

The Political Uses of Nostalgia in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Abstract

Drawing on Svetlana Boym's theory on restorative and reflective nostalgia, this thesis investigates how the emotion relates to Harper Lee's classic. The thesis is divided into two main parts: the first part discusses the function of nostalgia in the reception of the book, while the second part focuses on the use of nostalgia as a literary device within the book. The thesis argues that the nostalgia of the reception is restorative, and the nostalgia within the book is reflective. While nostalgia and collective memory studies make up the theoretical framework of the thesis, other influences are critical race theory – especially whiteness studies – and reception theory, and the thesis is informed to a great extent by historical context.

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To establish identity by reference to our faults was always simplest, for whatever their reservations about our virtues, our critics were never reluctant to concede us our vices and shortcomings.

- C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*

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1 Introduction

Two years after Hillary Clinton lost her bid for the presidency, she gave her take on the election results at a conference she was attending in India. “If you look at the map of the United States,” she observed, “there’s all that red in the middle where Trump won. I won the coasts,” she said:

I won the places that represent two thirds of America’s gross domestic product. So I won the places that are optimistic, diverse, dynamic, moving forward, and his whole campaign – ‘Make America Great Again’ – was looking backwards.¹

She then went on to describe Trump supporters as people who do not like “black people getting rights,” or women “getting jobs.”² With these comments Clinton did not only blame the rural poor for the election of Donald Trump – she essentially equated working-class rurality with racist, sexist and generally unprogressive attitudes.

Clinton’s indictment of the rural poor is based on a what literary scholar Stacey Denton describes as a common American assumption: “whatever places do not conform to the appearance of ‘modern’ progress and development,” Denton writes, “simply must be regressed, on both socioeconomic and cultural levels.”³ Of course, this is not necessarily true. It is possible to long for the slower rhythms of the past without longing to return to the past. As author and journalist Sarah Smarsh observes about her father, a white construction worker from rural Kansas: all he wants is “some chickens and a garden and place to go fishing once in a while.”⁴ This does not mean, she points out, that he wishes to return to a past which was significantly worse for anyone who were not white or male.⁵ It just means that his idea of progress is a society where everyone can thrive.⁶ A society, she writes, that does not “[bleed] people like him dry.”⁷

¹ Aaron Blake, “Hillary Clinton Takes Her ‘Deplorables’ Argument for Another Spin,” *The Fix*, *Washington Post*, March 13, 2018.

² Blake, “Hillary Clinton.”

³ Stacy Denton, “Nostalgia, Class and Rurality in ‘Empire Falls,’” *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 3 (2011): 503.

⁴ Sarah Smarsh, “Liberal Blind Spots Are Hiding the Truth About ‘Trump Country,’” *Opinion*, *New York Times*, July 19, 2018.

⁵ Smarsh, “Liberal Blind Spots.”

⁶ Smarsh, “Liberal Blind Spots.”

⁷ Smarsh, “Liberal Blind Spots.”

However, the United States is, as the former president Barack Obama once stated in an interview, “famously ahistorical.”⁸ In a country where capitalist progress is the national credo, nostalgia for the past is automatically assumed to mean, as Smarsh observes, the opposite of progress. This is not how the late literary scholar Svetlana Boym understood nostalgia. Longing for the past, she argued, does not necessarily mean to long for something that happened; it can also mean to long for something that did not – what she called “the unrealized dreams of the past and visions of the future that have become obsolete.”⁹ Boym therefore distinguished between two kinds of nostalgia, “restorative” and “reflective,” where the former seeks to return to the past and recreate it in the present, and the latter seeks to return to the past to explore that which did not become the present.¹⁰ An image that can be useful in this context, is to think of restorative nostalgia as a statue or a monument, and reflective nostalgia as a ruin. The statue represents an idealized version of the past, while the ruin represents the passing of time itself.

This thesis investigates the political uses of nostalgia in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (hereafter *Mockingbird*). There are particularly two reasons why the choice fell on *Mockingbird* for this study. The first is the unique standing the novel holds in American culture. Ever since its publication in 1960, the novel has for generations been taught in secondary schools throughout the United States. For this reason, *Mockingbird* is one of the books most widely read in the literary canon, and one of the few books Americans have in common.¹¹ The book has therefore been hugely influential in the American collective consciousness. This thesis aims to trace how the memory of the book has influenced its reception from the 1960s to today, and what the changing reception of the book can teach us about the United States then and now.

The second reason for choosing *Mockingbird* is the use of nostalgia in the novel itself. Narrated from the point of view of the late 1950s, what prompts Jean Louise “Scout” Finch to look nostalgically back to her childhood in the 1930s is the white backlash following the Supreme Court’s decision to desegregate public schools. Hailed

⁸ “President Obama and Marilynne Robinson: A Conversation – II,” *New York Review of Books*, November 19, 2015.

⁹ Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” *Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (2007): 10.

¹⁰ Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” 7.

¹¹ Casey Cep, “The Contested Legacy of Atticus Finch,” *New Yorker*, December 10, 2018.

as a “civil rights novel,” the book has been interpreted primarily as a book about race.¹² For this reason, the book’s nostalgia has in later years been dismissed by critics as escapist, and an idealization of the past – in other words, what Boym called restorative nostalgia. However, when reading the book as a story about class, the nostalgia within the book reveals the unrealized possibilities of the 1930s for progressive social change. This thesis aims to demonstrate how reflective nostalgia can serve as a viable tool for social critique.

This introduction is composed of three main parts. The first part is a presentation of Harper Lee and a synopsis of the primary text. *Mockingbird* is typically read in fulfillment of required middle-school curriculum. For this reason, it should prove useful to review some of the main plots, characters, and events in the story. The second part gives a brief overview of the historical context of the novel. Written in the 1950s and set in the 1930s, the novel operates within two timeframes, both of which have played an important role in the interpretation of the novel and the novel’s reception put forth in this thesis. It is important to note that the South has a rich history that goes far beyond the scope of this thesis. In order to keep it as brief and as relevant as possible, the overview will focus primarily on the South’s white history. The third part gives a more in-depth discussion on collective memory studies – specifically, Svetlana Boym’s theory on nostalgia – which make up the theoretical framework of this thesis. It concludes with an outline of the following chapters.

1.1 The Jane Austen of South Alabama

In 1956, the 30-year-old Nelle Harper Lee had to spend Christmas in New York.¹³ Back then she was working as an airline reservation clerk and she rarely got a day off.¹⁴ Taking leave to travel back to Alabama for the holidays was out of the question. As she wandered the snowy streets of Manhattan on her way to her friends Michael and Joy

¹² Christopher Metress, “The White Southern Novel and the Civil Rights Movement,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature*, ed. Julie Armstrong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 107.

¹³ Harper Lee, “Christmas to Me,” *McCall’s Magazine*, December, 1961, reprinted in Guardian, December 12, 2015. Lee’s essay is the source of reference for this whole paragraph and the next.

¹⁴ Robert Sullivan, “Harper Lee Before *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” Life Books, *Time Magazine*. February 23, 2016

Brown's apartment, she found herself longing for home. Or, she thought she did. Looking back on it a couple of years later, she wrote:

What I really missed, was a memory, an old memory of people long since gone, of my grandparents' house bursting with cousins, smilax and holly. I missed the sound of hunting boots, the sudden open-door gusts of chilly air that cut through the aroma of pine needles and oyster dressing. I missed my brother's night-before-Christmas mask of rectitude and my father's bumblebee bass humming Joy To The World.¹⁵

It was nostalgic memories like these that inspired Nelle to write her stories. She had shown some of them to the Browns, who found them delightful and encouraged her to continue. Yet, finding time to do so was hard. She barely had time as it was.

That Christmas, Nelle did not have high expectations. They had all agreed in advance that they would limit their presents to "pennies and wits" – Christmas was for children, after all.¹⁶ When she came downstairs on Christmas morning, however, there was an envelope on the tree with her name on it. Inside it was a note: "You have one year off from your job to write whatever you please," it read, "Merry Christmas."¹⁷ After objecting profusely, Nelle finally accepted this "act of love," as she called it, and vowed to do her best not to fail them.¹⁸

Arguably, no author has come through on a promise like Harper Lee did. When *Mockingbird* was published four years later, it became an immediate success. Within a year of its publication, it had sold a half million copies, been translated into ten languages, and landed Lee the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.¹⁹ In 1962 the story made its way to the silver screen, famously starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch, the hero of the story. The film won two Golden Globe awards, three Academy awards, and grossed more than 13 million dollars, which would be a 100 million in today's money.²⁰ By 2016, the year Lee died, the book had sold over 40 million copies and been translated into over 40 languages.²¹ In comparison, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has sold

¹⁵ Lee, "Christmas to Me."

¹⁶ Lee, "Christmas to Me."

¹⁷ Lee, "Christmas to Me."

¹⁸ Lee, "Christmas to Me."

¹⁹ Claudia Durst Johnson, *Reading Harper Lee: Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird and Go Set a Watchman* (California: Greenwood, 2018): 135.

²⁰ Tom Santopietro, *Why To Kill a Mockingbird Matters: What Harper Lee's Book and the Iconic American Film Mean to Us Today* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018): 124.

²¹ Johnson, *Reading Harper Lee*, 136.

20 million copies, and *Gone With the Wind* 30 million.²² Two years later the noted director Aaron Sorkin's adaptation of the story opened on Broadway, and after only 27 weeks of running, the play became the "Top-Grossing American Play in Broadway History."²³ These numbers all bear witness to the immense and enduring popularity of Lee's story. This was all beyond what Lee herself had expected. In an interview she humbly said that all she had aspired to be was "the Jane Austen of South Alabama."²⁴

Set in the Deep South during the Great Depression, *Mockingbird* tells the story of Jean Louise "Scout" Finch and her family as they tackle the pride and prejudice that permeates their small, rural, hometown. The novel reads almost like a memoir; it is narrated by the adult Jean Louise and centers on her childhood in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama. It stretches over three years, from 1933 to 1935. The book has two parts: part one centers on Scout's first years of school, and part two centers on the trial of the African-American Tom Robinson, who has been falsely accused of raping the poor white Mayella Ewell.

Through the children's many escapades we are introduced to the town and its inhabitants. Calpurnia is the Finch family's black cook and surrogate mother to Scout and her brother Jem. Dill Harris is a summertime visitor in Maycomb, and the one who first has the idea of making their neighbor, the mysterious recluse Boo Radley, come out of his house. Another neighbor is Mrs. Dubose, an old widow of a confederate general, who repeatedly scorns the children for going against their raising.²⁵ Then there is Aunt Alexandra who, like Mrs. Dubose, is highly class conscious, and whose biggest concern seems to be that Scout learns to behave like a lady. Finally, there is Atticus Finch; the lawyer, state legislator, and widowed father of Jem and Scout, who is given the ungrateful task of defending a man who has got all the odds stacked against him.

Part one reads in many ways as a rehearsal for part two, and deals primarily with the issue of class. Already on Scout's first day in school we are introduced to the class hierarchy in Maycomb. Other key events are the time Atticus shoots a rabid dog, and

²² Jim Auchmutey, "At 75, 'Gone With the Wind' still attracts fans, cash and controversy," *Best in Life*, CNN, June 25, 2011; Suzanne Bilyeu, "Mark Twain's Bad Boy," *New York Times Upfront* 142, March 1, 2010.

²³ David Rooney, "'To Kill a Mockingbird' Becomes Top-Grossing American Play in Broadway History," *Culture*, *Hollywood Reporter*, May 10, 2019.

²⁴ WQXR, "Harper Lee's Only Recorded Interview About 'To Kill A Mockingbird,'" *YouTube*, February 24, 2016, video, 09:33.

²⁵ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (London: Vintage Books, 2004): 111.

when the children are made to read for the old Mrs. Dubose who is trying to kick her morphine habit on her deathbed.

