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Is It Gender or Is It Race?
To Kill a Mockingbird and Its Film Adaptation

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Abstract: This article begins by exploring the national climate in which Lee's novel appeared, at the height of the civil rights movement in the South, which had a crucial impact on its composition and reception. The major film studios were not initially interested in the novel, but independent filmmakers Alan Pakula (producer) and Robert Mulligan (director), influenced by existentialism, felt attracted to stories with strong dramatization over the spectacular. The film is famously characterized by the voice-over narration of the adult Scout, which embodies a paradoxical duality of perspective: the events are seen from the perspective of the young Scout but described in the language of a mature and articulate adult Scout. In the novel, the destabilization of gender norms is the central theme, and the protagonist is clearly Scout going through the pains of growing up female in a South with very strict definitions of gender roles. This dimension is not prominent in the film version, which gave in to the demands of the Hollywood star system and made the girl's father, played by Gregory Peck, the main character, and made racism the main issue. The article concludes with a necessary reconsideration of Atticus Finch, subjected in recent years to the complaint that both the novel and the film convey the historically inaccurate message that heroic whites, instead of blacks, were the leaders of the anti-racist movements of the twentieth century. Atticus Finch no doubt remains tied to the accommodating values of his class and he never openly questions the structural racism of which he himself is part, but moral horizons of previous eras are often narrow in comparison with our own, and we should avoid the excesses of presentism and maintain the historical perspective that allows us to celebrate the courage and success of fictional white liberals like Atticus and real ones like Harper Lee herself, who could only speak as whites, not as black victims. Despite all its limitations, *Mockingbird* did contribute to making hearts and minds reconsider race in America, and it remains a socially and historically important film. Thus, we should at least acknowledge its merit in taking a stand during a period when many films avoided controversial racial matters.

Keywords: Harper Lee; *To Kill a Mockingbird*; Atticus Finch; Scout Finch; southern gender roles; race

Introduction: Reception and Historical Context

Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* became an instant success when it was published in 1960, and it has enjoyed continued popularity ever since. A year after its publication it had sold 500,000 copies and had been translated into ten languages. In the period from 1895 to 1975, *Mockingbird* was the seventh best-selling book in the US, and the third best-selling novel. It has never been out of print, and it remains highly popular in languages other than English. By 1982, more than 15,000,000 copies had been sold, and today the book remains popular among students and the general public. According to a survey of reading habits conducted in 1991 by the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Library of Congress, *Mockingbird* was second only to the Bible in being "most often cited as making a difference" in people's lives (Johnson 13-14). It won a number of important prizes, including the 1961 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The novel was selected by three American book clubs for their readers: Readers' Digest

Condensed Books, the Literary Guild and the Book-of-the-Month Club (Shields 200). In a recent poll of both men and women conducted in Britain by the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction, *Mockingbird* topped the list of the twenty novels by women "that have most impacted, shaped or changed readers' lives" (Flood).

The national climate in which the novel appeared, at the height of the civil rights movement in the South, is of great historical significance and had a crucial impact on its composition and reception. Lee wrote the novel between about 1955 and 1958, during the beginnings of the civil rights era. As she started writing, the Supreme Court's decision on the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case, in May 17, 1954, had provoked both dismay and excitement by declaring the policy of "separate but equal" in classrooms across the country to be unconstitutional. The ruling was perceived by many whites as a significant threat to the southern way of life and generated widespread opposition across the South. The arrest of Rosa Parks in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955, for refusing to give up her seat to a white person in a segregated bus was seen by many historians as the beginning of the end of segregation in the South. Her action generated a boycott of the Montgomery public transportation system that went on for more than a year and made the young local minister Martin Luther King Jr. nationally famous. Buses became fully integrated in Montgomery on December 21, 1956.

In the spring of 1956, when Harper Lee was writing about the problematic relations between blacks and whites during the Depression in Maycomb, Alabama, and the bus boycott by blacks was going on in Montgomery, Alabama, the nation's attention was attracted to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, which Lee herself had attended. Two black women, Pollie Ann Myers and Autherine Lucy, were excluded from the university when it was discovered that they were black. The courts ordered that Autherine Lucy be readmitted, only to be expelled by the Board of Trustees (Johnson 12).[1]

Over twenty years earlier, on March 25, 1931, nine black men were arrested in Scottsboro, Alabama, accused of raping two white women on a train. The Scottsboro trials would become famous in the history of civil rights and constituted one of the resonant events that focused the nation's attention on racial discrimination in the South. The women were poor whites of dubious virtue (at least one, Victoria Price, was a prostitute) who accused the black men of rape to avoid being arrested for vagrancy, as they and their two male companions and lovers had stowed away on the train. In spite of the overwhelming lack of physical evidence, the nine black men were convicted and one of them was subsequently shot by a deputy, like Tom Robinson in *Mockingbird*. The action of *Mockingbird*, as with the Scottsboro trials, takes place in the 1930s, when the South was still ruled by the tradition that its white women were to be protected from violation by an "inferior race." For many critics, such as Joseph Crespino, there is no doubt that "the Scottsboro trial's false accusations of rape influenced Harper Lee's depiction of Tom Robinson's trial" (12). She in fact denied that the novel had been influenced by the Scottsboro trials, although in a 1999 letter to Hazel Rowley she wrote that the case "will more than do as an example (albeit a lurid one)

