finches after the mob scene, to which Atticus replies that he "still is . . . [and he is] basically a good man[;] he just has his blind spots along with the rest of us."[68] Though Atticus put himself in physical danger to keep Tom safe in jail that night, he also excuses Mr. Cunningham's readiness to participate in a lynching as 'just' a 'blind spot.' Malcolm Gladwell has written on this scene, concluding that Atticus "puts personal ties first," above seeking justice or truly fighting for Tom.[69] In his private life, to his

[68] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 16.
[69] Gladwell's piece "The Courthouse Ring: Atticus Finch and the Limits of Southern Liberalism," appears in Meyer's collection (*Harper Lee's* To Kill a Mockingbird: *New Essays*, pp.57-65) and this quote appears on p. 60. This is a reprint from the essay's earlier appearance in *The New Yorker*, Politics and Prose, 10 August 2009; pp. 26-32.

children, Atticus could easily take a firmer stance against extra-legal mob justice and anti-Black violence. Instead, he chooses to reiterate the need for uncompromising empathy with potential murderers. He does the same after Tom's trial ends with a guilty verdict, applauding the Cunningham[70] on the jury that made the deliberation take longer than expected. Atticus describes the entire jury as "twelve reasonable men in everyday life . . . There's something in our world that makes men lose their heads—they couldn't be fair if they tried."[71] Atticus makes exceptions and excuses for men who are not actually trying to be fair. Fairness for Tom Robinson was not on their minds when the jury eventually decided to convict him, regardless of how long they deliberated. Atticus offers the length of deliberation to his children as a condolence, suggesting that a delayed guilty verdict against an innocent man is the best they could expect.

Despite the emphasis both books place on Atticus's integrity and the animosity his family receives for him acting on it, his standing in his community does not change after his feat of lawyerly bravery is over. Though heckling from people like Mrs. Dubose and Scout's classmates implied that Atticus could face ostracization, he suffers no personal consequences when the trial ends. Jean Louise in *Watchman* does not remember any particular backlash from his friends. The future-Scout narrator of *Mockingbird* mentions that "in spite of Atticus's shortcomings as a parent, people were content to re-elect him to the state legislature that year, as usual."[72] Temporary disapproval of Atticus did not stem from his parenting style; 'as a parent' works as a euphemism for 'as a person' or 'as a lawyer.' The 'people'—the white residents of Maycomb County—do not think of Atticus any differently. Any personal sacrifices Atticus thought he was

[70] Atticus says that the Cunninghams have "considerable respect for the Finches" (Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 23). He lauds the possibility that the Cunningham family would protest in the jury room for the Finches, without recognizing that considerations for Tom have no place in this configuration of justice.
[71] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 23.
[72] *Id.*, ch. 26.

making before Tom's trial simply do not come to fruition. And though he could push for new laws for the state of Alabama, Atticus tells Jem that he "won't live to see the law changed, and if you live to see it you'll be an old man."[73]Atticus proves he has no real commitment to structural change; he is unwilling to consider that he could try to work toward future progress. He went to court for Tom and has fulfilled what he views as his personal duty. Meanwhile, Tom has been convicted of a crime he likely did not commit and has been murdered while awaiting justice. The 'friends' Atticus thought he was fighting carried out these actions, or they let them happen and said nothing. These white Maycombians, whether explicitly or implicitly involved in such injustices, welcome Atticus as their local representative, understanding that he will not pursue real progress.

White Saviors and Mockingbirds

In a book that educators use to teach students about racial injustice, *Mockingbird* is about these white Maycombians, resisting change and unwilling to take substantial measures towards dismantling systemic racism. The *Mockingbird* story (in any media format) features few Black characters, and those who are present exist in the narrative according to their relationships to white people: Calpurnia, as an employee; or Tom, as a pro bono case and prop for Atticus to prove his moral superiority. These depictions purposefully marginalize Black Maycombians and refuse to acknowledge the fullness of Black experiences. As Christina Sharpe says, "even as we [Black people in the U.S] experienced, recognized, and lived subjection, we did not *simply* or *only* live *in* subjection and *as* the subjected."[74] This perspective is simply not available in

[73] *Id*., ch. 23.
[74] *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, p. 4. Sharpe describes her concept of 'wake work' in the first chapter of her book as the practices of resistance and creation that Black inhabitants of the U.S. continue in while living in the

Mockingbird, and *Watchman* features even fewer Black characters. In *Mockingbird*, characters like Zeebo and Reverend Sykes have extremely minor roles in which they eagerly accommodate Scout and Jem, welcoming them to First Purchase A.M.E. Church and inviting them to sit in the colored balcony for Tom's trial. One churchgoer, Lula, resists the Finch children's presence when she confronts Calpurnia, telling her: "You ain't got no business bringin' white chillun here—they got their church, we got our'n. It is our church, ain't it, Miss Cal?"[75] Zeebo, Calpurnia's son, drowns out Lula's objections and Scout soon forgets Lula's moment of defiance. But Lula's point remains true; when segregation ensured that Black children could not similarly visit white spaces, Scout and Jem are intruding, and flaunting their white privilege in doing so. Lula, in a few short lines, must represent the many differing perspectives of a diverse population. The narrative spends no time exploring the validity of Lula's feelings, and the marginal space available for the novel's four other Black characters[76] limits them to deferential players catering to the Finches. Many books about white characters have few to no Black characters or characters of color, but for a novel supposedly *about race*, *Mockingbird* lacks depth in its depiction of Black Maycombians.