In part two, the children are introduced more directly to the politics of race. Calpurnia brings Jem and Scout to her black church, the children ward off a lynch mob, and finally, they follow the trial of Tom Robinson from the segregated black balcony. Atticus loses the case to the town bigots, and although he intends to appeal the case, Tom has no hope of seeing justice served in a southern court of law. As he attempts to escape the county jail, he is shot seventeen times. The novel concludes with the vengeful Bob Ewell, Mayella's father, attacking Jem and Scout to get back at Atticus for not only defending Tom, but more to the point for making him look bad in court. The children survive thanks to Boo Radley who finally comes out of his house and murders Bob Ewell.

1.2 The Age of Massive Resistance

The cultural and political moment in which Harper Lee wrote *Mockingbird* was a turbulent one, and well matched the upheaval in the novel. While Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington and the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts were several years away, the mid-1950s were marked by what is popularly referred to as the white backlash following the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The decision to desegregate public schools, along with the heinous lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Mississippi the following year, is by many considered the tipping point of the modern day civil rights movement.²⁶

Yet, the resentment that fueled the backlash had been building over some time. Already in 1936, southern Democrats had started to lose faith with their party as they witnessed the mounting number of black northern delegates at the Democratic Convention.²⁷ Although African Americans were disenfranchised in the South, that was not the case in the North, although they did face other kinds of racial discrimination. Historically, black northerners had voted Republican, perhaps out of loyalty to their

²⁶ Jeanette Keith, *The South: A Concise History Volume II* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002): 172.

²⁷ Keith, *The South*, 140.

great emancipator, Abraham Lincoln.²⁸ Six years into the Great Depression, however, they came to recognize that the Democratic Party, headed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, had done more for them in the past few years than the Republican Party had in decades.²⁹

In all fairness, Roosevelt's New Deal did not aim specifically to help blacks. As the historian Jeanette Keith observes, blacks benefited from the New Deal programs "not because of their race but because of their poverty."³⁰ Nor did the New Deal aim specifically to help poor whites. According to literary scholar Claudia Durst Johnson, the Depression was "just an episode in the life of abject poverty in the cotton-producing South."³¹ In other words, poverty was nothing new; the novelty lay rather in its greater reach across class lines. By 1932, for reasons beyond their control, one quarter of the American labor force was out of work.³² The poor were no longer to blame for being poor; poverty was no longer exclusively associated with ignorance, laziness, or some inherent, degenerate trait. The poor were, as historian Nancy Isenberg writes, "simply men and women without jobs."³³

When the Depression took hold, it hit the South particularly hard. "Southerners were poorer," historian Jeanette Keith explains, "and had been poorer longer, than people in any other part of the country."³⁴ Scholars have attributed this to the massive wealth invested in slaves that disappeared with emancipation.³⁵ However, according to historian J. Wayne Flynt, downward mobility was already a characteristic of the South during the antebellum era: "With so much land available on the Southern frontier," he observes, "planters and farmers concentrated on maximizing profits. They invested little of their capital in maintaining soil productivity," he explains, "because it was cheaper to buy and improve new land than to take care of the old."³⁶ The plots of land left behind by the planters became home to the poor whites. Due to depletion of topsoil the land

²⁸ Keith, *The South*, 139.

²⁹ Keith, *The South*, 139.

³⁰ Keith, *The South*, 139.

³¹ Johnson, Reading Harper Lee, 24.

³² J. Wayne Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People: The South's Poor Whites* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1980): 64.

³³ Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking, 2016): 210.

³⁴ Keith, *The South*, 130.

³⁵ Robert A. Margo, "Poverty," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 20: Social Class*, ed. Larry J. Griffin and Peggy G. Hargis (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 202.

³⁶ Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People*, 6.

quickly eroded, and poor white farmers often lacked the skills and means to repair it. Even the sturdiest of yeomen, Flynt notes, was reduced to a destitute subsistence farmer.³⁷

Historically, poor whites have been pushed to the margins of society, and left there to themselves. Because of their physical isolation, they were also excluded from the social and economic institutions of the community.³⁸ As a result of their poverty, many suffered dietary deficiencies from lack of nutritious food, writes Keith, such as “pellagra (a niacin deficiency disease that causes diarrhea, dementia, and butterfly-shaped blotches on the face) and rickets, a bone malformation caused by lack of vitamin D.”³⁹ This in turn gave Southern poor whites a distinct look that set them apart from other whites.

As a distinct sociocultural group, poor whites have developed their own subculture which has been subjected to ridicule by mainstream society.⁴⁰ When researching poor whites in the 1920’s, the sociologist Howard Odum found that they demonstrated “a unique individualism produced by prolonged contact with nature.”⁴¹ They have long been associated with certain traits, such as laziness, shiftlessness, ignorance, and backwardness, which have inspired derogatory slurs such as crackers, rednecks, hillbillies and clay-eaters, many of which are still in use today.⁴² The most common term for this group, however, is “poor white trash.” This term first appeared in the 1830s, and although originally used by African Americans in reference to non-slaveholding whites, it subsequently fell into use with upper-class whites.⁴³ As the sociologists Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray observe, the term proved “a useful way of blaming the poor for being poor.”⁴⁴

Despite the upper classes’ disdain for them, the poor whites remained an important part of the social ecosystem in the South. According to historians Larry J.

³⁷ Flynt, *Dixie’s Forgotten People*, 6.

³⁸ Flynt, *Dixie’s Forgotten People*, 6.

³⁹ Keith, *The South*, 165.

⁴⁰ Flynt, *Dixie’s Forgotten People*, xvii.

⁴¹ Flynt, *Dixie’s Forgotten People*, 89.

⁴² Flynt, *Dixie’s Forgotten People*, 10.

⁴³ Anthony Harkins, “Hillbillies, Crackers, Rednecks, and White Trash,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 20: Social Class*, ed. Larry J. Griffin and Peggy G. Hargis (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 367.

⁴⁴ Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, introduction to *White Trash: Race and Class in America*, ed. Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (New York and London: Routledge, 1997): 1.

Griffin and Peggy G. Hargis, white elites made ample use of the existing racial tensions between blacks and poor whites whenever they feared “racial insurgency and class conflict.”⁴⁵ According to Flynt, practically all white Southerners believed in the idea of white supremacy. But because poor whites had nothing to take pride in but the color of the skin, he writes, they were the ones who defended white supremacy “most emotionally and violently.”⁴⁶ This is demonstrated in the novel. All Bob Ewell has that makes him better than his black neighbors, Scout muses to herself, is that, “if scrubbed with lye soap in very hot water, his skin was white.”⁴⁷

In *Reading Harper Lee: Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird and Go Set a Watchman*, Claudia Durst Johnson argues that the Depression made race relations in the South worse, as poor whites blamed blacks for their economic problems.⁴⁸ The most notorious case that best exemplifies the racial animosity in the South in the 1930s is the Scottsboro trials, in which nine African-American teenagers were falsely accused of having raped two white women on a freight train. It was Johnson who first suggested that Harper Lee was influenced by the Scottsboro Trials when she crafted the trial of Tom Robinson. This suggestion has since been accepted by most scholars, and it may well be true. However, to focus on one trial in particular deters from the fact that Tom’s predicament was quite common for black men in the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Keith, the typical lynching looked like this:

Whites accused a black man of committing a crime, often rape of a white woman. The accused criminal was arrested and placed in the county jail. A white mob gathered and menaced the county sheriff and his deputies until they delivered the prisoner to the mob; sometimes law enforcement officials joined the lynchers themselves. The prisoner was then ‘lynched,’ a term that usually connoted hanging, but that also included preliminary torture, castration, and sometimes burning at the stake. White mobs committed these acts in full daylight, often cheered on by crowds of thousands, including white women and children.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Larry J. Griffin and Peggy G. Hargis, “Racial Attitudes,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 20: Social Class*, ed. Larry J. Griffin and Peggy G. Hargis (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 213

⁴⁶ Flynt, *Dixie’s Forgotten People*, 11.

⁴⁷ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 186.

⁴⁸ Johnson, *Reading Harper Lee*, 26.

⁴⁹ Keith, *The South*, 76.

Lynching was not a uniquely southern activity in the antebellum years, but according to historians William I. Hair and Amy Louise Wood, the practice intensified in the South following Reconstruction.⁵⁰ Between 1882 and 1950, 4,739 persons were killed by lynch mobs.⁵¹ In the early 1890s, a Southerner was lynched on average every two and a half days.⁵²

However, by 1930 the number of lynchings per year had declined significantly.⁵³ To be sure, racial violence did not end during the Great Depression, but as the noted historian C. Vann Woodward observed, the 1930s was, contrary to what Johnson claims, a period in which racial tensions eased, as “both white and colored people grappled with the problems of the Great Depression.”⁵⁴ Several historians have since provided evidence for Woodward’s claim. Larry Griffin and Peggy Hargis have found that working class and poor whites “sought to transcend racial bigotry to forge strategic class alliances with African-Americans.”⁵⁵ Robert H. Zieger asserted that while labor unions in the South typically had been segregated, “a more egalitarian strand of biracial organization emerged in the 1930s.”⁵⁶

The Great Depression revealed that whites and blacks of the working class had in common their economic oppression. Historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall argues that the 1930s was the “decisive first phase” of the civil rights movement.⁵⁷ Civil rights unionism, she explains, was a “national movement with a vital southern wing.”⁵⁸ At the heart of the movement was the connection between race and class. Neither trumped the other, she writes:

⁵⁰ William I. Hair and Amy Louise Wood, “Lynching and Racial Violence,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 24: Race*, ed. Thomas C. Holt and Laurie Green (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2013): 87-88.

⁵¹ Hair and Wood, “Lynching and Racial Violence,” 89.

⁵² E. M. Beck and Stewart E. Tolnay, “Lynching,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 20: Social Class*, ed. Larry J. Griffin and Peggy G. Hargis (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 167.

⁵³ Beck and Tolnay, “Lynching,” 170.

⁵⁴ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1966): 118.

⁵⁵ Griffin and Hargis, “Racial Attitudes,” 213.

⁵⁶ Robert H. Zieger, “Race and Labor, since 1865,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 20: Social Class*, ed. Larry J. Griffin and Peggy G. Hargis (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 209.

⁵⁷ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1245.

⁵⁸ Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1245.

and both were expansively understood. Proceeding from the assumption that, from the founding of the Republic, racism has been bound up with economic exploitation, civil rights unionists sought to combine protection from discrimination with universalistic social welfare policies and individual rights with labor rights. For them, workplace democracy, union wages, and fair and full employment went hand in hand with open, affordable housing, political enfranchisement, educational equity, and an enhanced safety net, including health care for all.⁵⁹

In other words, a window of opportunity opened in the 1930s for poor Americans to overcome their racial animosity. But the opportunity was mostly missed. World War II brought an end to the New Deal. Tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union made communism and freedom seem like polar opposites to many Americans, and class became increasingly difficult to talk about.⁶⁰ For politicians, writes Keith, it became outright dangerous.⁶¹ Because the Communist Party was the only party that had supported integration and racial equality, Keith writes, “southern segregationists accused anyone who did not support Jim Crow of being a Communist.”⁶² Thus, calling someone communist became an efficient way to silence political opponents.⁶³

Finally, the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* released a white backlash that spiked racial tensions. The decision formally nullified the separate but equal-doctrine that had been the legal foundation of Jim Crow – the laws that enforced racial segregation in the South for the better part of a century. This was met with such opposition from white Southerners, in particular the white establishment, that a year later, the Supreme Court had to issue a second ruling, *Brown II*, in which they ordered the desegregation to proceed “with all deliberate speed.”⁶⁴ By 1956, the White Citizens’ Councils, an organization for primarily middle-class white, protestant Southerners, had spread all across the region and become, as Keith observes, “a powerful political force.”⁶⁵ That year, 19 senators and 82 representatives from the former Confederacy issued the Southern Manifesto, in which they declared their

⁵⁹ Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1246.

⁶⁰ Keith, *The South*, 159.

⁶¹ Keith, *The South*, 165.

⁶² Keith, *The South*, 165.

⁶³ Landon R. Y. Storrs, “McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, July 2, 2015.

⁶⁴ Keith, *The South*, 167.