1 The first black student to graduate from University of Alabama would not do so until 1963 (Palmer 58).

of deep-South attitudes on race vs. justice that prevailed at the time" (in Shields 118).[2] Patrick Chura has rightly pointed out the impossibility of *not* reading *Mockingbird* in the context of the struggle for civil rights. He highlights "the novel's participation in racial and social ideology that characterized not the Depression era but the early civil rights era," adding that "the novel is best understood as an amalgam or cross-historical montage, its 'historical present' diluted by the influence of events and ideology concurrent with its period of production" (1). According to Chura, "There is a long list of similarities both circumstantial and deeply ideological between the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till and Lee's account of the conviction and murder of Tom Robinson" (2). Emmett Till was a 14-year-old black boy from Chicago who was brutally murdered by two white men in the Mississippi Delta on August 28, 1955, for allegedly whistling at a white woman in a store. An all-white, all-male jury declared the two murderers innocent after a 67-minute deliberation. The centrality of the trial of Tom Robinson in *Mockingbird* is inseparable from all the political passions in the air as Lee was finishing the novel in the late 1950s. The legal proceedings of the Scottsboro Boys case began in 1930 and ended in 1950, and the unsuccessful prosecution of the Emmett Till killers took place in 1955. As audiences were flocking to see *To Kill a Mockingbird* on the screen, in the summer of 1963, the civil rights movement reached another watershed. In June, Governor George Wallace attempted to oppose the enrolment of two black students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, at the University of Alabama (Shields 233), and in August the whole nation would see the March on Washington, culminating in the epoch-making "I have a dream" speech by Martin Luther King.

The story is told by Scout, an adult woman, as she looks back on her childhood during the period between her last summer before entering school and the Halloween of her third year in school. Scout is "almost six" (6) when the novel opens, and her brother Jem is ten. The action begins in 1933 and takes place primarily in 1935, during the Great Depression. The point of view is restricted to the child's consciousness—the events of the past are related as the child Scout experiences them. The events are seen through the mind of a child, but the writing and reminiscing are done through the mind of an adult. As William Going says, "The reader comes to learn the true meaning of Maycomb through the eyes of a child who now recollects with the wisdom of maturity" (61). Maintaining a consistent narrative voice was a significant challenge for the author, and this was the main reason for her completely re-writing the manuscript three times.

Adapting *Mockingbird* to the Screen

The major film studios were not interested in *Mockingbird*, in spite of the enormous, instant success of the book. As Charles Shields says, it "lacked the tried-and-true ingredients that attracted movie audiences: shoot-'em-up action, a love story, danger, or a clear-cut 'bad guy'" (192). Also, *Mockingbird* lacked the sensational spectacle of southern decay and sexual repression and dysfunction that had proved so appealing to audiences in southern films of the previous decade, such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) and *The Long Hot Summer* (1958).

2 Hazel Rowley is the author of *Richard Wright: The Life and Times*.

Lee's literary agent, Annie Laurie Williams, sold the rights to Alan Pakula and Robert Mulligan who were in the process of forming a production company. They were both members of the post-war generation of filmmakers, sometimes called the "New York school," which included figures like John Frankenheimer and Sidney Lumet (Palmer 123). Schooled in directing for the theatre and television and with a worldview influenced by post-war existentialism, they felt attracted to stories with strong dramatization and showed a preference for intimate drama over the spectacular, with characters who face moral dilemmas while navigating tragic situations. Palmer places *Mockingbird* among the "small films" of the first two postwar decades that were the precursors of today's independent productions and which "were showcases not only for topical themes, but also for subtle forms of naturalist acting and literate scripts" (140). Pakula and Mulligan had recently teamed up for the successful *Fear Strikes Out* (1957), another film noted for its human interest and its emphasis on individuality and non-conformism.

Pakula insisted on getting Gregory Peck to play Atticus, and the actor, fascinated by the book and the role, joined the partnership with his own Brentwood Productions. Harper Lee declined the courtesy invitation to write the screenplay and Pakula chose the Texas-born playwright Horton Foote, urging him to compress the novel's three years into one. Another important change Foote made was to heighten the intensity of the book's critique of racism. Foote would later write, "I felt I understood the world of Harper Lee's novel and its people. The town of the novel was not unlike the town I was born and brought up in, and the time of the novel, the depression era of the 1930s, was a period I had lived through" ("Foreword" *xii*). In spite of all the necessary changes, like the elimination of episodes, minor characters and subplots, as well as the fundamental decision to compress the time scheme of the novel from three years to one, the film emphasized the two major story lines—the increasingly complex relationship of the children with the reclusive Boo Radley, which dominates the first half, and the trial of Tom Robinson, which dominates the second half. Lee was delighted with Foote's screenplay: "If the integrity of a film adaptation is measured by the degree to which the novelist's intent is preserved, Mr. Foote's screenplay should be studied as a classic" (in Shields 206).

With the exception of Gregory Peck, the chosen Hollywood star for the lead and whose role as Atticus would become inseparable from the man, Pakula and Mulligan preferred little known actors, who would be unrecognized by most audiences, "to retain the sense of discovery, which is so important in the novel," as Pakula said (Shields 210). For the roles of the Finch children two completely unknown actors were chosen, in keeping with Pakula and Mulligan's search for naturalness: Mary Badham and Phillip Alford, both from Birmingham, Alabama.[3] Moreover, two new actors were selected, Collin Wilcox Paxton in the role of Mayella Ewell and Robert Duvall in the role of Boo Radley.[4]

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3 Mulligan would say years later: "I did not want to work with Hollywood actors because the kids just lose their sense of childhood very quickly when they become professional actors at age 8 or 7 and I said, 'Let's find real kids'" (commentary to the 1998 Universal Home Video release).

4 To prepare for the role of the reclusive Boo, Duvall stayed out of the sun for six weeks and dyed his hair blonde, hoping it would give him an angelic look (Shields 211).