The *Mockingbird* story (in print and on screen) not only excludes Black individuals from standing out against an assumed monolith, but it also purposefully situates Maycomb's Black community as underdeveloped, needing the 'help' of white saviors like Atticus. The term "white savior"—used already in my discussion of Atticus—becomes particularly apt when considering how the story applies the symbol of the mockingbird to Black people. Scout and Jem learn early

---

wake of slavery. She takes care to emphasize that Black people do not exclusively lead oppressed lives, without agency or expressive power.

[75] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 12.

[76] Calpurnia, Tom Robinson, Zeebo, Lula, and Reverend Sykes are the only Black characters with speaking roles. Helen Robinson (Tom's wife), Sophy and Jessie (other domestic workers) comes up in conversation but do not have their own lines or scenes in the novel.

in the novel that "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" because they "don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy."[77] The innocent but vulnerable mockingbird symbolizes the person or people the white hero is trying to save. The sin of killing a mockingbird alludes to the evil the savior intends to oppose, righting wrongs and 'saving' Black people with the force of their white privilege and goodwill.

Most obviously, the *Mockingbird* narrative positions Tom as a figurative mockingbird. Tom's first appearance in the novel is in Chapter 15 (out of 31), after the mob seeking to lynch him dissipates. The first words he speaks are "Mr. Finch?"[78] A mob has already threatened Tom's life, supposedly proving his need for protection. His continued presence in this scene depends upon Atticus. Tom's only means of accessing the action below is through his disembodied voice addressing Atticus, suggesting that Tom must turn to Atticus for information and affirmation of his safety. The story extends the paternalistic vision of the white savior, via metaphor, assigning Tom a lack of agency and essentializing the importance of white sympathy. In the night before the trial, and until his death, Tom's future depends on Atticus's ability to navigate a legal system designed for Black men to become prisoners.[79]

While Atticus does not manage to 'save' Tom, he reveals his own subscription to the white savior mentality and his inclination for paternalism on behalf of the Black community. In his closing arguments Atticus identifies Mayella Ewell as "the victim of cruel poverty and ignorance, but [he] cannot pity her: she is white."[80] He then delineates why Tom is "a quiet, respectable, humble Negro,"[81] emphasizing Tom's meekness and innocence. Atticus implies that

---

[77] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 10. Both Atticus and Miss Maudie tell Scout and Jem about this 'sin.'
[78] *Watchman*, ch. 15.
[79] As mentioned in note 58, see *13th* on the reverberations of American slavery built into the U.S.'s prison-industrial complex.
[80] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 20.
[81] *Ibid*.

Mayella would be pitiable for her poor living conditions, but her whiteness makes her less vulnerable. Atticus recognizes Mayella's exercise of white privilege, but is unable to see how his white savior mentality is also harmful. Since Mayella has accused Tom of a crime he did not commit, Atticus understands her as the sinner killing the mockingbird. Tom then becomes the sympathetic figure, the poor, quiet and disabled Black man in need of help in Atticus's racial imaginary. In satisfying the minimal demands of his conscience, Atticus uses Tom as his sort of moral litmus test[82] to prove his own righteousness. Atticus admits before the trial that Tom "might go to the chair, but he's not going till the truth's told."[83] Accepting Tom's conviction, and even death, as foregone conclusions, Atticus positions himself as the only one who can reveal the truth. The pursuit of justice or a fair trial lose priority as the white savior ignores the needs of the 'mockingbird' he thinks he is helping. Atticus may have 'saved' the truth, but this comes at Tom's expense.

Tom's usefulness to Atticus diminishes when, after the trial, a prison guard murders Tom off-stage. In a summary provided by Atticus: "They fired a few shots in the air, then to kill . . . Seventeen bullet holes in him. They didn't have to shoot him that much."[84] Atticus yet again chooses to find issue with the details, rather than the problem itself. His description of Tom's murder suggests that his primary objection is not that Tom was shot, but rather that his disapproves of the number of times the guards shot him. Atticus's focus on how the prison guard murdered Tom draws attention away from the fact that Tom has been killed. It is this latter point

[82] From Andrew Sarris, "A Negro is Not a Mockingbird," *Village Voice*, Mar. 7, 1963, qtd. in Baggett, p. 5.
[83] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 15.
[84] *Id.*, ch. 24.

that should anchor the novel's paltry coverage of Tom's death. The guards should not have needed to shoot any prisoner attempting to climb a fence at all.[85]

The Finches' mockingbird stand-in has been killed, but they chose to focus on how this affects them rather than on punishing the sin. Comparing Tom to a bird is no longer convenient for the Finches as their disappointment overshadows the news of Tom's murder; Atticus's sister laments that this news will tear Atticus "to pieces,"[86] as if Atticus's feelings should take precedence. There is no consideration for Tom, or his wife, but the narrative invites plenty of sympathy for the position Atticus is now in. While the Finches fret over how the news of Tom's murder affects them, no one seems to do anything about the shooting. The town of "Maycomb was interested by the news of Tom's death for perhaps two days."[87] The narrator assumes that *white* Maycombians care very little about Tom's murder, with their white privilege manifesting as morbid curiosity and violent ambivalence. Tom's life, trial and death exist as a blip on white residents' radar, and his murder is similarly glossed over in the text.