⁶⁵ Keith, *The South*, 170-171.

opposition to the decision in *Brown*.⁶⁶ In it, they stated that the Supreme Court had exerted “a clear abuse of judicial power” that “encroach[es] upon the reserved rights of the States and the people.”⁶⁷ The senators and congressmen, 101 in all, vowed to “use all lawful means to bring about a reversal of this decision which is contrary to the Constitution and to prevent the use of force in its implementation.”⁶⁸ The operative term for this strategy was “massive resistance,” and it effectively closed the window of opportunity.⁶⁹

1.3 The Political Uses of Nostalgia

Arguably, one of the most memorable images of massive resistance is a photograph taken during the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. In the center of the photograph is the young Elizabeth Eckford, one of the nine African-American students selected for integration by the Little Rock school board.⁷⁰ She is wearing a white dress, black sunglasses, and a mask of stoic calm. She is surrounded by a crowd of jeering onlookers of whom one in particular stands out: Hazel Bryan, also dressed in white, with dark, curly hair, and whose angry, distorted face indicates that she is shouting insults at her new schoolmate.⁷¹

The resistance to school desegregation in Little Rock made national headlines. According to Isenberg, the media reporting on the events at the time “easily slipped into southern stereotypes.”⁷² They described the demonstrators as overall-wearing, tobacco-chewing “white trash,” “rednecks” and “harpies.”⁷³ A few years later, as the decade drew to a close, Isenberg writes, “the *Times Literary Supplement* acknowledged that it was the ‘ugly faces’ of ‘rednecks, crackers, tar-heels, and other poor white trash’ that

⁶⁶ Keith, *The South*, 169.

⁶⁷ Southern Manifesto, “The Supreme Court Should Not Interfere in Southern Racial Practices,” in *The Civil Rights Movement: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. Willaim Dudley (California: Greenhaven Press, 1996): 171.

⁶⁸ Southern Manifesto, 173.

⁶⁹ Equal Justice Initiative, “Massive Resistance,” Segregation in America, accessed October 14, 2020, <https://segregationinamerica.eji.org/report/massive-resistance.html>.

⁷⁰ “The South: Making a Crisis in Arkansas,” *Time Magazine*, September 16, 1957.

⁷¹ Isenberg, *White Trash*, 247.

⁷² Isenberg, *White Trash*, 251.

⁷³ Isenberg, *White Trash*, 251.

would be forever remembered from Central High.”⁷⁴ This prophecy came true. What was not remembered, however, is that there were two schools for white children in Little Rock, one for the upper class and one for the working class, and only the latter was selected for desegregation.⁷⁵

The Little Rock photograph is an example of how collective memory and class intersects. As history progresses, the number of memories we accumulate far extends our capacity to store them, both on an individual and a collective level. We therefore prioritize what memories we remember according to our needs. Literary scholar Aleida Assmann describes this process as “a perpetual interaction between remembering and forgetting.”⁷⁶

Yet, whereas personal memory may be subject to unintentional repression, collective memory is the result of intentional creation.⁷⁷ Historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage calls it a combination of “the willfully recalled and deliberately forgotten.”⁷⁸ According to Brundage, collective memory “forges identity, justifies privilege, and sustains cultural norms. For individuals and groups alike,” he observes, “memory provides a genealogy of social identity.”⁷⁹ As another historian, Jan Assmann, puts it, “Remembering is a realization of belonging, even a social obligation. One has to remember in order to belong.”⁸⁰

There are as many collective memories in society as there are groups, Assmann writes, and these groups can differ greatly when it comes to their understanding of the past.⁸¹ This is especially true for the South. The dominant narrative is that the region lost the Civil War, yet for the African-American Southerner, this hardly rings true. In this case, southern identity is assumed to mean white identity. When this happens, observes Brundage, “[w]hite claims to power, status, and collective identity are advanced at the same time that black claims are undercut.”⁸² In this way, upper-class

⁷⁴ Isenberg, *White Trash*, 252.

⁷⁵ Isenberg, *White Trash*, 247.

⁷⁶ Aleida Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 97.

⁷⁷ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, 2005), 4.

⁷⁸ Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 5.

⁷⁹ Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 4.

⁸⁰ Jan Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010): 114.

⁸¹ Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” 113.

⁸² Brundage, *The Southern Past*, 5.

white Southerners achieve cultural hegemony by perpetuating their version of history as the official memory of the past.

It was Maurice Halbwachs who first introduced the concept of collective memory. In his *On Collective Memory*, published posthumously in 1952, the French philosopher and sociologist asserted: “It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories.”⁸³ Halbwachs argued that society makes up what he dubbed “the cultural frameworks of memory.”⁸⁴ Because society constantly evolves, he observed, our memories must evolve too in order for them to be “in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society.”⁸⁵

Consequently, memory “exists only in constant interaction,” writes Assmann.⁸⁶ He distinguishes between two kinds of interaction: that with “other human memories” and that with “things.”⁸⁷ This is corroborated by psychologist William Hirst. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he explains the unreliable nature of memory. When an event occurs, everyone involved will have their own individual memory of it, he says. Over time, however, people tend to make little changes to their memory so as to match those of the others. They shift their versions of the story, he explains, “until they reach a kind of mnemonic consensus.”⁸⁸

The process is similar in the interaction with things. Although things have no memory of their own, they have the potential to trigger ours, Assmann observes, “because they carry memories which we have invested into them.”⁸⁹ These things are what the French historian Pierre Nora coined *lieux de mémoire* – sites of memory – and can be anything from photographs and books to monuments and memorials. “There are *lieux de mémoire*,” writes Nora, “because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory.”⁹⁰ To create a site of memory is therefore to attempt to exempt one version of the past from that inevitable revision Halbwachs was talking about. As Hirst observes, “[m]emories are like epidemics [...] some spread quickly, and

⁸³ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992): 38.

⁸⁴ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 38.

⁸⁵ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 39.

⁸⁶ Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” 111.

⁸⁷ Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” 111.

⁸⁸ Sarah Boxer, “A Memorial Is Itself A Shaper Of Memory,” *Arts, New York Times*, October 27, 2001.

⁸⁹ Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” 111.

⁹⁰ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire,” *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 7.

others fade and eventually die.”⁹¹ Sites of memory not only shape the content of our memories, he told the reporter, they also determine which memories survive.⁹²

A month before the desegregation of Little Rock Central High, riots broke out in Pennsylvania as the first ever African-American family moved into an all-white Levittown community. Upon William and Daisy Myers’s arrival, write historians Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, “four hundred residents formed a mob that threw rocks through their picture window, harassed them with loud music and car horns, unfurled a Confederate battle flag, and burned a cross in the yard of a neighbor deemed too friendly to the newcomers.”⁹³ These residents were not rednecks, crackers or tar heels; Levittowns were reserved for the white middle class.

Americans do not remember Levittown, but they do remember Little Rock.⁹⁴ In fact, the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School is now considered one of the key events in civil rights history.⁹⁵ This is a result of southern exceptionalism, the belief that racism is something particular to the South and not the nation as a whole. According to Lassiter and Crespino, this myth is part of a national strategy:

Scholars, journalists, and politicians frequently have compartmentalized outbreaks of racial backlash in the “non-South” by drawing on a reliable reservoir of southern metaphors: opposition to housing integration makes Cicero, Illinois (...) “the Selma of the North”; resistance to school desegregation means Boston is “the Little Rock of the North”; ending affirmative action makes California the “Mississippi of the 1990s.”⁹⁶

These metaphors perpetuate the myth that racism is uncommon in the North and all too common in the South. When this compartmentalization doesn’t work, they write, “the ‘southernization of America’ metaphor works to erase the longer trends of white backlash and political conservatism in a different but equally problematic way.”⁹⁷

Part of the reason why racism has been located to the South in the public mind is the region’s apparent obsession with the past. Indeed, nostalgia for a lost past has long been a distinguishing feature of the South. Historian W. Scott Poole attributes this to the

⁹¹ Boxer, “A Memorial Is Itself A Shaper Of Memory.”

⁹² Boxer, “A Memorial Is Itself A Shaper Of Memory.”

⁹³ Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, introduction to *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, ed. Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 2.

⁹⁴ Lassiter and Crespino, introduction, 5.

⁹⁵ “Civil Rights Movement,” *History.com*, last modified June 23, 2020.

⁹⁶ Lassiter and Crespino, introduction, 9.

⁹⁷ Lassiter and Crespino, introduction, 10-11.

South's defeat in the Civil War, which, he writes, "led many white southerners to imagine and reimagine what southern life had been before the war came."⁹⁸ Through the popular medium of historical romance novels, of which *Gone With the Wind* is perhaps the best known example, stories centered around the plantation system recreated the antebellum South as a pre-industrial, pre-capitalist Arcadian dream world. They erased the experiences of slaves by insisting that slaves were treated very well – better, in fact, than poor and working-class whites were treated in the cold, industrial North. These stories have been so influential that the South is often said to be as much "a region of the mind" as it is an actual, geographic region.⁹⁹

The fact remains that racism has always been a national issue. As Woodward observed, it was the Supreme Court that facilitated Jim Crow through its separate but equal-legislation in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰⁰ And while the second coming of Ku Klux Klan was initiated in 1915 in Georgia, by the 1920s, the Klan had become a nationwide movement, with local chapters in states like Oregon and Washington.¹⁰¹ Of the Klan's elected officials, the majority were from the Midwestern and Western states.¹⁰² Nor was the Klan an organization for the poor or working class; more than anything, the Klan was a social club for the middle class.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the Civil War, Jim Crow, and the massive resistance to the civil rights movement, along with their nostalgia for an idealized past, have cemented the South – particularly the rural South – in the public mind as a backward, regressive region unwilling to change with the times.

This definition of nostalgia as a sentimental idealization of the past, has long been the dominant one.¹⁰⁴ According to literary scholar Jennifer K. Ladino, "the term

⁹⁸ W. Scott Poole, "Memory," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 104.

⁹⁹ George B. Tindall, "Mythic South," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 125.

¹⁰⁰ Woodward, *Strange Career*, 70-73.

¹⁰¹ Kris Durocher, "Ku Klux Klan, Second (1915-1944)" in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 24: Race*, ed. Thomas C. Holt and Laurie Green (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2013): 233; Pamela Paul, "The Second Coming of the KKK," *The New York Times Book Review*, December 8, 2017, podcast audio, 10:56.

¹⁰² Paul, "The Second Coming of the KKK," 10:56.

¹⁰³ Joshua Rothman, "When Bigotry Paraded Through the Streets," *Politics, Atlantic*, December 4, 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Alastair Bonnet, "Rear-View Mirrors: Reclaiming the Past's Foreign Countries," *Times Higher Education*, August 7, 2008.

nostalgic is often used interchangeably with words like conservative, regressive, ahistorical, or uncritical to disparage or dismiss writers, politicians, scholarship, and cultural texts.”¹⁰⁵ With her influential book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym recuperated nostalgia as a more complex emotion.

According to Boym, the term nostalgia was first coined in the late seventeenth century.¹⁰⁶ Made up of the two Greek roots *nostos* (return home), and *algia* (longing), the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer offered the word as name for a disease that had been especially prevalent among Swiss soldiers abroad. The symptoms of nostalgia extended from “nausea, loss of appetite, pathological changes in the lungs, brain inflammation, cardiac arrests, high fever,” to “marasmus and a propensity for suicide.”¹⁰⁷ The cure, according to Hofer, was simple: a return to the Swiss Alps should do the trick.¹⁰⁸

While the term originally meant longing for home, by the twentieth century, Boym observed, the term has come to mean “a longing for home that no longer exists or has never existed.”¹⁰⁹ Nostalgia is not so much in opposition to modernity, she observed, as it is “a rebellion against the modern idea of time.”¹¹⁰ The rapid pace of industrialization and the cascade of changes, social and otherwise, that follow, Boym argued, can leave us longing for a different time – “the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams.”¹¹¹ In other words the kind of time that allows us to look after our chickens, tend to our gardens, and go fishing once in a while. In this way, Boym argued, nostalgia can be retrospective and prospective at the same time.¹¹² She distinguished therefore between two kinds of nostalgia, restorative and reflective. They may be triggered by the same memory, Boym observed – the same “Proustian madeleine cookie,” as she called it – but the stories they tell are very different.¹¹³

Restorative nostalgia emphasizes *nostos*, the home, and seeks a “transhistorical reconstruction of that lost home.”¹¹⁴ This kind of nostalgia, Boym argues, engages in

¹⁰⁵ Jennifer K. Ladino, *Reclaiming Nostalgia: Longing for Nature in American Literature* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2012): 5-6.