Much of the appeal and success of both the novel and the film is a result of the point of view of the child Scout. Foote acknowledges that in his dramatization he was influenced by R. P. Blackmur's review "Scout in the Wilderness" in which *Mockingbird* is compared to *Huckleberry Finn* and Scout to Huck: "His review strengthened my own feelings that we should discover the evil and hypocrisy in this small southern pastoral town along with and through the eyes of the children" ("Foreword" *xii-xiii*). Novels often exist in a state of conversation with other works, and the comparison of *Mockingbird* to novels like Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding*, in which we contemplate the incongruities of our society through the eyes of the child "outsider," is most pertinent here. If McCullers channeled through the tomboyish Frankie Addams her opposition to the white South's rigid dichotomies of race and gender, Harper Lee does very much the same through the fresh eyes of Scout.[5] As Joseph Crespino observes, "Lee's decision to report Atticus's heroics through the perspective of his nine-year-old daughter is crucial in reinforcing the moral impulse that it is children who ultimately have the most at risk in the nation's struggle to end racial segregation" (20). The project of a future of racial and gender tolerance seems to be more effective and promising when it is supported by the stronger moral weight of the innocent child's voice.

In the film the unifying voice of the first-person narrator ties together the two narrative strands, thus expressing a clear intention on the part of the filmmakers to connect closely to the novel by providing an equivalent of the book's greatest formal achievement. This voice is conveyed though the use of the "voice-over" technique, which suggests the presence of somebody like the novel's narrator. The film opens with Scout and the first thing we hear is her adult voice speaking words which are very close to those in the novel. The voice-over narration of Jean Louise Finch, the adult Scout, is performed by actress Kim Stanley. Palmer remarks on "the paradoxical duality of perspective embodied in that voice, which sees events from young Scout's point of view but describes them in the language of the mature, articulate Jean Louise." As a result, "the narrator's precise location in time is undecidable, certainly psychologically impossible, as she appears to occupy some indeterminable space between her experiencing and her narrating selves, somehow bridging the gap of many years that separate them" (177).

The film premiered in Hollywood on Christmas Day of 1962 and in New York on Valentine's Day of 1963, and most reviews were favorable. In his review for the *New York Times*, Bosley Crowther objected to the handling of point of view: "It is, in short, on the level of adult awareness of right and wrong, of good and evil, that most of the action in the picture occurs. And this detracts from the camera's observation of the point of view of the child.... [I]t leaves the viewer wondering precisely how the children feel. How have they really reacted to the things that affect our grown-up minds?" (Crowther). The film was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won three: best actor for Gregory Peck, best adapted screenplay for Horton Foote and best black and white art direction for Alexander Golitzen and Henry Bumstead. Not only was Atticus the role that gave Gregory Peck his only Academy Award as best actor, but also his most memorable role in a long and distinguished career, which included

5 Charles Shields informs that the press had likened Lee's Scout to McCullers's Frankie (192).

leading roles in action films like *The Big Country* (1958) and *The Guns of Navarone* (1961).[6] In 1998 the American Film Institute ranked *Mockingbird* 34th in the list of the "100 best American films of all time" (Holcomb 35).[7]

The Mockingbird Image

In both the novel and the film the central image is the mockingbird, and Tom Robinson and Boo Radley are the prominent metaphorical mockingbirds alluded to in the title. Unable to mock the roles society prescribes for them, they suffer the consequences of their marginal position in society. Mockingbirds are here symbols of innocence and goodness. They do no harm, so it would be a sin to kill them, as Atticus tells Scout and Jem when he gives them air-guns for Christmas: "I'd rather you shot at tin cans in the back yard, but I know you'll go after birds. Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."[8] This is the first time that Scout has heard her father say it was a sin to do something, so she goes to Miss Maudie Atkinson for an explanation, and the latter says, "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (98).[9] Miss Maudie's explanation illuminates the symbolic significance of the mockingbird in a novel about kindness and tolerance. One of the things the children discover is that the supposed monster Boo Radley is actually the kind "mockingbird" who metaphorically sings his heart out for his "children" when they need him and is the opposite of the "evil" person he is thought to be. At the end, Scout will become conscious of the connection between Boo and the mockingbird when Sheriff Tate refuses to put Boo on trial for killing Bob Ewell. He thinks this would be "a sin" and Scout understands: "Well, it'd be sort of like shootin' a mockingbird, wouldn't it?" (302). The ironic Gothic of Boo Radley, rendered a potential Frankenstein's monster by gossip and the children's fantasy, has effectively saved those children from the really dangerous Gothic threat of Bob Ewell's redneck depravity. Ewell and his violent racism are the true monsters, but the children are more attracted to the supposed monstrosity of Boo, more appealing because it remains for them a secret and a mystery to discover.

In the film the children see Ewell for the first time when they go to the courthouse, drawn there by the fantasy of the "bat-infested" basement where they imprisoned Boo after he attacked his father "and he almost died from the mildew"

6 After reading the novel, at Pakula's suggestion, Peck felt that Atticus was the character he was most suited to play by inclination and experience: "In twenty years of making movies, I never had a part that came close to being the real me until Atticus Finch" (in Palmer 161). After *Mockingbird* it became impossible to separate Peck from the role, because he had become Atticus. This was not a role in which he was simply a star playing a handsome lover or a man of action, but one in which he could best express his own character.

7 In 2001 *Mockingbird* was listed as the 29th best film of all time in a poll by the Internet Movie Database (Ebert).

8 Harper Lee. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. London: Vintage, 2005, p. 98. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

9 In the film it is Atticus who says these words (see Foote 33).

(Foote 20). Boo's heroic intervention at the end is a decisive turning point for Scout and it persuades her permanently of the benign resources present in even the most wounded human nature. Scout, Jem and Dill[10] have always seen their neighbor Arthur Radley, whom they re-name Boo, as a stereotype, as one of the character types in the Gothic literature they read. By the end of the novel and the movie, he has shed his role as this stereotype to become a real human being, and consequently the name Boo is dropped together with the one-dimensional image of the stereotype. Thus Scout now addresses him respectfully as Mr. Arthur. He is no longer the Other that simultaneously attracts and horrifies, the one on whom the children project those dark forces and desires that they do not recognize in their ordinary lives but in which they are somehow implicated, as they unknowingly share in their society's impulse to hurt and exclude others. But in the novel Boo returns to his secluded marginality for ever: "I never saw him again" (304), Scout says. Through their obsession to see into the secrecy of Boo, whose presence is so important in the film despite not being physically present until the very end, the children learn about themselves and about their society. As Rebecca Best says, "Through Boo and their quest to understand him and why he stays shut up inside, the children come to understand more of their own society, the society that created Boo by ignoring the abuse to which his father subjected him" (550). Unfortunately, Boo's mockingbird status does not afford him a place in a classist society.