The film version of *Mockingbird* further skims over Tom's murder, too. Atticus tells his family that Tom was shot once, an accident resulting from the shooter tragically missing his target when he had only meant to injure Tom. Poor shooting skills, not the malice that accompanies shooting someone multiple times in the back, are then to blame for Tom's death. This aggressive reimagining hides a murder behind a blunder in a movie that already tries to eliminate Tom in the story of Atticus the hero. Just as in the novel, this is the end of Tom's role in the movie. Atticus tells Tom's wife—off-screen—and then the story ties up neatly with

---

[85] Also in Atticus's retelling of Tom's murder is the note that "if he'd had two good arms he'd have made it" (Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 24). The idea that Tom's disability makes his death doubly undeserved is both ableist and deleterious of other able-bodied men who have suffered similar fates. Two arms or not, a man does not deserve getting shot in the back.
[86] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 24.
[87] *Id*., ch. 25.

Arthur/Boo Radley saving the kids from the disgruntled Bob Ewell. Atticus does not continue to fight for Tom. He fulfilled what he considers his duty; now he can live with his conscience. And many white people in the U.S. can live with their consciences, while the means by which the legal system failed Tom Robinson are all too common in history and contemporary society. Twenty-first century authorities of the U.S. police state are no strangers to shooting Black men, in the back or otherwise, and legal measures, like qualified immunity (and for civilians, stand-your-ground laws)[88] continue to make justice unnavigable and unreachable for many Black people. Beyond police brutality, the heavy policing of Black neighborhoods and an unjust criminal justice system ensures that Black individuals live under consistent state-sanctioned surveillance and aggression.[89] But from *Mockingbird*'s perspective, Tom is just another casualty at the hands of state violence and Atticus's contributions to Tom's defense—his shining white savior moment—clear him of culpability in these larger manifestations of systemic racism and anti-Blackness.

The Bad Whites

While attempting to maintain his moral authority, Atticus expands the mockingbird metaphor, distancing himself from poor white people like Bob and Mayella Ewell. Positioning these 'other' white people as the sinners and Black people as monolithic mockingbirds, Atticus tells his children that "[t]here's nothing more sickening to me than a low-grade white man who'll take

[88] *13th*. Stand-your-ground and qualified immunity are just two defenses that help murderers escape indictments and convictions. The documentary connects these laws with the lobbying power of weapons manufacturers who supply the police and the public with lethal force.

[89] *13th* also sheds light on the lobbying power of for-profit prisons, who incentivize increased policing of low-income communities, Black neighborhoods, and communities of color. For more on the systemic biases that permeate the justice system, see *Time: The Kalief Browder Story* (dir. Jenner Furst, 2017). Kalief Browder refused to accept a plea deal for a theft he did not commit and was held in prison without a trial for three years before the charges were finally dropped.

advantage of a Negro's ignorance."[90] Atticus maintains his superiority over both groups here, expressing classist biases and anti-Black racism. As Hughey notes, whiteness implicates racists and antiracists alike, though in fiction "the savior is juxtaposed with racist, domineering, completely uncaring and extremely violent white characters" often to provide white audiences with a 'bad white' to blame for everyday and structural racism.[91] The savior can then appear to struggle against racist speech and act as a victim of the bad white, proving the savior's ability to overcome challenges. The construction of the bad white allows for white saviors like Atticus to shift attention toward their relatively privileged lives and away from the quotidian and systemic violence targeting Black people and other people of color. The polarity between Atticus Finch and Bob Ewell, a likely perpetrator of incest and a definitively bad white person, feeds into the "delusion" that racism and anti-Black violence are tools of the Bob Ewells and not the Atticus Finches of the world.[92]

As it demonizes overtly racist white characters, *Mockingbird* allows Atticus and Scout to avoid reflecting on their own contributions to white supremacy. The Ewells are exceptional outcasts in Maycomb, and this makes them identifiable bad whites. As they live near the town dump, the narrative literally describes them as white trash. Scout uses these associations with grime in her description of Bob Ewell, telling readers that "it was easy to tell when someone bathed regularly, as opposed to yearly lavations: Mr. Ewell had a scalded look; as if an overnight soaking had deprived him of protective layers of dirt."[93] Bob Ewell's bath leaves him vulnerable to the eyes of the Maycomb community; even Scout can recall the strange pinkish hue of a man used to living in abject filth. Anyone could 'read' Bob Ewell's skin and know his social standing,

---

[90] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 23.
[91] *The White Savior Fil*m, p. 48.
[92] Ako-Adjei, p. 185.
[93] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 18.

as cleanliness and purity elude him. The Ewells appear less-than white, fulfilling the mutually beneficial needs of white supremacy and capitalism that keep wealthy whites in power.