¹⁰⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001): 3.

¹⁰⁷ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 4.

¹⁰⁸ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 4.

¹⁰⁹ Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” 7.

¹¹⁰ Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” 8.

¹¹¹ Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” 8.

¹¹² Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.

¹¹³ Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” 15.

¹¹⁴ Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” 13.

“the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping of conspiracy theories.”¹¹⁵ Indeed, as Boym points out, much of the violence people have suffered at the hands of the national state, such as the Holocaust or the red scare “operated in response to conspiracy theories in the name of a restored homeland.”¹¹⁶ The yet-to-concede lame duck President of the United States is an example of the restorative nostalgic with his mission to make America great again. To restore, Boym later said in an interview, “is a way of forgetting history.”¹¹⁷

The reflective nostalgic on the other hand, emphasizes *algia*, the longing, and attempts to “delay the homecoming.”¹¹⁸ Rather than concerning himself with restoring the past, the reflective nostalgic prefers to meditate on the passing of time, and seeks to connect the dots between the past, present and future.¹¹⁹ In other words, the reflective nostalgic returns to the past in order to understand the present – not, it is important to emphasize, to recreate that past in the present. While the restorative nostalgic will typically resort to monuments and statues as a means to preserve his version of the past, the reflective nostalgic relishes in the ruins and the narrative gaps – the evidence of time passed. For the reflective nostalgic, Boym writes, “the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historic development.”¹²⁰

Recent research on nostalgia seems to corroborate Boym’s theory. Scientists have revealed that the emotion prevents loneliness and anxiety, and “makes people more generous to strangers and more tolerant of outsiders.”¹²¹ Moreover, studies show that people who long for the past “typically become more optimistic and inspired about the future.”¹²² According to Sinead McDermott, “[w]hen we long for the past, we long for what might have been as well as what was; it is only by incorporating such longings into our narratives that we can suspend the past and ultimately change its meanings in the present.”¹²³ It is this longing that distinguishes reflective nostalgia from other acts of

¹¹⁵ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

¹¹⁶ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 43.

¹¹⁷ Boxer, “A Memorial Is Itself A Shaper Of Memory.”

¹¹⁸ Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” 13.

¹¹⁹ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 50.

¹²⁰ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 50.

¹²¹ John Tierney, “What Is Nostalgia Good For? Quite a Bit, Research Shows,” *Science*, *New York Times*, July 8, 2013.

¹²² Tierney, “What Is Nostalgia Good For?”

¹²³ Sinead McDermott, “Memory, Nostalgia, and Gender in *A Thousand Acres*,” *Signs* 8, no. 1

memory. Boym did not see emotion and critical thinking as mutually exclusive. “Affective memories,” she argued, “do not absolve one from compassion, judgment, or critical reflection.”¹²⁴ Instead, these are necessary ingredients in a critical investigation of the past. The contemporary nostalgic, Boym concluded, has “to be homesick and sick of home – occasionally at the same time.”¹²⁵

As this discussion has demonstrated, there are several ways in which nostalgia can be used politically. It can be used to restore peace in a region plagued with internal conflicts. It can be used to legitimize violence against marginalized groups. It can be used to make a region the scapegoat for a nation’s ills. Finally, it can be used as a tool for social critique. Boym therefore warned that it is always important to consider: “Who is speaking in the name of nostalgia? Who is its ventriloquist?”¹²⁶ Nostalgia can be comforting but it can also be oppressive. As the North Carolinian journalist Jonathan Daniels once observed:

We southerners are [...] a mythological people. Supposed to dwell in moonlight and incandescence, we are in part to blame for our own legendary character. Lost by choice in dreaming of high days gone and big house burned, now we cannot even wish to escape.¹²⁷

Accordingly, this thesis investigates the political uses of nostalgia in *Mockingbird*. Chapter 2 focuses on the reception of the novel, and in particular, Atticus Finch. In the sixty years that have passed since the novel was first published, Atticus has gone from being a liberal icon to a conservative racist. At the height of the civil rights movement, Atticus was hailed by Martin Luther King Jr. for his empathy and philosophy of nonviolence.¹²⁸ Thirty years later, his accolades were replaced with accusations of paternalism and white savior complex. Two years ago, Republican senators invoked the lawyer-hero during the hearing of Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh in what they called their “Atticus Finch moment.” The aim of this chapter is to determine in what way nostalgia has influenced the reception, and in turn what the reception can tell us about the United States then and now. The theoretical approach is

(2002): 405-406.

¹²⁴ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvii.

¹²⁵ Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” 18.

¹²⁶ Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” 17.

¹²⁷ Jonathan Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers The South* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1938), 14.

¹²⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: Penguin, 1964), 38.

Boym's theory on nostalgia. The analysis is also informed by Nora's theory on sites of memory, Stanley Fish's theory on interpretive communities, as well as various scholars within history, collective memory, and critical whiteness studies.

Chapter 3 analyzes how the nostalgia in the novel functions as a tool for social critique. Traditionally, Atticus has been read as the novel's protagonist, and consequently race and racism as the novel's central theme. When Atticus in later years has come under criticism, the book's nostalgia has been interpreted as an argument for gradualism. This thesis argues that by instead reading Jean Louise, the novel's narrator, as the protagonist, the novel's central theme becomes class. Such a reading reveals Jean Louise's nostalgia as reflective; a longing for the unrealized possibilities of the 1930s for social justice. This chapter reads *Mockingbird* as a modern day plantation myth that deconstructs the American class system. Again, the theoretical approach is Boym's theory on nostalgia. The analysis is also informed by Toni Morrison's theory on critical whiteness and various history scholars. Finally, Chapter 4 concludes the thesis.

2 The Rise and Fall of a White Liberal

In an essay published in 1956, the author Walker Percy observed a change he believed had taken place in the South over the course of a single generation. “Until a few years ago,” he wrote:

the champion of Negro rights in the South, and of fair-mindedness and toleration in general, was the upper-class white Southerner. He is their champion no longer. He has, by and large, unshouldered his burden for someone else to pick up. [...] With a few courageous exceptions, he is either silent or he is leading the Citizens’ Councils.¹

Whether or not that was true, this dramatic change is accurately dramatized in Harper Lee’s iconic character Atticus Finch. For years, readers of *Mockingbird* believed the genteel southern lawyer to be one of the courageous exceptions. With the publication of *Go Set a Watchman* (hereafter *Watchman*) in 2015, however, readers learned that he was not. Set in the same fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama, *Watchman* unfolds some twenty years after the trial of Tom Robinson, and only a few years after the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. By this time, Atticus has become a racist segregationist and a member of Maycomb’s White Citizens Council. As historian Joseph Crespino observes, in *Watchman*, Atticus has become “exactly the kind of guy you’d think would be living in South Alabama in the 1950s.”² However, while many were shocked to learn of Atticus’s regressive turn, it did not come as a complete surprise to everyone.

Accordingly, this chapter investigates the rise and fall of Atticus Finch, and what the reception of the novel and the novel’s hero can tell us about the United States then and now. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part is a study of the reception history of the novel, and focuses on three particular time periods: the 1960s, the 1990s, and the 2010s. The second part explores the term “site of memory” and how it can be applied to Atticus Finch. This chapter argues that the reception of the novel and its hero is characterized by restorative nostalgia, which has strongly influenced how white Americans understand racism.

¹ Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), 83.

² Joseph Crespino, “Searching for Atticus Finch,” TEDxEmory, *TED*, February, 2018, video, 04:06.

2.1 Reception History

The literary scholar Stanley Fish coined the term “interpretive communities” to explain how some readers can draw the same meaning from a text, while others can draw completely different meanings from that same text.³ In his influential essay “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” Fish argues that it all comes down to interpretation. There is no inherent meaning in the text itself; rather, meaning is created by the reader. In other words, the reader “writes” the text.⁴ Readers, he elaborates, base their interpretation of a text on certain decisions which make up “interpretive strategies.”⁵ We decide, for instance, that a text is a novel, and accordingly read the text as a novel. If we decide that the novel is a race novel, we read the novel as a novel about race. “Interpretive strategies are not natural or universal,” Fish argues, “but learned.”⁶ They are conditioned by the interpretive community in which we belong.

Fish does not define interpretive communities in more specific detail. However, one way of understanding the term is to connect it to a reader’s sense of identity. Our lived experience as a certain gender, nationality, ethnicity, social class, level of education, ability, age, and so on, plays into our identity and sense of self. We therefore belong to several communities at once, and we move between different communities over time. While interpretive communities are stable, their stability, Fish argues, is only temporary. “Interpretive communities grow larger and decline, and individuals move from one to another; thus,” he argues, “while the alignments are not permanent, they are always there, providing just enough stability for their interpretive battles to go on, and just enough shift and slippage to assure that they will never be settled.”⁷

Accordingly, this chapter explores the reception of *Mockingbird* and its hero Atticus Finch on three particular periods in time: the 1960s, when the novel was published; the 1990s, when scholars started paying attention to the novel; and finally, the 2010s, which saw the 50th anniversary of the novel and the controversial publication of *Watchman*. Separated by roughly 30 years apart, these three decades represent three

³ Stanley E. Fish, “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 3 (1976): 483.

⁴ Fish, “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” 482.

⁵ Fish, “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” 479.

⁶ Fish, “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” 484.

⁷ Fish, “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” 484.

different periods in American history: the civil rights era, the era of multiculturalism, and finally the (now slightly contested) post-racial era.

2.1.1 The 1960s

When *Mockingbird* was published on July 11, 1960, it garnered widespread attention from the press. According to the leading Harper Lee scholar Claudia Durst Johnson, at least thirty national newspapers and magazines reviewed the novel, and the reception was generally laudatory.⁸

Writing for *The New York Times*, Herbert Mitgang compared *Mockingbird* to the works of another southern author, Carson McCullers, but argued that “even without Miss McCullers’ fineness, the meaning in this novel runs even deeper because of the subject of injustice in the South.”⁹ Mitgang described Atticus as “one of the most decent members of his profession found in fiction,” and declared Lee a “fresh writer with something significant to say, South and North.”¹⁰ Frank H. Lyell of *The New York Times Book Review* hailed *Mockingbird* as a “level-headed plea for interracial understanding,” and Atticus as “the embodiment of fearless integrity, magnanimity and common sense.”¹¹

Richard Sullivan in *The Chicago Herald Tribune* described Lee’s debut as “a novel of strong contemporary national significance.”¹² Another reporter in the same newspaper later observed that Atticus “so affected one female reader we know that she said, wistfully; ‘I hope he finds some nice girl to marry.’”¹³ Katherine Gauss Jackson from *Harper’s Magazine* reported that Lee had “written a first novel which will satisfy all those [...] who are interested in the problems of the South to which there are no easy resolutions.”¹⁴ In Atticus, Jackson wrote, Lee had created “an old-fashioned ‘hero’ if there ever was one.”¹⁵ Leo Ward in *Commonweal* called *Mockingbird* an

⁸ Johnson, *Threatening Boundaries*, 20.

⁹ Herbert Mitgang, “Books of the Times,” *New York Times*, July 13, 1960.

¹⁰ Mitgang, “Books of the Times.”

¹¹ Frank H. Lyell, “One-Taxi Town,” *New York Times Book Review*, July 10, 1960.

¹² Richard Sullivan, “Engrossing First Novel of Rare Excellence,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 17, 1960.

¹³ Robert Cromie, “Wish for Publishers: Better Novels” *Chicago Tribune*, December 4, 1960.