Tom Robinson is another kind, innocent mockingbird, and the title of the novel refers to him most specifically. He is convicted in spite of being ostensibly innocent, later to be unfairly and senselessly killed, which makes his marginality irrevocable and absolute. Mr. Underwood, another man of the New South who sides with Atticus, and one of the characters missing from the film, describes Tom's death in the *Maycomb Tribune* as "the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children" (262). The imagery of the mockingbird develops the theme of inhumanity and lack of compassion in the society of Maycomb and reveals an adult world of cruelty that the children are initiated into; it also helps to show the best in heroic individuals like Atticus who shows understanding of the plight of these mockingbirds and tries to liberate human birds trapped in a cage of conventions that oppress and destroy. Ironically, it is the implausibly stereotypical goodness and kindness of Tom Robinson that seals his fate in the courtroom when he imprudently acknowledges, "I felt sorry for her [Mayella]" (Foote 65). The look of Atticus in this scene clearly expresses his realization of the consequences of the "crime" of feeling sorry for—and potentially superior to—a white person.

Fighting Racism

Although the reader perceives Atticus's heroism from the beginning, he is initially not quite a hero in the eyes of his children. Affected by their own society's obsession with rigid gender roles, early in the novel Scout and Jem are worried about the manliness of their middle-age widowed father. Atticus has not remarried, he does not hunt like other men, nor does he "play poker or fish or drink or smoke," and he never physically

10 Dill Harris is a six-year-old boy from Meridian, Mississippi, who comes to spend his summers in Maycomb with his Aunt Rachel, who becomes Aunt Stephanie in the film. He is generally thought to be based on Truman Capote, who had been Harper Lee's friend since childhood.

punishes his children. As Scout tells, "Atticus was feeble: he was nearly fifty," and he did not "do anything that could possibly arouse the admiration of anyone" (97). In both the novel and the film the crucial turning point in this respect is the scene in which Atticus shoots the rabid dog—he stands alone confronting madness to save his family and his town, just as he will do later on when he defends Tom Robinson from the racial madness of Bob Ewell and his kind. By shooting the mad dog, which symbolizes southern white racism, Atticus becomes a hero in the eyes of his children and asserts the power and the manliness that he will later prove when he risks his life in facing a lynch mob and his social reputation in defending a black man.

In both the novel and the film, the point of view is Scout's, and in all the events related to the trial of Tom Robinson she learns about race relations, the major issue in the second half of the film. African Americans are stereotyped as inferior, immoral and lazy in a community that will not give them status as full human beings and responsible adults. As Atticus says in his exhortation to the all-white jury, the entire prosecution of Tom Robinson is based on "the assumption, the evil assumption, that all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women" (Foote 67). This assumption is the flip side of the racial coin that establishes the absolute principle that all white women are virtuous and always to be trusted when a black male is accused of sexual malfeasance.

The Maycomb community is united by assumptions and rituals in which common scapegoats are attacked. They denounce Hitler's use of the Jews as scapegoats in Germany but they remain blind to their own use of blacks as scapegoats who carry the blame for all the ills in their society. Tom Robinson is convicted of rape in a trial which constitutes a mockery of justice and then shot by a guard, and whereas the white society completely forgets about him, it remains worried about injustice abroad. In chapter 26, Scout's teacher Miss Gates talks to the students about the damage of prejudice against the Jews in Germany and writes "DEMOCRACY in large letters" (266) across the blackboard, telling her students that "We are a democracy and Germany is a dictatorship" (267). Unable to perceive that the motive behind Hitler's persecution is racial, she says that the Jews "are a deeply religious people.... [S]o maybe [Hitler] doesn't like them for that reason" (267). Scout is perceptive enough to realize that her school is teaching hypocrisy and uncritical conformity rather than authentic knowledge, and she associates the episode with a conversation she overheard earlier in which Miss Gates tells Miss Stephanie Crawford that "it's time somebody taught 'em [blacks] a lesson, they were gettin' way above themselves, an' the next thing they think they can do is marry us" (268). Scout cannot understand "how can you hate Hitler so bad an' then turn around and be ugly about folks right at home?" (268). During the 1930s and early 1940s southern racial practices and policies led many to associate the South with European fascism. A great deal of discourse argued explicitly that racial oppression in the South implicated the whole nation and rendered inconsistent its claims of opposing fascist racism. The writer and activist Lillian Smith, a contemporary of Harper Lee's from Georgia, did all she could to shock white southerners into the realization that in the end they were no different from the Nazis. She wrote that in both cases the mythic mind, when it is "uncontrolled by self-criticism, uncontrolled by ethical ideas, and instead urged on by primitive myths of blood and sex and race" (82), produces only

rigid barriers that deny many people their humanity. Smith persistently exposed the hypocrisy of a culture that put so much energy into keeping blacks "in their place" while sending them to fight racial hatred in foreign countries. And, as the racial agenda of the Nazis became more blatant, some southern white supremacists, including the Ku Klux Klan and the infamous Mississippi senator Theodore Bilbo, expressed their support for the policies of Hitler, which confirmed the accusations of Melvin Tolson, a columnist for the *Washington Tribune*, that the U.S. harbored "anti-Negro fascists" (123).[11]

In the American South, gender and sexuality have always been entangled with racial issues. In the novel, famous for its defense of social tolerance, we find a sustained parallel between the resistance to rigid racial boundaries and the opposition to drastic differentiations between the sexes, as well as a rejection, especially on the part of Scout, of authority figures who impose rigorous definitions. Generally the characters who are intolerant of sexual otherness are the most rigid enforcers of racial discrimination. In the novel, the destabilization of gender norms is a central theme and the protagonist is clearly Scout going through the pain of growing up as a female in a South with very strict definitions of gender roles and of the behavior acceptable for girls. This dimension of the novel is not prominent in the film version, which gave in to the demands of the Hollywood star system and made the girl's father, played by Gregory Peck, the main character, and made racism the main issue. Only 15% of the novel deals with Tom Robinson's trial, whereas it occupies 30% of the 129-minute film. According to Dean Shackelford, this is "not surprising considering it was made during what was to become the turbulent period of the 1960s when racial issues were of interest to Hollywood and the country as a whole" (103).