The interconnectedness of systems of oppression, a prominent element of critical race theory, is useful here in understanding the role of the bad white. The upper-to-middle-class white people who enjoy the classist benefits of a capitalist society[94] normally exclude poor whites due to their class status. Through this endeavor, Atticus characterizes the Ewells as not quite white to indicate their exclusion from economic opportunity. But (?) the same upper-to-middle-class white people pivot in the defense of white supremacy, inviting poor whites to align with them when pursuing the interrelated goals of capitalism *and* white supremacy. Poor white people, though they should theoretically feel some semblance of class loyalty with working-class Black people, instead choose to bolster white supremacy and their own claim to power in an economic and social structure that largely does not benefit them.[95]

Though not a higher-class white person, Bob Ewell expresses his marginal power and supports the power of other white people when he fabricates a deviant crime to pin on a Black man. The myth of the Black criminal, and particularly the Black rapist threatening white women, is so pervasive that white Maycombians listen to even the least 'white' man in town. The alliance between Maycomb county's white residents lasts only as long as Bob Ewell makes claims against Tom Robinson, though. After the trial the townspeople tell the Ewells, "okay, we'll convict this Negro but get back to your dump."[96] These are Atticus's words; he absolutely recognizes that all white Maycomb residents have converged around advancing white

---

[94] Capitalism in the U.S. is also inherently tied to chattel slavery. The slave trade and the work of enslaved laborers built the colonies' fledgling economy and sustained it post-independence from Britain. See the *1619* podcast hosted by Nikole Hannah-Jones, particularly "Episode 2: The Economy That Slavery Built" (30 Aug. 2019).
[95] For more on interest divergence, see Lani Guinier, "From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: Brown V. Board of Education and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma" (2004).
[96] Lee, *Mockingbird*, ch. 27.

supremacy, but he appears rather blasé. Atticus brushes aside Tom's conviction, as if it should be easy for people to sentence a man to death, and he ignores Bob Ewell's role in briefly unifying white supremacist goals. Atticus also confirms that the Ewells must return to their status as disgusting outliers, independent of proper Maycomb society and its wealthier citizens.[97] Atticus and the other townspeople (the well-off white people) do little to prevent the miscarriage of justice, and readers should not exclude them when the narrative invites criticisms of Bob and Mayella. The Ewells instigated the trial, but the county (the other poor whites) had to populate the jury and the townspeople like Atticus had to perform the motions of law enforcement in order for a guilty verdict to be achieved. The entirety of white Maycomb converged in order to incarcerate and murder Tom Robinson; Atticus and his educated peers—despite their quiet disapproval and Atticus's doomed defense—are as culpable as the bad white Ewells.

The same cognitive dissonance that allows Atticus to take part in a rigged proceeding enables him to continue to accept racism in other aspects of his life. In *Mockingbird*, Atticus openly makes excuses as a Klan apologist, yet readers' objections to his involvement with racist organizations only surfaced after the publication of *Watchman*. In *Mockingbird* Atticus tells Scout that "[w]ay back about nineteen-twenty there was a Klan, but it was a political organization more than anything. Besides, they couldn't find anybody to scare."[98] Atticus treats the early 1920s as far-off history, but *Mockingbird* takes place only ten years later.[99] Atticus uses

---

[97] "Wealth" is obviously relative, as *Mockingbird* takes place during the 1930s; Atticus even admits that the Finches do not have much money. According to Hannah-Jones in "What is Owed," income fluctuates for everyone but wealth (assets and investments minus debt) builds inter-generationally and often purposefully excludes those not fitting the mutual aims of white supremacy and capitalism.

[98] *Id*., ch. 15.

[99] The year is currently 2020: ten years ago Germany made its final reparation payment for WWI (See Olivia Lang, "Why Has Germany Taken so Long to Pay off Its WWI Debt?"); it has been over 400 years since the first enslaved Africans landed in the Americas and the U.S. continues to profit from social and economic oppressions rooted in slavery (for more on the legacy of slavery in the 401 years that have passed since 1619 and 2020, see Nikole Hannah-Jones' *1619* podcast).

the illusion of history[100] to claim that problems like the KKK have passed. Atticus also diminishes the effects of the KKK, choosing to substitute the word 'political' for 'terrorist' and insisting that he was not afraid of them. Discounting the KKK's scare tactics may be easy for Atticus, but he will never be the target of a hate crime. Atticus unfairly depicts the KKK to his children and ignores the real harm this 'political' group has perpetrated. With this in mind, it is hard to find Atticus's involvement in a White Citizens' Council in *Watchman* surprising.