¹⁴ Katherine Gauss Jackson, “BOOKS in Brief,” *Harper’s Magazine*, August 1960, 101.

¹⁵ Jackson, “BOOKS in Brief.”

“achievement,” and added that “what a greenhorn from the North may enjoy most is how quietly and completely he is introduced to the ways of seeing and feeling and acting in the Deep South.”¹⁶ *Saturday Review*’s Granville Hicks similarly commended Lee on her “insight into Southern mores,” and praised Atticus as “a notable portrait of a Southern liberal.”¹⁷ *Time Magazine* applauded Lee for having written her debut novel “with all of the tactile brilliance and none of the preciousness generally supposed to be standard swamp-warfare issue for Southern writers.”¹⁸

This last of Lee’s accomplishments was an even bigger selling point in the South. Lee’s local newspaper in Alabama, *The Monroe Journal*, praised her for having “veered away from bestial sadism and depravity of bedroom antics, commonly the themes of modern fiction, particularly that of a Southern setting.”¹⁹ Another Alabamian, Barbara Hodge Hall of *The Anniston Star*, similarly reassured her readers that “this is no Tobacco Road affair of depravity and decline.”²⁰

In fact, this was the general sentiment throughout the South. As the majority of the northern reviews attest to, at the time, racism was considered a distinctly southern problem which the greenhorns from the North insisted they were not familiar with, at least not personally. This assumption is also known as southern exceptionalism. Implicit in this assumption is that southerners were a distinctly racist people that did not reflect Americans in general. Many southern reviewers were therefore grateful to Lee for her more nuanced portrayal of the region’s people. In Texas, Catherine Munson Foster of *The Brazosport Facts* observed that “here, for once, is a South inhabited by people – good, bad, indifferent – no monsters, degenerates or sex-deviators. After all,” she added, “we Southerners [...] simply want to be regarded as human, and Harper Lee does this, bless her un-Tennessee Williamish heart!”²¹ In North Carolina, a writer for

¹⁶ Leo Ward, “(Nelle) Harper Lee: 1926-,” in *Contemporary Literary Criticism Volume 12: Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of Today’s Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, and Other Creative Writers*, ed. Dedria Bryfonski (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1980): 341.

¹⁷ Granville Hicks, “Harper Lee: 1926-1,” in *Contemporary Literary Criticism Volume 60: Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of Today’s Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, and Other Creative Writers*, ed. Roger Matuz (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1990): 241.

¹⁸ Dan Kedmey, “Read TIME’s Original Review of *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” *Time Magazine*, February 3, 2015.

¹⁹ “Editorial,” *Monroe Journal* (Monroeville, AL), August 4, 1960.

²⁰ Barbara Hodge Hall, “Alabamian Pens Novel Of Region,” *Anniston Star* (Anniston, AL), July 10, 1960.

²¹ Catherine Munson Foster, “New Author’s First Effort Makes Southerner A Human,” *Brazosport Facts* (Freeport, TX), September 4, 1960.

Charlotte News maintained that “by and large, southerners of both races are not the decadent, hating, violent, blind-to-the-great-sociological-problem people that so much literature these days is painting us,” and commended Lee for having shown “the other, and more real, side of the South.”²² In Mississippi, too, the editor of *The Delta Democrat-Times* thought it “refreshing for a change to find recognition for a Southern writer who draws from the more normal aspects of life in a small Southern community, and a more likely situation of racial relations.”²³

Even a Black Southerner lauded the book. Nick Aron Ford, writing for the African-American journal *PHYLON: The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture*, commended Lee for her complex characters, and particularly her portrayal of African Americans: “Instead of stereotyped Negroes,” Ford wrote, “this novel presents living, convincing characters – neither saints nor devils, neither completely ignorant or craven or foolish, nor completely wise or wholly courageous.”²⁴

Just like in the North, many in the South and border states were impressed with the character Atticus Finch. Thomas B. Sherman of *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* declared him “the author’s real triumph.”²⁵ Mary Corrdry wrote in *The Baltimore Sun*: “So emotionally involved does the reader become that he is very likely to feel an inner tremor when all the Negroes silently rise to their feet as the defeated lawyer leaves the crowded courtroom.”²⁶ Ruth Wallace of *The Montgomery Advertiser* ventured that “[s]ome may be surprised that Atticus Finch and his kind existed.”²⁷ Wallace most likely agreed with Virginian Howard Gibbons of *The Daily Press* who wrote that Atticus “represents the humanitarianism often dormant in but never absent from the Southern character.”²⁸

Not everyone was equally impressed with Atticus, however. In her review in the Chicago-based white liberal protestant magazine *Christian Century*, Elizabeth Lee

²² “To Kill A Mockingbird,” *Charlotte News* (Charlotte, NC), May 18, 1961.

²³ “Editorial,” *Delta Democrat-Times* (Greenville, MS), May 4, 1961.

²⁴ Nick Aaron Ford, “(Nelle) Harper Lee: 1926-,” in *Contemporary Literary Criticism Volume 12: Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of Today’s Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, and Other Creative Writers*, ed. Dedria Bryfonski (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1980): 341.

²⁵ Thomas B. Sherman, “Reading and Writing,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (St. Louis, MO), November 27, 1960.

²⁶ Mary Corrdry, “Absorbing, Moving Novel Of South,” *Books, Baltimore Sun* (Baltimore, MD), July 10, 1960.

²⁷ Ruth Wallace, “To Kill A Mockingbird,” *Montgomery Advertiser* (Montgomery, AL) July 9, 1960.

²⁸ Howard Gibbons, “A Brave Record Of Awakening South Told In Harper Lee’s Forthright Novel,” *Daily Press* (Newport, VA), December 18, 1960.

Haselden described the lawyer as one who “acts upon his conviction with Olympian wisdom and calm. He is completely self-sufficient at all times,” she observed, “and the reader is not invited to share any spiritual struggle which might be his.”²⁹ According to Haselden, who was a civil rights activist and national urban program director for Church Women United, the book offered not one character with whom the reader could identify, and she considered this to be the book’s biggest flaw.³⁰ Yet, she ventured:

Perhaps this weakness is also the secret of the novel’s popularity. Acclaiming the merit of the book’s theme, keeping the book on the best-seller list, soothes the public conscience. Thus the reader can witness his concerns about injustice-in-general, in some removed place, at a distant time, without feeling any personal sense of guilt or involvement in the extensions of the injustice into our own time and place. ‘We’ are not in the book, and the finger does not point at ‘us.’³¹

Someone who joined in Haselden’s critique of *Mockingbird* as first and foremost palliative was Andrew Sarris from *The Village Voice*. Reviewing the film and not the novel, Sarris argued that “the Maycomb courtroom is still segregated thirty years later,” and called *Mockingbird* a “cleverly masked argument for gradualism.”³² Like Haselden, Sarris was critical of the portrayal of the characters in the novel – in particular, he found fault in the figures of Tom Robinson and Bob Ewell, of whom he wrote:

One innocent Negro and one murderous redneck hardly cancel each other out. How neat and painless it is for the good people of Maycomb to find a bothersome victim in one grave and a convenient scapegoat in the other. [...] Perhaps the Negro and the redneck are brothers under the skin, both victims of the same system.³³

Arguably, both Haselden’s and Sarris’s critique is quite on the mark. North or South of the Mason-Dixie line: if the critics identified with anyone it was with Atticus. Few, if any, implicated themselves in what the reporter from *Charlotte News* described as the “great-sociological-problem.”³⁴ In fact, many of the critics readily accepted the poor whites as the root of the problem. Northern reviewers referred to the Ewells as

²⁹ Elizabeth Lee Haselden, “We Aren’t in It,” reprinted in *Readings on To Kill a Mockingbird*, ed. Terry O’Neill (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000): 29.

³⁰ “Death Notice: Elizabeth Lee Haselden,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 2, 2008.

³¹ Haselden, “We Aren’t in It,” 31.

³² Andrew Sarris, “A Negro Is Not a Mockingbird,” *Village Voice*, March 7, 1963.

³³ Sarris, “A Negro is Not a Mockingbird.”

³⁴ “To Kill A Mockingbird,” *Charlotte News* (Charlotte, NC), May 18, 1961.

“moronic,” “good-for-nothing,” “low-life,” and “depraved.”³⁵ Southern reviewers were considerably harsher, and described the Ewells as “vile,” “shiftless crackers,” and “trashy, drunken, town-dump inhabiting reprobate.”³⁶ Yet, southern critics were also prone to be more sympathetic towards the Ewells. The editor of *The Delta-Democrat Times* understood that:

Some of the most bigoted of the characters are obviously more to be pitied than to be censored; and even the most enlightened indicate they still have more to learn. The problems are not so qualified that the principles are compromised into a grey area of neither right nor wrong, but the people who deal with them are not rigidly good or bad.³⁷

Writing for *The Montgomery Advertiser*, John T. Hamner found one of the most appealing aspects of the book to be Scout’s “growing awareness that while she is ‘different’ because fate made her ‘folks’ instead of ‘trash,’ she has neither right nor desire to take advantage of it over those who were not so blessed by accident of birth.”³⁸ However, these critics were the exception rather than the rule.

Historian Joseph Crespino attributes part of the success of *Mockingbird* and Atticus Finch to “the way Finch embodies what historians have called the ‘liberal consensus’ of mid-twentieth-century America. With the defeat of the Depression at home and fascism abroad,” Crespino explains, “postwar Americans were confident that democracy and western capitalism could answer basic questions of material need and class inequality that plagued the nation in prior decades.”³⁹ Indeed, writes historian Gary Gerstle, the 1960s marked the period when “the nation-state undertook a second Reconstruction to complete the work left unfinished by the first. Popular support for this renewed commitment to racial equality seemed overwhelming,” Gerstle writes:

A deep and widespread revulsion against segregation spread through the nation as millions watched Sheriff Bull Connor unleash his dogs and high-pressure hoses on peaceful civil rights protesters in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. Hundreds of thousands – Black and white – joined the March on Washington in

³⁵ Margaret Marble, “Lee Tale Has Fresh Rapport,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Aug. 7, 1960; Lyell, “One-Taxi Town”; Mitgang, “Books of the Times”; Sullivan, “Engrossing First Novel.”

³⁶ Corddry, “Absorbing, Moving Novel Of South”; Sherman, “Reading and Writing”; Roger Thames, “Alabamian does fine novel,” *Birmingham News* (Birmingham, AL), Jul. 17, 1960.

³⁷ “Editorial,” *Delta Democrat-Times* (Greenville, MS), May 4, 1961.

³⁸ John T. Hamner, “This Mockingbird Is A Happy Singer,” *Montgomery Advertiser* (Montgomery, AL), July 10, 1960.

³⁹ Joseph Crespino, “The Strange Career of Atticus Finch,” *Southern Cultures* 6, no. 2 (2000): 11-12.

August 1963 while millions endorsed their efforts. In 1964 and 1965, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, the most significant pieces of civil rights legislation in a hundred years. And Lyndon B. Johnson won a landslide victory over Barry Goldwater in 1964, in no small measure because of his outspoken support for civil rights.⁴⁰

This narrative did not account for the massive resistance to the civil rights movement in the South, but as Gerstle points out, that did not matter: “the fact that the South stood outside the ‘consensus’ did not damage the notion of consensus, for the South was regarded as a backward region that did not truly represent the United States. Once the South was forced to become part of the nation,” he points out, the idea was that “the liberal consensus would prevail there too.”⁴¹

The idea of liberal consensus hinges on the belief in southern exceptionalism: that the South is the exception to American exceptionalism. A nation associated with democracy and progress could not maintain this image while simultaneously demonstrating flagrant signs of racism and oppression. Because the South’s history already was dominated by racial violence, and because of the South’s preoccupation with that past, the region became what historians Larry J. Griffin and Don H. Doyle describes as a “repository for problems that were really ‘American’ all along.”⁴² Thus, the nation could maintain the status quo, observes historian Gary Lipsitz, by practicing a “simultaneous disavowal and embrace of racism.”⁴³

As with southern exceptionalism, the idea of liberal consensus has since proved to be myth. It extended only to the establishment, Gerstle observes, “in churches and synagogues, in government bureaucracies, in universities and foundations, in sections of the media.”⁴⁴ In other words, the very people who make up the interpretive community of *Mockingbird* in 1960.