Scout's Tomboyism

Scout consistently prefers overalls to dresses, and for Christmas she wants an air-gun rather than a doll. In the novel, one of the main problems she faces is the oppressiveness of the conventional conceptions of what a girl and a lady should be. The pressure begins fairly early, when both her aunt Alexandra and her teacher insist that Scout should use her gender-specific name Jean Louise instead of the boyish and gender-neutral Scout. Throughout she is seen to be engaged in a fight against the scrutiny and discipline of the community and part of her extended family, who try incessantly to make her abandon her tomboyish ways and to take up forms of behavior more appropriate for a young southern girl of the 1930s. The full feminist energies of the novel, although merely hinted at in the film, were clearly perceived by Mary Badham, the actress who played Scout: "Scout was definitely not the little girl type. She was very out there and not the little southern demure little creature that everyone wanted her to be. She was fire and brimstone out there and spoke her mind. And Atticus was willing to let her be who she needed to be" ("Scout Remembers").

Aunt Alexandra, the paragon of white southern femininity, does not feature in the film. In the novel she moves into the Finch household during the summer of

11 As Stephen Whitfield notes, "The film adaptation makes no reference whatsoever to Nazism and therefore muffles the issue of double standards when the topic of persecution comes up" (67).

Tom Robinson's trial, to give the motherless Scout "some feminine influence" (138) and to directly take charge of her socialization into a proper lady. Scout deeply resents the threat of the walls of this "pink cotton penitentiary" (148) closing in on her. Scout's overalls are in fact a point of continuous friction, as Aunt Alexandra enforces normative mappings of gender onto biological sex: "Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of my attire. I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breaches: when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn't supposed to be doing things that required pants" (88). Later in the novel, Scout ratifies that "I would never be interested in clothes" (138). She never agrees with her aunt's ideas that little girls should play with tea sets, and she never plays with girls, likes to fight with her fists, and takes part in the kind of games that require physical out-of-door activity and which are traditionally associated with boys, like tree climbing and tire rolling. From the boys she plays with, Scout learns that "being a girl" is something negative, not the role she would like to assume. In the scene from the film in which Scout goes with Jem and Dill to see through the window of Boo Radley's house, she is forced to repress her fear and caution, due to Jem's humiliating observation, "I swear, Scout, you act more like a girl all the time" (Foote 24). Being a girl is the equivalent of inferiority and exclusion from the interesting things in life.

Aunt Alexandra exists in counterpoint with the widow Miss Maudie Atkinson, who does appear in the film, though in a diminished role. She is present in the highly significant scene in which we see Scout uncomfortably wearing a white dress for her first day of school and "feel[ing] very awkward in it" (Foote 30). Jem laughs at her but Atticus and Miss Maudie feel sympathy for the anguished awkwardness of the tomboy forced to squeeze her body into the clothing of conventional femininity, and exclaiming, "I still don't see why I have to wear a darn old dress" (Foote 30). Miss Maudie is the novel's most sympathetic white adult female character, and Scout's preferred model of southern womanhood. Described as "a chameleon lady who worked in her flower beds in an old straw hat and men's coveralls, but after her five o'clock bath she would appear on the porch and reign over the street in magisterial beauty" (46), Miss Maudie is both masculine and feminine, and always tolerant of transgressive performances of gender. She instructs Scout in how to play the social game and pass as a lady, in how to appropriate what Holly Blackford terms "a double life as chameleon lady/morphodite" (288).[12] But the film does not deal with Miss Maudie's androgynous characteristics or

12 A comic pronunciation of the word "hermaphrodite," "morphodite" becomes Scout and Miss Maudie's comic designation for those who are neither male nor female, or are both. It might very well be an intertext to the passage in Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding* about the Half-Man Half-Woman, "a morphidite and a miracle of nature" (27) who both attracts and terrifies the tomboyish Frankie. McCullers, famous for her female characters who oppose drastic differentiation between the sexes as well as the imposition of rigid racial boundaries, actually noticed the resemblances between *Mockingbird* and *Member* and, as Lee's biographer observes, "The surface similarities of the two novels were not lost on McCullers, either, who commented acidly about Lee to a cousin, 'Well, honey, one thing we know is that she's been poaching on my literary preserves'" (Shields 192). One of the reasons why the major studios were not interested in *Mockingbird* was the commercial failure of the film version of McCullers's *Member*, and some reviews noted similarities between nine-year-old Scout and twelve-year-old Frankie (Shields 192).

include Scout seeking advice from her on issues of gender. Critics tend to think that the primary function of Miss Maudie's presence in the film is to indicate the widower Atticus's opening up to the possibility of a heterosexual relationship. In the film's opening sequence she joins the Finches for breakfast in their house, and for Barton Palmer "this brief moment of 'normal' life does little beyond establishing Atticus's heterosexual *bona fides* and his easy acceptance of what changes might come from sharing his life and children with a woman" (169).