White Citizens' Councils (or WCC)[101] were generally comprised of professionals and businessmen who committed themselves to racist ends, working with the KKK and often sharing in its membership. Members aimed to promote(?) racially biased business practices, including refusing loans to black families and organizing against stores employing black workers.[102] Hughey describes WCCs as a response from white people who felt defensive about their position of power or majority, and groups like the KKK, neo-Nazis, and even the Tea Party have similarly all formed as a result of white members' perceived loss of political and social control.[103] Atticus's *Mockingbird* defense of the KKK fits alongside his *Watchman* membership in a related racist organization. But when Jean Louise sees, sitting "on rough benches . . . not only most of the trash in Maycomb County, but the county's most respectable men," she feels that Atticus has "betrayed [her] . . . publicly, grossly, and shamelessly."[104] WCCs represent spaces of white interest convergence across class boundaries, with Maycomb's Citizen's Council

---

[100] Just as Hughey warned, the white savior narrative manipulates the assumed accuracy of history to exalt the white messianic figure and distance them from the problems of the past.
[101] I provide the following background to ensure that the linkages between WCCs and the KKK are apparent. Colloquially, I have also found that classroom settings (in K-12) for myself and my peers tended not to address WCCs. My high school included *To Kill a Mockingbird* in its curriculum but glossed over histories confronting anti-Black violence and systemic racism, especially lacking details that implicated middle- and upper-class white people.
[102] Johnson, p. 35.
[103] Hughey, *White Bound*, p. 9.
[104] *Watchman*, ch. 8.

bringing together the "trash" of the country and the "gentlemen" from the town.[105] Jean Louise is shocked that all of Maycomb's white residents—regardless of class—could conspire together to forward white supremacy, but she clearly has not been paying attention. Her negative response to seeing her father in this group may rely on her assumption of her father's superiority to other white people. She had assumed him to be an outstanding man, and his presence at the council meeting does not "make it less filthy," but rather "condone[s]" such beliefs.[106] When she confronts her father about the betrayal she feels, her anger seems to have little impact on him. Atticus tells Jean Louise that, in reference to her insults: "I can take anything anybody calls me so long as it's not true," and then proceeds to tell her he forgives her.[107] He doesn't think any of Jean Louise's personal attacks are valid, and thus shrugs off her protests against the WCC. Just as in *Mockingbird*, Atticus proves no commitment to change, and his confidence in his own conscience has only grown with age.

Atticus's condescending, anti-Black attitudes did not originate in *Watchman*. White readers may have felt blindsided by the Finches' engagement with explicitly racist content, but the shift from white savior to bad white is more a change in tone than meaning. Atticus's staunch support for segregation and white superiority at the end of *Watchman* fit the UN's definition of hate speech[108] and could be distressing for many of Lee's readers to see. I will only touch on a few moments to illustrate that Atticus has become more open in his racist views. In his argument against segregation, Atticus asks Jean Louise, "[d]o you want them [Black people] in our

---

[105] *Watchman*, ch. 8.
[106] *Ibid*.
[107] *Id.*, ch. 19.
[108] Though an international, legal definition for hate speech does not yet exist, the UN defines hate speech as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor." Hate speech can incite targeted violence, and it can have lasting psychological impacts on victims. For more on the impacts of hate speech see Wendy Leo Moore, et al., "The Limits of Community: Deconstructing the White Framing of Racist Speech in Universities," (2019).

world?"[109] Despite the fact that Black Maycombians are already in his and Jean Louise's world—Calpurnia worked for the Finches for years—he willfully ignores the role Black residents play in the local community. Calpurnia helped raise his children, which should also carry an emotional connection, but Atticus does not think her capable of navigating 'his world.' This deeply hateful and hypocritical perspective reveals an old man out of touch with his own reality. Atticus's insistence that Black people do not belong in his world is not dissimilar to his condescending views on Black people's 'ignorance,' just as his membership in a hate group is not an unreasonable extension of his casual dismissal of the KKK.

When a member of Calpurnia's family is charged with killing a white pedestrian with his car, Atticus's previous drive to defend the truth seems to be replaced with a desire not to interact with the NAACP. He jokes that he would not want "to have [the defendant] fall into the wrong hands,"[110] because he thinks that

> the NAACP-paid lawyers are standing around like buzzards down here waiting for things like this to happen . . . they demand Negroes on the juries in such cases . . . they raise every legal trick in their books . . . Above all else, they try to get the case into a Federal court where they know the cards are stacked in their favor.[111]

Atticus equates the NAACP to carrion birds and implies that the Supreme Court blatantly favors certain plaintiffs. The latter claim verges on conspiracy theory, as the Supreme Court ruled in cases like *Scott v. Sandford* and *Plessy v. Ferguson* that Black people in the U.S. were property and then that segregation was legal before the 1954 ruling.[112] Atticus's claim that the

---

[109] *Watchman*, ch. 17.
[110] *Id.*, ch. 12.
[111] *Ibid.*
[112] Carbado uses the *Dred Scott* case and *Plessy v. Ferguson* to detail how Black people have historically been included in U.S. identity formation—as property and then as their own distinct class of citizen—while being excluded from the full rights of U.S. citizenship.

courts could be on any one side also directly contradicts his stated confidence, as a young man, in the judicial system. In his closing remarks at Tom's trial in *Mockingbird*, Atticus had said to the jurors: "We know all men are not created equal in the sense some people would have us believe . . . But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal . . . That institution, gentlemen, is a court."[113] Atticus was able to champion the integrity of the court system when he knew it would not matter and that Tom's verdict would not change. His ability to reframe the courts as malleable by the NAACP shows that he knows that the law and justice have never been synonymous.[114] He wants to purposefully manipulate the local criminal justice system to prevent national progress, and he conflates the prevention of practices like racist jury selection[115] with tricks, as if the NAACP is maliciously taking advantage of the system that white lawmakers and interpreters have clearly designed to disenfranchise Black people. As he opposes the NAACP for interfering in what he perceives as local matters and through his rather dismissive attitude towards his defendant, one may wonder if Atticus's hands are not the wrong ones to which he refers.