The historian Matthew D. Lassiter observes that even though southern exceptionalism has proved to be a myth, “it is important to historicize the idea of

⁴⁰ Gary Gerstle, “Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus,” *Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 579.

⁴¹ Gerstle, “Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus,” 579.

⁴² Larry J. Griffin and Don H. Doyle, introduction to *The South as an American Problem*, ed. Larry J. Griffin and Don H. Doyle (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995): 8-9, quoted in Mathew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, introduction to *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, ed. Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 9.

⁴³ Gary Lipsitz quoted in Leigh Anne Duck, introduction to *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation, and U.S. Nationalism* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 2006): 4.

⁴⁴ Gerstle, “Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus,” 580.

southern distinctiveness as a cultural, political, and legal construction that has been very real in its consequences.”⁴⁵ Indeed, even though racism was not something particular to the South, many people believed it was, which has greatly influenced how liberal white Americans have understood racism. These consequences are apparent also in the 1960s reception of *Mockingbird*. For white liberals in the North, the book confirmed what they already believed to know: that racism was a problem particular to the South. For the white liberals in the South, the novel was a godsend. As journalist Howell Raines observes, it gave southerners what they needed the most: “an internationally accepted statement that [they] are better than the rest of America [...] has been willing to admit.”⁴⁶ Despite what Haselden in *Christian Century* claimed, as far as these southern reviewers were concerned, they were in it.

2.1.2 The 1990’s

When HarperCollins published a new edition of *Mockingbird* on the occasion of its 35th anniversary, the book included a “foreword” – an excerpt from a letter to her editor – written by Lee herself two years earlier. “Please spare *Mockingbird* an Introduction,” it reads:

As a reader I loathe Introductions. To novels, I associate Introductions with long-gone authors and works that are being brought back into print after decades of interment. Although *Mockingbird* will be 33 this year, it has never been out of print and I am still alive, although very quiet. Introductions inhibit pleasure, they kill the joy of anticipation, they frustrate curiosity. The only good thing about Introductions is that in some cases they delay the dose to come. *Mockingbird* still says what it has to say; it has managed to survive the years without preamble.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Matthew D. Lassiter, “De Jure/De Facto Segregation: The Long Shadow of a National Myth,” in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, ed. Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 27.

⁴⁶ Howell Raines, “Harper Lee and Her Father, the Real Atticus Finch,” Book Review, Nonfiction, *New York Times*, June 18, 2018.

⁴⁷ Harper Lee, foreword to *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Harper, 2015).

By 1995, *Mockingbird* had sold 16 million copies in the U.S. alone, and been translated into 24 languages.⁴⁸ There was no question whether the book had survived; the question was rather if its hero would. A year before Lee wrote her letter, Monroe Freedman, a law professor and co-editor of the national law journal *Legal Times*, fired the first shot in what would turn out to be a lengthy debate in legal circles about Atticus Finch's merits as a lawyer. Freedman's critique of Atticus was so controversial that it made it into a national newspaper, and inspired scholars to revisit Lee's classic.⁴⁹

Having grown up reading *Mockingbird*, a new generation of lawyers had chosen their profession in large part because of Atticus Finch.⁵⁰ Legal ethics professors regularly assigned *Mockingbird* to their students, and promoted Atticus as the ideal lawyer.⁵¹ This prompted Freedman to publish an entry in his legal ethics column entitled "Atticus Finch, ESQ., R.I.P." In the entry, Freedman voiced his concern regarding this new role model for lawyers he had seen "promoted in scholarly books, law reviews, and bar journals. His name is Atticus Finch," he wrote, "He looks a lot like Gregory Peck. He is a gentleman. He has character."⁵² In Freedman's opinion, character alone did not make for good lawyers. Character, he noted, "is not directly concerned with doing the right thing, but rather with being the right type of person."⁵³ Atticus's defense of Tom, Freedman argued, is not so much commendable as it is required by law. Had he refused the judge's appointment, he would have, or at least should have, been held in contempt of court.⁵⁴ "Atticus Finch does, indeed, act heroically in his representation of Robinson," Freedman concedes:

But he does so from an elitist sense of noblesse oblige. Except under compulsion of a court appointment, Finch never attempts to change the racism and sexism that permeate the life of Macomb [sic], Ala. On the contrary, he lives his own

⁴⁸ Mary B. W. Tabor, "A 'New Foreword' That Isn't," Book Notes, *New York Times*, August 23, 1995.

⁴⁹ David Margolick, "To Attack A Lawyer In 'To Kill a Mockingbird': An Iconoclast Takes Aim At A Hero," *At the Bar, New York Times*, February 28, 1992.

⁵⁰ Teresa Godwin Phelps, "The Margins of Maycomb: A Rereading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*," *Alabama Law Review* 45, no. 2 (1994): 513.

⁵¹ Margolick, "To Attack A Lawyer."

⁵² Monroe Freedman, "Atticus Finch, ESQ., R.I.P.: A Gentleman But No Model For Lawyers," *Legal Times*, February 24, 1992. Reprinted in *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historic Documents*, ed. Claudia Durst Johnson (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1994), 189.

⁵³ Freedman, "Atticus Finch, ESQ., R.I.P.," 189.

⁵⁴ Freedman, "Atticus Finch, ESQ., R.I.P.," 189.

life as the passive participant in that pervasive injustice. And that is not my idea of a role model for young lawyers.⁵⁵

Some legal scholars, like Thomas Shaffer and Timothy Hall, both of whom had previously published pieces promoting Atticus as a role model, merely scoffed at their colleague, telling a reporter for *The New York Times*: “There isn't a sacred cow in the world Monroe Freedman doesn't enjoy taking on.”⁵⁶ Other members of the profession were personally offended by Freedman's remarks. One in particular was the civil rights lawyer R. Mason Barge from Atlanta, Georgia. “We'll worry about racism down here,” he charged in his reply to Freedman:

and you just go on living in the good old days, when New York was marginally less racist than Alabama and its inhabitants could arrogate moral superiority to themselves. And when you get around to cleaning up some of those sewers you call cities, give me a call, and we can talk about what a bad guy Atticus Finch was.⁵⁷

Barge was not alone in feeling this way. A few months after his first piece, Freedman published a second where he observed that of all the cases his column had dealt with, ranging from criminal injustice to corruption in the White House:

never has there been such a fulsome response as to the column making the rather modest suggestion that a particular fictional character is not an appropriate model for lawyers. The mythological deification of Atticus Finch was illustrated by Atticans who wrote to equate my rejection of Finch, literally, with attacking God, Moses, Jesus, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa.⁵⁸

The reactions Freedman received to his column bear witness to the immense influence of the interpretation of Atticus as a hero. For these lawyers, this was not just an attack on a fictional character, it was an attack on them and how they perceived themselves. If Atticus was not the ideal lawyer, what did that say about them?

⁵⁵ Freedman, “Atticus Finch, ESQ. R.I.P.,” 190.

⁵⁶ Margolick, “To Attack A Lawyer.”

⁵⁷ R. Mason Barge, “Fictional Characters, Fictional Ethics,” *Legal Times*, March 9, 1992. Reprinted in *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historic Documents*, ed. Claudia Durst Johnson (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1994), 192.

⁵⁸ Monroe Freedman quoted in Christopher Metress, “The Rise and Fall of Atticus Finch,” in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 144.

The attack on Atticus is symptomatic of a paradigm shift in American culture and society. By the 1990s, America had entered into the era of multiculturalism. Thanks to the progress of the civil rights movement, voices previously silenced had now entered into the mainstream. As women, queer people, and people of color were given a platform, they directed the critical lens towards their shared oppressor – the straight, white male.⁵⁹ In this context it was only a matter of time before Atticus Finch would be called on the carpet.

Thus, in the 1990s, a new interpretive community of *Mockingbird* emerged which consisted of people who did not identify with the lawyer-hero. First and foremost, they took issue with the novel's demonstration of systemic racism, and particularly the white savior complex – the idea that black people need white people to save them. One example of this problem, they argued, could be found in the symbol of the mockingbird itself, which the novel's defenders and detractors alike have understood as a symbol of the African-American population. "Shoot all the bluejays you want," Atticus famously tells his children, "but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."⁶⁰ After all, mockingbirds "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."⁶¹ Defenders of the novel, typically white, have found this simile positively liberal - a sympathetic attitude towards the black population from a man who had nothing to gain and everything to lose by taking this stance publicly. However, for non-whites, this simile is problematic as it likens black people with "innocent creatures."⁶² This echoes the rationale behind the antebellum ideal of the benevolent slaveholder – that it was the moral duty of the master to care for and protect his slave, just as he should his animals. As a consequence, rather than challenging racist ideology, they argue that the novel instead perpetuates it, by implying that it is the white man's moral duty, as the superior race, to protect the black man from harm.⁶³

Another, more overt example of the white savior complex in the novel is the white lawyer fighting the good fight on behalf of his black charge. Such a narrative

⁵⁹ David Wellman, "Minstrel Shows, Affirmative Action Talk, and Angry White Men: Marking Racial Otherness in the 1990s," in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997): 321.

⁶⁰ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), 98.

⁶¹ Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 98.

⁶² Saney, "The Case Against *To Kill a Mockingbird*," 50.

⁶³ Saney, "The Case Against *To Kill a Mockingbird*," 50-51.

suggests that black people played no part in their own emancipation or civil rights victories. As the black author and educator Isaac Saney observes: “They are robbed of their role as subjects of history, reduced to mere objects who are passive hapless victims; mere spectators and bystanders in the struggle against their own oppression and exploitation.”⁶⁴ These examples leave the impression that whatever progressive views on social justice the novel might display, these views are still rooted in white supremacy.

Claudia Durst Johnson is baffled by the critique from African-American parents and educators. “All the black characters are sympathetic,” she writes, “and the novel exposes racism as abhorrent and white racists as ludicrous and hypocritical.”⁶⁵ What more do you want, Johnson seems to say. She admits that *Mockingbird* “does indeed contain racial slurs,” but quickly adds:

those who would censor it on these grounds should consider the alternative: Would we want a novel about race relations in the South of the 1930s to ignore the language used at the time? To ‘pretty-up’ the language of racists? In short, to distort reality and to portray racists as less objectionable than they are?⁶⁶

This remark by Johnson is quite indicative of the typical white response to black criticism. Saney explains that any suggestion put forth by black educators over the years to remove the novel from high school curriculum, has been met with public outcry and accusations of censorship. In reference to one such attempt in Halifax, Canada, Saney reports:

The arguments advanced by the Black community were consistently presented in a non-serious, even risible, light, so as to give the impression that the black educators and parents are ignorant of the merits of literature, mere emotional whiners and complainers, belonging to a hot-headed fringe. For example, after the decision was made to keep books in the curriculum, the Halifax Daily News in an editorial was “relieved cooler heads have prevailed,” reproducing the racist notions of inherent Black emotionality versus rationality of white society.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Saney, “The Case Against *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” 51.

⁶⁵ Claudia Durst Johnson, *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources and Historic Documents* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1994), 200.

⁶⁶ Johnson, *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird*, 201.

⁶⁷ Isaac Saney, “The Case Against *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” in *Racism in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird*, ed. Candice Mancini (Gale Cengage Learning: Greenhaven Press, 2008), 49.

Of course, to question the books that are assigned as required reading in school is not the same as censorship – it is merely an attempt to diversify the canon. Nobody in the black community ever proposed to remove the book from school or public libraries. Ironically, what these emotional responses by the white community prove more than anything, is that literature matters, which is precisely the reason why black educators want to remove the novel from the curriculum. The canon is by its very definition limited. The consequence of keeping *Mockingbird* in the canon is that another book about race relations in America, perhaps one in which the black population is credited for the progress of the civil rights movement, perhaps one in which the protagonist is black, is excluded. Such a book would arguably offer a much more sinister portrayal of whites. Perhaps this is the motivation to keep *Mockingbird* in the canon.