Scout's other ideal person is her own father, Atticus, who is tolerant of both racial and sexual otherness. His heroism has nothing to do with guns, and he does not resort to male violence to resolve conflicts. If Scout's ideal woman, Miss Maudie, is both masculine and feminine, her ideal man, Atticus, seems equally androgynous. It is not clear if Scout's identification with him is due to his maleness, to a male power and freedom unattainable for her as a woman in the backward South, or if it is due to his androgynous nature, his being both a mother and a father, his feminine passivity, his rejection of masculine violence and a false sense of honor. He never forces on Scout the traditional stereotypes of the southern female. Indeed, he sometimes ridicules the women's attitudes and is well aware of the tragic consequences of the connection between the myths of southern femininity and white supremacy. Dean Shackelford explains Scout's attraction to Atticus: "In a world in which men seem to have the advantages and seem to be more fairminded and less intolerant than women with their petty concerns and superficial dress codes, why should she conform to the notion of Southern ladyhood?" (112). The film stresses Scout's closeness to her father throughout, and maybe this is better understood by viewers who have read the novel in which the issue of Scout's gender is so important.

In the three years spanned by the novel Scout has learnt many things, including that a lady in the best sense is the one who can be tolerant, polite and brave, and her unconventionality augurs progress in the South. Kathryn Seidel notes that neither Calpurnia, the Finches' black maid, nor Atticus "want her to be a 'lady' in Aunt Alexandra's traditional southern sense of the word but rather in a more Stoic sense, as someone whose primary concern is not clothing or costume jewelry but personal qualities" (86). Scout is to a certain extent a very young lady at the end of the film, but the complex process of her relationship with the opposing models of Aunt Alexandra and Miss Maudie is not explained and, as Bradley Shaw says, the film "leaves behind the cultural complexity of this socially-constructed role of Southern woman" (457).

White Femininity and Racial Supremacy

Atticus is well aware of the tragic consequences of the connection between the myths of southern white femininity and white supremacy, an issue dealt with at length in the second half of the film, which covers the trial and conviction of Tom Robinson, falsely accused of raping Bob Ewell's daughter Mayella. One day Atticus tells his sister Alexandra that he is "in favor of Southern womanhood as much as anybody, but not for preserving polite fiction at the expense of human life" (161), and of course the African American Tom Robinson is the innocent mockingbird unfairly convicted and later killed because of the myth of southern womanhood. We do not know the true

depth of Scout's awareness of the sinister connections between race and gender, but she surely senses something, particularly during the courtroom section of the film, in which she watches everything from behind the rails of the balcony where she sits with the town's African Americans. The rails suggest not only the bars of the prison in which Tom Robinson was put but also the metaphorical prison of the past of the South whose presence still shapes the attitudes of the inhabitants of Maycomb, and influences the characters and action of the narrative.

Atticus knows only too well that the past of racial oppression and the aristocratic pretensions of genteel white families continue to determine present attitudes, and thus the winter before the trial he tells Scout that he will probably lose Tom Robinson's case, "Simply because we were licked a hundred years before we started" (82). The attitudes of whites toward blacks in Maycomb have been shaped by slavery and Reconstruction and they have not changed much. Not only the uneducated rural poor but also the most prominent citizens are shaped by the long tradition of racism. When Scout is made to attend the meeting of the ladies of the Missionary Society, which is part of Aunt Alexandra's "campaign to teach me to be a lady" (249), the author uses the girl's innocent outlook to subtly expose the dogmatism of these women with respect to gender issues and to relate it to a hypocritical Christianity that cares about "those poor Mrunas" who live "in that jungle" (251) and need Christian salvation, while ignoring the suffering blacks in their own town. These ladies continue to fight the Civil War and they are furious at the hypocrisy of Yankees with respect to the treatment of blacks. As Mrs. Merriweather says, "People up there set 'em free, but you don't see 'em settin' at the table with 'em" (254). Aunt Alexandra opposes the idea of Scout, who feels attracted by the otherness in Calpurnia, visiting the house of this black "mother" who raised her in order to know more about her life. Alexandra feels threatened with contamination from those that live a dark and different life, and she reflects the obsession of the white South with the absolute separation of whiteness and blackness, which harms both blacks and whites.

Mrs. Lafayette Dubose, described in chapter 11 of the novel, appears in only one scene in the film, sitting "on the front porch in her wheelchair" (Foote 13) accompanied by the black girl who takes care of her. Very old and sick and living her last days in a broken romantic world enveloped in clouds of morphine, she is an adequate representative of the Old South symbolized by her "old and run-down house" (Foote 13). She is as racist as the whites at the bottom of society who are known as "white trash," and she often chides Scout for not dressing and behaving like a proper young lady. This is only very partially conveyed in the film when Scout is reprimanded for poor manners when she passes Mrs. Dubose's house and says "hey" instead of "good afternoon" (Foote 14). In the novel, when Atticus makes Jem go to Mrs. Dubose and read to her, she significantly chooses Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*.[13] Through this minor character, Lee is exposing the outmoded Old Order that used to revere the historical romances of Scott,

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13 The film went through two consecutive re-edits; at the insistence of Gregory Peck, the children's scenes were cut down to give more prominence to Atticus. Pakula said later, "It just tore my heart out to lose the sequence [where Jem reads aloud to Mrs. Dubose, who is dying]" (in Shields 218). In a review of the DVD Legacy Series edition of 2005, Glenn Erickson says that Ruth White "originally had a much larger role [as Mrs. Dubose] that was cut down."

deriving from them some of those illusions of grandeur that would prove to be so self-destructive. In *Life on the Mississippi*, Mark Twain accuses Scott of "set[ing] the world in love with dreams and phantoms" and of doing "measureless harm" to the American South: "But for the Sir Walter disease, the character of the Southerner ... would be wholly modern, in place of modern and medieval mixed, and the South would be fully a generation further advanced than it is." According to Twain, Walter Scott had such an influence on the antebellum South "that he is in great measure responsible for the war" (500-501). Ironically, a woman like Mrs. Dubose who considers blacks to be "trash" (111) is totally dependent on her black nurse Jessie. This is yet another instance of the tragic unawareness on the part of southern whites of how much they lose by rejecting blackness, and with it so many vital forces that they suppress in themselves.