Jean Louise certainly thinks so; the narrative turns again to free indirect discourse to express her belief that "[n]ot long ago, Atticus would have [defended a Black man] simply from his goodness, he would have done it for Cal."[116] Atticus affords the family of his long-time employee little thought, which contrasts with the extent to which Atticus was seemingly willing

---

[113] Lee, *Mockingbird,* ch. 22.
[114] Alfred Brophy, "Watchman's New Constitutional Vision" (2016), explores this misalignment.
[115] Prosecutors striking Black jurors is *still* an extremely pervasive practice. See *In the Dark*, season two on Curtis Flowers for more. Flowers, a Black Mississippian, has been tried six times for a crime the local D.A. insists he committed. Appeals have found that the D.A. has barred Black jurors from serving in multiple trials. Host Madeleine Baran discusses in episode 7 of season 2, "The Trials of Curtis Flowers," how serving on a jury is an integral part of citizens' access to U.S. democracy and in the practice of political agency.
[116] *Watchman*, ch. 12.

to oppose his friends and neighbors when defending Tom Robinson.[117] Since *Mockingbird* does not directly invite readers to question Atticus in this way, the experience of probing his motivations may be uncomfortable and unfamiliar for those who previously idolized Atticus Finch. But this 'new' Atticus is not so different from the one who risked so little, and insisted on no real, substantive changes in *Mockingbird*.

Though Atticus spews hate speech and aims racist insults at the NAACP in *Watchman*, Jean Louise is not an innocent observer. Atticus and Jean Louise both express disdain for the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board* decision. The irony in white people's favorite lawyer opposing the power the Constitution grants to the federal judiciary reverberates in Jean Louise, who used her father's conscience as the model for her own, and similarly reflects racist values. According to Jean Louise, the Supreme Court decision "rubbed out . . . The Tenth [Amendment]":

> It's only a small amendment, only one sentence long, but it seemed to be the one that meant the most, somehow . . . it seemed that to meet the real needs of a small portion of the population, the Court set up something horrible that could . . . affect the vast majority of folks. Adversely, that is.[118]

Jean Louise argues against desegregation using the guise of the Tenth Amendment and 'states' rights,' the same kind of doublespeak that whites in the U.S. have weaponized to protect everything from slavery to black codes to segregation. Though *Brown v. Board* was far from perfect,[119] it is a common marker for the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement and Jean

---

[117] According to Michiko Kakutani, in "Review: Harper Lee's 'Go Set a Watchman' Gives Atticus Finch a Dark Side," it is this 'change' in Atticus that caught the attention of many readers, who felt that Atticus's development seemed *out of* character.

[118] *Watchman,* ch. 17.

[119] Guinier discusses *Brown v. Board* as an example of interest convergence for middle-class Black families and Northern whites, as the decision most directly benefitted affluent Black students and targeted *de jure* segregation in the South. She emphasizes that the Supreme Court's decision did not address means for ending *de facto* measures of segregation (common across the U.S.) and that Black people continue to be disadvantaged because of this: "If the

Louise's opposition looks particularly egregious in hindsight. She echoes the popular claim that the South was not ready for desegregation by saying that "they [the Supreme Court] were putting the cart way out in front of the horse."[120] Jean Louise thinks that she and her peers deserve the authority to determine when and how Constitutional rights should be affirmed, erasing the centuries-long fight that Black people in the United States have waged to secure their freedoms. As she touts paternalism, Jean Louise proves she inherited her father's values. Atticus's white saviorism and white supremacism are not only logical progressions for his character, but these codes of ethics also transferred easily onto his daughter, who continues to uphold oppressive systems.

The Finches, the two novels show, are themselves bad whites, not according to Hughey's definition of the term, but rather in practice; they are no better than the Ewells. Atticus's movement from paternalism to outright white supremacist sentiments illustrates how similar he really is to poorer whites like the 'trash' of Maycomb County. Jean Louise, who used her father as the model for her conscience, is the next generation, a generation perhaps living in the North and considering themselves more progressive, yet still staunchly supporting dated defenses for anti-Black racism.

On Broadway and Beyond

The stage adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* debuted in late 2018,[121] and unlike *Watchman*, the play attempts to grapple with the problems in its source material. With more self-awareness, the

problem is that separate is inherently unequal, then equality is simply presumed when the separation is eliminated. Any remaining inequality is the fault of black people themselves" (117).

[120] *Watchman*, ch. 17.