In 1997, the Alabama State Bar association erected a bronze monument in the town square in Monroeville, Alabama, Harper Lee's hometown. "The legal profession, has in Atticus Finch," it reads:

a lawyer-hero who knows how to see and to tell the truth, knowing the price the community, which Atticus loves, will pay for that truth. The legal profession has in Atticus Finch, a lawyer-hero who knows how to use power and advantage for moral purposes, and is willing to stand alone as the conscience of the community. The legal community has in Atticus Finch, a lawyer-hero who possesses the knowledge and experience of a man, strengthened by the untainted insight of a child.⁶⁸

Pierre Nora suggests that we only create sites of memory when those very memories are under threat. If Atticus Finch was not already a monument in figurative terms, in the late 1990s he literally became one.

2.1.3 The 2010's

Although it took three decades before any serious attention was afforded the novel, since the early 1990s, scholars have more than made up for lost time. By 2010, which marked the 50th anniversary of the novel, five collections of essays had been published.

⁶⁸ "Monument to Atticus Finch in Monroeville, AL.," Visitmonroevilleal.com. Accessed November 14, 2020.

A distinguishing feature of the scholarship on *Mockingbird* is that because of the novel's widespread popularity, scholars are likely to have read the novel before – typically in secondary school. Calvin Woodard, for example, refers to his “tattered paperback edition of Miss Harper Lee’s classic,” and Karly Eaton similarly points out the condition of her worn-out copy of the book.⁶⁹ In other words, the scholarship consists in large part of rereadings. To the extent that this constitutes a problem, it is that the readers have preexisting opinions about, and often an emotional connection to the book, which inevitably marks their interpretation.

Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs argued that we remember our reactions to a book more vividly than the book itself. Whenever we revisit a book from our childhood, he observed:

we actually seem to be reading a new book, or at least an altered version. The book seems to lack pages, developments, or details that were there when we first read it; at the same time, additions seem to have been made because our interest is now attracted to and our reflections focused on a number of aspects of the action and the characters which, we well know, we were incapable of noticing then. These stories moreover seem less extraordinary to us, more formulaic and less lively.⁷⁰

A rereading can in other words leave the reader a little disappointed. The late Harold Bloom, for instance, described rereading *Mockingbird* as “a somewhat ambivalent experience. Scout Finch charms me,” he observed, but the book “has dated into a period piece.”⁷¹ Susan Arpajian Jolley also found the novel to be little dated upon rereading it after twenty years, but concluded that it remained “a moving one nonetheless.”⁷² Teresa Godwin Phelps had taught the novel for a decade when students started challenging her on her “unqualified admiration for Atticus Finch.”⁷³ In an attempt to answer their questions she reread the book and was shocked by Maycomb’s rigid social hierarchy.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Calvin Woodard, “Listening to the Mockingbird,” in *Racism in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird*, ed. Candice Mancini (Gale Cengage Learning: Greenhaven Press, 2008), 147; Karly Eaton, “Mockingbird, Watchman, and the Adolescent,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2017): 338.

⁷⁰ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 46.

⁷¹ Harold Bloom, introduction to *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 1.

⁷² Susan Arpajian Jolley, “Integrating Poetry and ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’” *English Journal* 92, no. 2 (2002): 34.

⁷³ Phelps, “The Margins of Maycomb,” 514.

⁷⁴ Phelps, “The Margins of Maycomb,” 514.

A rereading may also make the reader a little defensive. In fact, a fair share of critics insists on the inherent quality of *Mockingbird*, as if subjective opinions become objective simply by voicing them. Theodore R. Hovet and Grace-Ann Hovet open their essay with the following declaration: “the novel and the movie are two of the finest accomplishments in mainstream American culture.”⁷⁵ Robert Butler announces that *Mockingbird* is endowed with “thematic depth, technical complexity, and cultural resonance.”⁷⁶ Jolley goes so far as to address the novel directly, as if she’s trying to cheer it up after a particularly rough time of it:

I maintain, however, that you are not as simplistic as some people would have us believe. You are rich enough in thematic material and accessible enough and moving enough to open the eyes of many an American high school student to worlds and perspectives they need to see. The good you can do in a high school classroom and the possibilities you present for multigenre teaching certainly outweigh any damage.⁷⁷

Even more curious is what Jennifer Murray found in her study of the critical corpus on the novel. When it comes to what she calls “textual disturbances,” such as narrative gaps or contradictions, critics of *Mockingbird* have a tendency to interpret, rewrite, and overwrite parts of the narrative to fit their analysis.⁷⁸ In reference to the scene where Scout kicks one of the members of the lynch mob a little too high up the leg, Murray observes, one critic overwrites Lee’s description of “a burly man,” with “the hulking Bob Ewell,” although all textual evidence point to the fact that Bob Ewell and the lynch mob from Old Sarum do not socialize.⁷⁹ Another critic, Murray notes, reattributes one of Scout’s racist remarks to another character in the novel. “What this slip of the pen seems to express,” Murray argues, “is the contradictory desire on the critic's part to acknowledge the racism in the text, but to preserve Scout from being associated with it.”⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Theodore R. Hovet and Grace-Ann Hovet, “‘Fine Fancy Gentlemen’ and ‘Yappy Folk’: Contending Voices in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” *Southern Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2001): 68

⁷⁶ Robert Butler, “The Religious Vision of *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” in *On Harper Lee: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 122.

⁷⁷ Jolley, “Integrating Poetry and ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’” 34.

⁷⁸ Jennifer Murray, “More Than One Way to (Mis)Read a ‘Mockingbird,’” *Southern Literary Journal* 43, no. 1 (2010): 76.

⁷⁹ Murray, “More Than One Way,” 79.

⁸⁰ Murray, “More Than One Way,” 80.

“When we defend classics,” writes author Padma Venkatraman, “we’re sometimes just defending childhood memories.”⁸¹ This seems especially true for the scholarship on *Mockingbird*, which is decidedly marked by restorative nostalgia. Critics seem to feel the need to gloss over disturbances and restore the novel to its former glory. This suggests that when critics reread the novel, they are confronted not only with a new version of the book, but also a new version of themselves.

In 2010, the United States seemed a very different country from the one in which Harper Lee wrote *Mockingbird*. Americans had elected their first black president, and media pundits toyed with the idea that America had evolved into a “post-racial society.”⁸² However, despite the color of the President’s skin, the African-American community continued to suffer from systemic racism, mass incarcerations and police violence. As Claudia Durst Johnson observes, the 2010s were flooded with news stories of unarmed black men killed by the police. In 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement emerged in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin, with the mission to put a spotlight on institutional racism and police brutality.⁸³ Then, in 2015, racism finally became a national issue as the country grappled with the white supremacist terrorist attack on the historic Mother Emanuel church in Charleston, South Carolina. It is a curious coincidence that a little under a month after the Charleston Church Shooting, the highly anticipated second novel of Harper Lee was published. As people called for authorities to take down Confederate monuments, white liberals found their greatest hero being taken down with them.

When HarperCollins announced in February of 2015 their plans to release Harper Lee’s newly discovered second novel, most people received the news with shock and skepticism. Lee had, after all, gone all this time without publishing a second book. It was part of the mythology surrounding the famously reclusive author, whose perfunctory “I said what I had to say,” had long settled any questions of a sequel.⁸⁴ Now aged 88, partially deaf, almost completely blind, and possibly struggling with her short

⁸¹ Padma Venkatraman, “Weeding Out Racism,” *School Library Journal* 66, no. 8 (2020): 22.

⁸² Ta-Nehisi Coates, “There Is No Post-Racial America,” *Atlantic*, July/August, 2015.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/07/post-racial-society-distant-dream/395255>.

⁸³ “About,” Black Lives Matter.

⁸⁴ Janet Maslin, “A Biography of Harper Lee, Author of ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’” *Book of the Times*, *New York Times*, June 8, 2006.

term memory, her giving the green light concerned both her fans and her friends.⁸⁵ Lee's mental health, a source told a reporter for the *New York Times*, was "too shaky for her to have knowingly authorized the new book."⁸⁶ Complaints of possible elder-abuse prompted the state of Alabama to conduct an investigation, which a few months later concluded that "Lee was able to answer questions about the book to investigators' satisfaction."⁸⁷ On July 14th that same year, *Watchman* was published, almost sixty years after it is was first written.

Watchman is both a sequel and a prequel to *Mockingbird*. In HarperCollins' press release, Lee explained in a statement that the novel, which features a grown-up Scout, was completed in the mid-50s, but that her editor, captivated by Scout's childhood flashbacks, had persuaded Lee to instead write a novel based solely on those. "I was a first-time writer," Lee wrote, "so I did as I was told."⁸⁸ She concluded the statement by noting that she was both "humbled and amazed that this will now be published after all these years."⁸⁹ So were her fans. Within a week of its publication, *Watchman* had sold 1.1 million copies.⁹⁰

The release of *Watchman* sent the literary world into a frenzy. As Claudia Durst Johnson observes, articles about Lee's sequel "ran with regularity in the English-speaking world's top newspapers, sometimes on the front page."⁹¹ The reviews were numerous, and for the most part negative. Maureen Corrigan reporting for the *NPR* program "Fresh Air," described *Watchman* as "a troubling confusion of a novel, politically and artistically, beginning with its fishy origin story."⁹² She further lamented that the novel "is kind of a mess that will forever change the way we read a

⁸⁵ Serge F. Kovalski, Alexandra Alter and Jennifer Crossley Howard, "Harper Lee's Condition Debated by Friends, Fans and Now State of Alabama," Books, *New York Times*, March 11, 2015.

⁸⁶ Kovalski, Alter and Howard, "Harper Lee's Condition Debated by Friends, Fans and Now State of Alabama."

⁸⁷ "Alabama Agency Closes Harper Lee Elder-Abuse Investigation," *Montgomery Advertiser*, April 6, 2015.

⁸⁸ Tina Andreadis, "Recently Discovered Novel from Harper Lee, Author of To Kill a Mockingbird," *HarperCollins Publishers*, February 3, 2015.

⁸⁹ Andreadis, "Recently Discovered Novel from Harper Lee."

⁹⁰ Collette Bancroft, "The Two Atticuses: 'Mockingbird's Hero Radically Reshaped from 'Watchman's Racist Version,'" Books, *Tampa Bay*, July 22, 2015.

⁹¹ Johnson, *Reading Harper Lee*, 136.

⁹² Maureen Corrigan, "Harper Lee's 'Watchman' Is A Mess That Makes Us Reconsider A Masterpiece," *Fresh Air, National Public Radio*, July 13, 2015, 01:18.

masterpiece.”⁹³ William Gibaldi from *The New Republic* wrote three consecutive articles about the release of *Watchman*, and was equally disappointed. “This befouling book does not come close to meeting the immoderate predictions of its publisher,” he wrote, and concluded, “It should have been permitted to retain its quiet dignity boxed in the author's archives.”⁹⁴ In her review of the first chapter, which was released a week prior to the book launch, Jane Shilling from *The Telegraph* wrote that *Watchman* “reads like a young writer’s first, hesitant pass over material that will later be transformed into a masterpiece by tough editing and hard work.”⁹⁵ Like so many other *Mockingbird*-fans, Shilling announced that she too would boycott the book when it arrived.⁹⁶

Many critics took issue with the novel’s form, or lack thereof. Sophie Gilbert from *The Atlantic* described the novel as having a “meandering, distinctly unfinished style; stilted dialogue;” and “an unsatisfactory ending.”⁹⁷ David Ulin from *The Los Angeles Times* also read the novel as a draft, which “falls apart in the second half.” Xan Brooks from *The Guardian* pointed out that were it not for the fact that we already know the characters, the shocking revelations that the novel offers “might have blown merrily past our ears.”⁹⁸ Adam Gopnik of *The New Yorker* agreed: “the book as a book barely makes sense if you don’t know ‘*Mockingbird*,’” he wrote.⁹⁹ Gaby Wood from *The Telegraph* declared the novel “an anxious work in progress,” and that in terms of genre, *Watchman* is “barely a novel at all”¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, there were critics who found that, despite the “shaky narrative,” and other flaws, *Watchman* is still “worth welcoming,” because it

⁹³ Maureen Corrigan, “Harper Lee’s ‘*Watchman*’ Is A Mess That Makes Us Reconsider A Masterpiece,” *Fresh Air, National Public Radio*, July 13, 2015. Audio, 5:15.