In the long courtroom section that occupies most of the second half of the film, we see, through the eyes of Scout, the complex intersections of race, gender and class at work in this society. The culture of segregation resulted in a collective racial identity that narrowed the scope for class politics. Whiteness inhibited the natural expression of class divisions in the South, as the white southerner, no matter what misfortunes might befall him, would never be a "nigger." Poor white Mayella Ewell is also a woman of dubious morals, like the two women who initially accused the Scottsboro boys: everybody knows that she is the victim of her father's beatings and sexual abuse and that she attempts to break the taboo that forbids sex with black men and later makes Tom pay for her own sexual transgression. She takes advantage of the social code that a white woman's word is always going to be taken before that of a black man, and that in the case of sexual assault by a black male the white woman is always going to be assumed to be chaste, no matter how strong the evidence to the contrary or how low she is in social estimation. In the 1930s the South was still dominated by the taboo of race mixing and the presumption that its white women are to be protected from violation by an "inferior race." Most whites clung to the myth of the black beast rapist, according to which after the collapse of the "moral order" of slavery, black men reverted to their African base instincts, the most prevalent of which was their insatiable sexual appetite, especially for white women. After emancipation and Reconstruction, the white version of southern history made the white male into the new enemy. This enemy enabled white men to fulfill their role as protectors of white women. The elevation of the "pure" white woman in turn elevated white men to the noble role of protector, at the same time establishing the necessity of keeping blacks "in their place." Thus did sexuality forge a link between gender and race: white men became protectors of "innocent" white women, threatened as they were seen to be by sexually aggressive black males. The major coincidence between Tom's case and those of the Scottsboro Boys and Emmett Till resides precisely in the pernicious obsession with the defense of southern white womanhood supposedly threatened by the inherent depravity of black males. As Leon Litwack observes, "The Negro as beast became a fundamental part of the white South's racial imagery" (302) during the segregation period and "White women often fed the obsession with black sexuality by depicting themselves as virtually under siege" (Litwack 304), like Mayella does in Lee's novel, and as Carolyn Bryant, Emmett Till's accuser, also did.

In both the novel and the film we see clearly how the low-class Ewells savor the invigorating drug of white supremacy that gives them automatic superiority thanks

to the most precious possession of a white skin. In the episode of the attempted lynching of Tom Robinson by the poor white farmers and later during the interrogation of Bob and Mayella Ewell, the film gives the impression, so frequent in popular media renditions of southern society, that the ugliest acts of racism are carried out only by the lowest members of the white social scale, which automatically exonerates the elites and leaves unexplained the genesis of the situation. The novel is much more critical of institutional racism and the hypocrisy of "respectable" whites than the film, which blames it almost exclusively on the "redneck" Ewells. Allison Graham notes how the "cracker" or "redneck" "has functioned in popular culture as a signifier of racial ambiguity, with his class-bound vulgarity consistently representative of contaminated whiteness" (13). No matter how deeply the "respectable" whites despise the alcoholism and violent racism of Bob Ewell, they make a pretense of believing his false accusation, as the survival of the system is at stake: in spite of being far down the social and moral scale, his false accusations set in motion the destructive racial solidarity that destroys Tom Robinson. The refusal to admit white inferiority or perfidy, or the irrepressible sexual urges in white women, least of all the possibility of a white woman lusting after a black man, leads to Mayella's lies being taken as true, and makes Tom Robinson collectively, if not individually, guilty, because he is a member of the subjected race and was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Ewell is, in Graham's words, "the redneck [that] can be counted on to perform his time-honored, generic duty: roar the hatred that his betters will only whisper, and then die at their hands in a near-mythic purgation of the race" (13). Thus most of the evils that plague the society portrayed in the film spring from the degeneracy of the redneck Ewells rather than from the repressive racial and sexual codes that govern a society most of whose betters are implicated in its despicable practices.

Atticus tells Scout the "single trick" to "get along a lot better with all kinds of folks": "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view ... until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it" (Foote 35).[14] But Atticus never extends his compassion and understanding to Bob Ewell[15] or his luckless daughter Mayella, as if they were irremediably beyond the reach of his compassion and tolerance. At the end, neither Atticus nor anyone else shows any concern about the future of the Ewell orphaned children. In the courtroom section, we see a class battle being fought, with the camera angle consistently placing the evil "white trash" Bob Ewell below everyone else, crouching in his chair and looking defiantly at Atticus in his confidence that playing the sex-and-race card is going to win the day for him. When he leaves the witness stand and purposely bumps into Atticus, he provokes the laughter of part of the crowd, but Atticus soon reaffirms his class superiority by asking, "Now, Mr. Ewell, ... can you read and write?" (Foote 58).

14 In the novel, Scout reports that "One time [Atticus] said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them" (305), which also appears in the voice-over that closes the film.

15 As Bradley Shaw notes, his ironic full name Robert E. Lee Ewell "reminds us that he represents the worst of post-bellum cultural decay—an angry farmless yeoman farmer whose infrequently washed white skin is his only cultural capital" (451).