[121] I was able to see the play early in 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the U.S. It is impossible to know when the next performance will be, or how the production will be impacted.

play reacts to both novels and the movie, recognizing the legacy it has inherited while maintaining features of the original storyline. Aaron Sorkin, who adapted the script, made sure to refer to the late 2010s. Atticus's advice to indiscriminately stand in others' shoes stretches into contemporary discussions among moderates and centrists about the acceptability of Trump supporters. Sorkin has stated that he sees similarities between Atticus and Trump, particularly when thinking about Trump's 2017 excusal of neo-Nazis in the Charlottesville protests.[122] The dangerous extent to which one can pardon the behavior of others should have been obvious in the original novel, but the play engages more fully with current events than Lee's *Mockingbird* did. The reframing of Atticus brings these extra-textual details into partnership with a script that allows characters—Calpurnia, specifically—more room to push back against Atticus's attitudes and privilege.

When Tom Robinson is accused of rape in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus reminds Scout to continue to respect her neighbors despite their maintenance of racist institutions and sentiments. However, as Calpurnia argues in the stage adaptation of *Mockingbird*, the refusal to confront those perpetrating or complicit in oppression inherently harms the oppressed. LisaGay Hamilton, as Calpurnia, takes on a larger role than her character did in either the book or the movie—though neither set the threshold very high to begin. The scene in which Calpurnia speaks her mind on stage was perhaps the single biggest deviation from the source material. Atticus implies that she should be grateful that he is doing his job defending Tom[123] and her response digs at the many fallacies behind the white savior myth. Calpurnia sarcastically thanks Atticus for demeaning himself enough to provide his legal counsel for a Black man, and notes

[122] Cep discusses interviews Sorkin has given.
[123] Atticus tells Calpurnia, "you're welcome" when he is appointed Tom's lawyer, as if she had asked Atticus for a favor and this was how he chose to deliver.

that the Black residents of Maycomb do not owe Atticus anything. Justice and equality are not transactional, and that Atticus expects thanks for performing the bare minimum to secure a quasi-fair trial speaks to his inability to step into Calpurnia's shoes.

Audiences do see Atticus seriously consider Calpurnia's words. In a voice-over near the end of the performance, Scout describes how Atticus later suggested measures to the state legislature that would curb biased jury selections. Atticus lost the following election, assumedly due in part to this bill proposal. Despite his lack of success, Atticus here attempts more than the merely symbolic nonracism that he seeks out in the book and movie. Whereas the novel features Atticus passively accepting that racist laws will not change, this adaptation allows room for Atticus to work towards a more equal future.

The play is far from perfect, though. That Atticus's bill fails and he loses his seat in the state legislature reflects his inability to effect change but suggests that his ineffectiveness is not his fault. Proposing antiracist measures and then losing—and doing nothing more—is the new 'best' that Atticus can do. There is no suggestion that he dedicates any more of his life to preventing what happened to Tom from happening again. And while the play takes liberties with the source material, the *Mockingbird* story only stretches so far. Calpurnia and Tom are the only Black characters in the play, their actors the only Black people on stage for the entire performance. In providing Cal space to speak, Sorkin apparently cut out representations of other Black Maycombians when there were already so few. Unfortunately for the play, undoing a white savior myth within the bounds of its original plot may be impossible. In that case, audiences and readers, fans and educators, and creators looking to adapt Atticus for new modes, will have to work to determine *Mockingbird*'s future usefulness.

I wrote earlier that white people interacting with Lee's texts cannot be complacent with the faux progressivism that has made Atticus so popular. I have laid out Atticus's faults—spanning from 1960 to today. He has not changed; in every story, he reveals a little more of himself. Atticus is both a paternalistic white savior and a bigoted white supremacist; these categories are mutually inclusive. The discomfort some readers and reviewers felt when confronted with this reality in 2015 should reflect the problems in not only *Watchman* but *Mockingbird* as well. For decades white people have reassured themselves by looking to Atticus's example, embracing him as the best version of themselves.[124] White people must reflect on why we want to claim Atticus Finch as our hero. Similar to the necessary removal of monuments dedicated to slaveholders, bigots, and traitors,[125] white people need to remove Atticus from his pedestal. Placed among dethroned and demystified icons, Atticus could serve as a reminder of the insidious nature of anti-Blackness in the U.S., literary and popular culture's best example of the ways that overt racism is bolstered by white silence and complicity.

[124] Baggett similarly notes white people assuming Atticus as their gold standard, but Baggett specifies that Southern whites in the U.S. do this. I would argue that U.S. regions outside of the South are equally responsible for perpetuating and profiting from systemic racism.

[125] Conversations about removing Confederate monuments have been happening for years; for context see John Oliver's *Last Week Tonight* episode "Confederacy" (2017) and for a 2020 perspective see poet Caroline Randall Williams' "You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body is a Confederate Monument."

Works Cited

13th. Directed by Ava DuVernay, Netflix Studios, 2016. *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/watch/80091741?trackId=13752289 &tctx=0%2C1%2C.

Ako-Adjei, Naa Baako. "Why It's Time Schools Stopped Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Transition*, no. 122, 2017, pp. 182-200.

Baggett, J. Mark. '"Tumbling Out of the Beautiful Dream': *Go Set a Watchman* and Harper Lee's Legacy." *Cumberland Law Review*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2016, pp. 3-18.

Baran, Madeleine, host. *In the Dark.* APM Reports, 2018-2020, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/id1148175292.

Brophy, Alfred L. "Watchman's New Constitutional Vision." *Cumberland Law Review*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2016, pp. 19-23.