Reconsidering Atticus

In recent years *Mockingbird* has become engulfed in the acrimonious racial debate, and Atticus Finch has been attacked from different sides, by literary and film critics, educators and lawyers, both black and white. Several individuals and associations have demanded to have the novel removed from school reading lists, as if curricula should shortsightedly avoid all controversial issues (see Johnson 14-17). They oppose the book because the word "nigger" is used 48 times and because the portrayal of blacks, like Tom, whose name is reminiscent of the virtuous suffering Uncle Tom, as innocent and harmless mockingbirds that "don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us," is the opposite of a discourse of liberation. According to Isaac Saney, "What these lines *say* is that Black people are useful and harmless creatures—akin to decorous pets—that should not be treated brutally" (102). He sees this as reminiscent of some pious abolitionists who instead of postulating the equality of blacks argued that they should be treated with kindness, like one's horse or dog: "By foisting this mockingbird image on African Americans, the novel does not challenge the insidious conception of superior versus inferior 'races,' the notion of those meant to rule versus those meant to be ruled" (Saney 102). The basic argument is that the novel does not really attack racism but only the most violent excesses of the racial social order. Another complaint is that the novel and the film convey a historically inaccurate message: that heroic whites like Atticus Finch, instead of blacks, were the leaders of the anti-racist movements of the twentieth century. Richard Yarborough states that in *Mockingbird* "black characters exist largely as tools to have white characters successfully test their ethics" and that this makes it into one of those narratives in which "the black character is the victim and he or she becomes the test upon which any struggle for moral satisfaction on the part of the white savior is waged" (in Martelle; qtd. in Palmer 231).

One of the unavoidable issues here is who in American society has the authority to speak on racial issues. One of the prerogatives African Americans claimed in the civil rights movement was that of becoming the subjects in the analysis of the racial divide and in the demands to end racial inequality. As Crespino says, "The early success of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Atticus Finch's warm reception can be explained in part by the way Finch embodies what historians have called the 'liberal consensus' of mid-twentieth-century America" (11). The liberal views that Harper Lee expresses through Atticus are obviously too timid and limited for our age and render both the novel and the film defenseless against the accusation that her message was that racial change could only occur through the agency of elite southern white liberals like Atticus Finch, who in a sense becomes as much a stereotype of the white liberal hero as Bob Ewell is a stereotype of the racist redneck. In the courtroom scene the verdict is received in submissive silence by the blacks and at the end, as Atticus walks down the aisle, "the Negroes in the balcony start to rise until all are standing" and the black Reverend Sykes urges a distracted Scout, "Miss Jean Louise, stand up, your father's passin'" (Foote 69). This speaks volumes about the unconscious paternalism of white liberals and of their incapacity to acknowledge the power of blacks, who here rise as one body, as if they had no individuality.[16] In the well-known statement of the most

16 Roger Ebert says that "The problem here, for me, is that the conviction of Tom Robinson is

radical outgrowth of the civil rights movement, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967), Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton ask, "How fully can white people free themselves from the tug of the group position—free themselves not so much from overt racist attitudes in themselves as from a more subtle paternalism bred into them by the society, and perhaps more important, from the conditioned reaction of black people to their whiteness?" (28; qtd. in Crespino 22).

It is true that Atticus Finch remains tied to the accommodating values of his class,[17] that he never openly questions the structural racism of which he himself is part or the dominant discourse of the difference between the races, and that his treatment of blacks is paternalistic. But moral horizons of previous eras are often narrow in comparison with our own; we cannot expect that a moral position which is obvious to us in the present should have been equally obvious to those in the past, nor should we consider ourselves implicit heroes because of our moral position on issues already settled long ago. As Andrew Delbanco says, "History is lived by people ignorant of the future, and surely it is a hubris of our own to dismiss all who, living in the darkness of [previous eras], made a different calculation" (54). Atticus is not the ideal model of racial heroism for our times, but we should avoid the excesses of presentism and maintain the historical perspective that allows us to celebrate the courage and success of fictional white liberals like Atticus and real ones like Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith or Harper Lee herself, who could only speak as whites, not as black victims.[18] Lee satirized the racism of her native South in a humorous magazine that she edited at the University of Alabama in 1946-47 (Johnson xi-xii), and from the age of 24 made the far more liberal New York City her adopted home. White liberalism does deserve some credit for the attack on discrimination at a time when African Americans had limited political power.

In view of Atticus Finch's fall from grace due to his obvious inadequacies and limitations, Crespino suggests "that we reassign *To Kill a Mockingbird* from English class to history class and that rather than dismissing Atticus we deconstruct him" (28). I think it is better to keep *Mockingbird* in the literature and film classes, including the necessary creative deconstruction, and paying attention to how novels and films are affected by the particular circumstances of their composition and by their contemporary reception, as well as to how the passage of time changes our sensibilities and perceptions. While acknowledging that Atticus Finch acted heroically in the drastically segregated 1930s Alabama, the modern reader has every right to expose the limits of his heroism, and his or her reaction will obviously be different from that of readers or viewers in the early 1960s, when Atticus was still in some respects a model of bravery and a man ahead of his times. No text can surpass *Mockingbird*

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not the point of the scene, which looks right past him to focus on the nobility of Atticus Finch." Equally incredible is the scene at Tom's house in which Bob Ewell is not attacked or even insulted by Tom's friends and relatives.

17 Atticus explains to his son Jem, "You and Jean Louise... are not from run-of-the-mill people... you are the product of several generations' gentle breeding... and... you should try to live up to your name" (144).

18 Ralph McGill (1898-1969) was an anti-segregationist editor and publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution* newspaper.

for providing the material for fruitful debate in our age of pluralism and skeptical dissension. Nothing is more motivating and thought-provoking than the promotion of critical readings that expose the internal contradictions of characters and books or films with such a wide cultural reach as that of Atticus and *Mockingbird*. And the many-mindedness of earnest students of fiction and film should be broad enough to perceive the potential of *Mockingbird* to instruct us about the inadequacies of white southern liberalism in the 1930s—and the early 1960s, for that matter—while at least acknowledging its merit in taking a stand during a period when many films avoided controversial racial matters. In spite of all its limitations, *Mockingbird* did contribute to making hearts and minds reconsider race in America, and it remains a socially and historically important film, released only 11 months before the assassination of President Kennedy definitely put an end to the complacency of the postwar years, that period Robert Lowell described as "the tranquillized Fifties" (2535).

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