Carbado, Devon W. "Racial Naturalization." *American Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2005, pp. 633-58.

Cep, Casey. "The Contested Legacy of Atticus Finch." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 9 July 2019, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/17/the-contested-legacy-of-atticus-finch.

Chura, Patrick. "Prolepsis and Anachronism: Emmet Till and the Historicity of *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2000, pp. 1–26.

"Confederacy." *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, HBO, 8 Oct. 2017.

Cornett, Judy M. "Four Reasons Why Readers Hate *Go Set a Watchman* (and One Reason Why I Don't)." *Cumberland Law Review*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2016, pp. 25-35.

Corrigan, Maureen. "Harper Lee's 'Watchman' Is A Mess That Makes Us Reconsider A Masterpiece." NPR Books. 13 July 2015.

Eder, Maciej and Jan Rybicki. “Go Set A Watchman while we Kill the Mockingbird In Cold Blood.” *Computational Stylistics Group*, 2015, https://sites.google.com/site/computationalstylistics/projects/lee_vs_capote.

Edwards, Phil. “The real reason To Kill A Mockingbird became so famous.” *Vox.com*, 13 Sept. 2017.

Equal Justice Initiative. “Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror.” 2017, https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/.

Epperson, Hannah. “‘A Love Story Pure and Simple’: Harper Lee and Atticus Finch.” *Critique*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2018, pp. 115-25

Furst, Jenner, director. *Time: The Kalief Browder Story.* Viacom Entertainment Group, 2017.

Guinier, Lani. “From Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy: Brown V. Board of Education and the Interest-Divergence Dilemma.” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 91, no. 1, 2004, pp. 92-118.

Hannah-Jones, Nikole, host. *1619*. The New York Times, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/podcasts/1619-podcast.html.

Hannah-Jones, Nikole. “What is Owed.” *The New York Times Magazine*, The New York Times, 30 June 2020.

Hetter, Katia. “No Elder Abuse Found in Harper Lee Case.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 13 Mar. 2015, www.cnn.com/2015/03/13/living/feat-harper-lee-kill-a-mockingbird-elder-abuse/index.html.

Hey Boo: Harper Lee and to Kill a Mockingbird. First-Run Features, distributed by Films Media Group, 2011.

Holland, Brooke Richelle. “Classical Rhetoric In Atticus Finch’s Speeches.” *English Journal*,

vol. 105, no. 6, 2016, pp. 78-82.

Hughey, Matthew W. *White Bound: Nationalists, Antiracists, and the Shared Meanings of Race*. Stanford University Press, 2012.

--. *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption*. Temple University Press, 2014.

Johnson, Claudia Durst. *Reading Harper Lee: Understanding to Kill a Mockingbird and Go Set a Watchman*. Greenwood, 2018.

Kakutani, Michiko. "Review: Harper Lee's 'Go Set a Watchman' Gives Atticus Finch a Dark Side." *The New York Times.* 13 July 2016.

Lang, Olivia. "Why Has Germany Taken so Long to Pay off Its WWI Debt?" *BBC News*, BBC, 2 Oct. 2010.

Lee, Harper. *Go Set a Watchman*. Apple Books ed., HarperCollins, 2015.

--. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Apple Books ed., J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1960.

Lubert, Steven. "Reconstructing Atticus Finch." *Michigan Law Review*, vol. 97, no. 6, 1999, pp. 1399-62.

Meyer, Michael J. *Harper Lee's* To Kill a Mockingbird: *New Essays*. Scarecrow Press, 2010.

MLA Handbook. 8th ed., Modern Language Association of America, 2016, pp. 123-4.

Moore, Wendy Leo, et al. "The Limits of Community: Deconstructing the White Framing of Racist Speech in Universities." *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 63, no. 13, Nov. 2019, pp. 1760–75.

Murray, Jennifer. "More Than One Way to (Mis)Read a 'Mockingbird.'" *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2010, pp. 75–91.

Robinson, Lillian S. "Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon." 1983. Rpt. in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter, Pantheon, 1985, pp. 105-21.

Santopietro, Tom. *Why To Kill a Mockingbird Matters: What Harper Lee's Book and the Iconic American Film Mean to Us Today*. St. Martin's Press, 2018.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016, pp. 1-22.

Shields, Charles. *Mockingbird*. New York, Henry Holt, 2016.

Squire, Kelsey. "Novel, Sequel, Draft: Classification and the Reception of Harper Lee's Go Set a Watchman." *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2019.

To Kill a Mockingbird. Directed by Robert Mulligan, performance by Gregory Peck. Universal Pictures, 1962.

To Kill a Mockingbird. Adapted by Aaron Sorkin, directed by Bartlet Sher, performances by LisaGay Hamilton and Ed Harris. 2 Feb. 2020, Sam S. Shubert Theatre, New York.

"UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech." *The United Nations*, June 2019.

"White Nationalist." *Southern Poverty Law Center*, Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019, www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/white-nationalist.

Williams, Caroline Randall. "You Want a Confederate Monument? My Body is a Confederate Monument." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 26 June 2020.

Yancy, George. "Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2005, pp. 215-241.