⁹⁴ William Gibaldi, “Harper Lee’s ‘*Go Set a Watchman*’ Should Not Have Been Published,” *New Republic*, July 16, 2015.

⁹⁵ Jane Shilling, “Why I Won’t Be Reading *Go Set a Watchman*,” *Telegraph*, July 12, 2015.

⁹⁶ Shilling, “Why I Won’t Be Reading *Go Set a Watchman*”; Stephen L. Carter, “‘*Watchman*’ Is Harper Lee for Grown-Ups,” *Opinion, Bloomberg*, July 15, 2015.

⁹⁷ David L. Ulin, “Review: Harper Lee’s ‘*Go Set a Watchman*’ Reveals a Darker Side of Maycomb,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 11, 2015; Sophie Gilbert, “*Go Set a Watchman*: What About Scout?” *Culture, Atlantic*, July 17, 2015.

⁹⁸ Xan Brooks, “*Go Set a Watchman*’s First Chapter, First Review: a Beguiling Journey Into the Past,” *Books, Guardian*, July 10, 2015.

⁹⁹ Gopnik, “Sweet Home Alabama.”

¹⁰⁰ Gaby Wood, “*Go Set a Watchman*, Review: ‘An Anxious Work in Progress,’” *Telegraph*, July, 2015. Reprinted February 19, 2016.

contextualizes the idealized world of *Mockingbird*.¹⁰¹ Others still argued that the political message of the novel trumps the form altogether. Even if the book is “highly uneven,” wrote Alyssa Rosenberg for *The Washington Post*, *Watchman* is “still worth reading at a moment when we’re grappling yet again with Northern and Southern variations of white supremacy and the idea that good people can do poisonous things.”¹⁰² “Whatever its failings,” wrote Arifa Akbar in *The Independent*, “*Go Set a Watchman* can’t be dismissed as literary scraps from Lee’s’ imagination. It has too much integrity for that.”¹⁰³

What concerned the reviewers the most, however, was Atticus. The majority received the news of his regressive turn with a mixture of shock and sadness. Daniel D’Addario from *Time Magazine* attributes this, in part, to the historical moment in which *Watchman* was published – that is, a year into the Black Lives Matter movement, and only a month after the Charleston Church Shooting. “Perhaps especially as anxieties rise over the apparent absence of justice in racially charged cases,” he writes, “it seems somehow too much. We need heroes in our fiction, at least.”¹⁰⁴ Several reviewers reacted with disbelief, insisting that this was not the Atticus they knew and loved. Corrigan on “Fresh Air” argued that “this Atticus is different in kind, not just degree: he’s like Ahab turned into a whale lover or Holden Caulfield a phony.”¹⁰⁵ Megan Garber in *The Atlantic* described Atticus as “both distressingly new and distressingly old,” and “in pretty much every way possible, the antithesis of the legend and the lore.”¹⁰⁶ Jia Tolentino from *Jezebel* reported that “It’s impossible to imagine *Mockingbird*’s Atticus, so thoroughly inhabited by Lee in all of his goodness, turning into a man who’d ever attend a KKK rally.”¹⁰⁷ *The Los Angeles Times* lamented that Atticus “has turned a

¹⁰¹ Maddie Crum, “Here’s Why You Should Read ‘Go Set A Watchman,’” Culture and Arts, *Huffington Post*, July 15, 2015; Sophie Gilbert, “Go Set a Watchman: What About Scout?” Culture, *Atlantic*, July 17, 2015.

¹⁰² Alyssa Rosenberg, “‘Go Set a Watchman’ Has Important Insights Into Contemporary Racism,” Act Four, *Washington Post*, July 14, 2015.

¹⁰³ Arifa Akbar, “Go Set A Watchman - Book Review: A Rough Draft, But More Radical and Politicised than Harper Lee’s To Kill A Mockingbird,” Culture, *Independent*, July 13, 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Daniel D’Addario, “Go Set a Watchman Review: Atticus Finch’s Racism Makes Scout, and Us, Grow Up,” *Time Magazine*, July 11, 2015.

¹⁰⁵ Maureen Corrigan, “Harper Lee’s ‘Watchman’ Is A Mess That Makes Us Reconsider A Masterpiece,” Fresh Air, *National Public Radio*, July 13, 2015. Audio, 2:24.

¹⁰⁶ Megan Garber, “‘My Atticus,’” Culture, *Atlantic*, July 15, 2015.

¹⁰⁷ Jia Tolentino, “In Go Set a Watchman, Atticus Is a Racist Who’s Gone to a Klan Meeting,” Books, *Jezebel*, July 10, 2015.

treacherous corner,” and *The Telegraph* went ahead and compared Atticus with Adolf Hitler himself.¹⁰⁸

However, not everyone was shocked by this new Atticus. “The Atticus of *Watchman* is, in historical terms, entirely realistic,” Collette Bancroft wrote for *The Tampa Bay Times*, “It’s the Atticus of *Mockingbird* who is the anomaly. The odds that such a man would exist in a tiny, remote Alabama town in the 1930s are small,” she observed. “The odds that he would publicly express the idea that blacks should receive equal justice,” she continued, “are even smaller.”¹⁰⁹ For Bancroft, the issue lay not so much with Atticus, as with the adult Jean Louise, who she described as “self-absorbed and self-righteous. She has been living in New York City for several years,” Bancroft noted, “and seems to be on a mission to show all the hicks in Maycomb how backward they are compared to her sophisticated self, which wears thin in a hurry.”¹¹⁰

Still others insisted that there was nothing new with Atticus at all. “Atticus isn’t—never was—a bland fighter for what is empirically right,” wrote Daniel D’Addario for *Time Magazine*. “His true heart,” he pointed out, “actually squares neatly with the paternalistic attitude Atticus takes towards black people in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and his occasionally overwrought compassion for his racist white neighbors.”¹¹¹ Catherine Nichols, a colleague of Tolentino at *Jezebel*, maintained that Atticus was always a racist. “By itself, I thought *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a racist book,” Nichols wrote. “Now, with the publication of *Watchman*,” she argued, “it stands to be redefined as a book about racism not just in Maycomb County, but within the Finch household itself.”¹¹²

As Nichols pointed out, the publication of *Watchman* invites a rereading of *Mockingbird*. Yet few critics seem to have done so. Instead, many insisted that there is a fundamental difference between *Mockingbird* and its precursor: the former offers a daughter’s idealized version of her father, they argue, whereas the latter describes a

¹⁰⁸ Ulin, “Review”; Wood, “Go Set a Watchman, review.”

¹⁰⁹ Collette Bancroft, “The Two Atticuses: ‘Mockingbird’s Hero Radically Reshaped From ‘Watchman’s Racist Version,’” Books, *Tampa Bay Times*, July 22, 2015.

¹¹⁰ Collette Bancroft, “The Two Atticuses: ‘Mockingbird’s Hero Radically Reshaped From ‘Watchman’s Racist Version,’” Books, *Tampa Bay Times*, July 22, 2015.

¹¹¹ Daniel D’Addario, “Go Set a Watchman Review: Atticus Finch’s Racism Makes Scout, and Us, Grow Up,” *Time Magazine*, July 11, 2015.

¹¹² Catherine Nichols, “Atticus Was Always a Racist: Why Go Set a Watchman Is No Surprise,” Review, *Jezebel*, July 20, 2015.

daughter's "reckoning with her father and herself."¹¹³ Wrote Gaby Wood, "*Go Set a Watchman* is a book about a daughter realising [sic] how she has blindly adored her father and conducting, through the politics of civil rights, her own private rebellion."¹¹⁴ David Ulin similarly regarded the most interesting feature of the book to be "the glimpse it offers of Jean Louise as an adult, her desire to stake out a territory of her own."¹¹⁵ Natasha Trethewey too deemed that a "significant aspect of this novel is that it asks us to see Atticus now not merely as a hero, a god, but as a flesh-and-blood man with shortcomings and moral failing."¹¹⁶ D'Addario meanwhile argues that:

Atticus has always been depicted as a Southern traditionalist; the tone of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, with its deceptively simple, childlike curiosity, simply elided consequences of those traditions that might be on the uglier side, because a young daughter overlooks the frailties in her father that are beyond her understanding.¹¹⁷

Yet, Scout does not overlook Atticus's attitude towards African Americans as inherently more ignorant than whites.¹¹⁸ Nor does she overlook his dismissal of lynch mobs as merely good men with blind spots, or his description of the Ku Klux Klan as "a political organization more than anything."¹¹⁹ This is all clearly stated in the novel. When D'Addario suggests that, "[it is] only by striving to see him with the eyes of an adult that she can come to understand what she stands for," he forgets that *Mockingbird* is also seen through the eyes of an adult.¹²⁰ Atticus's "frailties," as he puts it, may well be beyond the understanding of the child Scout, but they are not beyond the understanding of the adult Jean Louise. Thus, when Michiko Kakutani asks how "a lumpy tale about a young woman's grief over her discovery of her father's bigoted views" changed into "a classic coming-of-age story about two children and their

¹¹³ Alyssa Rosenberg, "'Go Set a Watchman' Has Important Insights Into Contemporary Racism," Act Four, *Washington Post*, July 14, 2015.

¹¹⁴ Wood, "Go Set a Watchman, review."

¹¹⁵ Ulin, "Review."

¹¹⁶ Natasha Trethewey, "In Harper Lee's 'Go Set a Watchman,' a Less Noble Atticus Finch," Books, *Washington Post*, July 12, 2015.

¹¹⁷ Daniel D'Addario, "Go Set a Watchman Review: Atticus Finch's Racism Makes Scout, and Us, Grow Up," *Time Magazine*, July 11, 2015.

¹¹⁸ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 241.

¹¹⁹ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 171; 160.

¹²⁰ Daniel D'Addario, "Go Set a Watchman Review: Atticus Finch's Racism Makes Scout, and Us, Grow Up," *Time Magazine*, July 11, 2015.

devoted widower father,” the answer is that the story never changed.¹²¹ *Mockingbird* is a coming-of-age story about a young woman critically exploring her childhood in order to understand the fall of her hero – her father. The Jean Louise reminiscing in *Mockingbird* is the same Jean Louise who confronts her father in *Watchman*.

The reception of *Watchman* bears witness to the immense stature of Atticus Finch in American culture. Upon learning that he was a racist, critics have reacted with many, if not all of the five stages of grief. Even though scholars have been offering similar interpretations for years, it has done little to diminish Atticus’s legacy. He remains what Crespino has described as “the most enduring fictional image of racial heroism.”¹²² Even after the fact, some insist that they will not let the news interfere with their memory of him. His memory is in other words set in stone. In this way, Atticus is an example of what Pierre Nora called a site of memory.

2.2 The Canonization of Atticus Finch

Pierre Nora coined the term *lieu de mémoire* – site of memory – to describe “the places in which the collective heritage of France was crystallized, the principal *lieux*, in all senses of the word, in which collective memory was rooted.”¹²³ He defines a site of memory as “any significant entity, whether material or nonmaterial in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community.”¹²⁴ It can in other words refer to museums, monuments, memorials and art, as well as non-tangible phenomena such as language, celebrations, and other expressions of tradition. Nora argues that memory is not spontaneous. In order to remember, he observes, “we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because

¹²¹ Michiko Kakutani, “Review: Harper Lee’s ‘Go Set a Watchman’ Gives Atticus Finch a Dark Side,” *Book of the Times*, *New York Times*, July 10, 2015.

¹²² Joseph Crespino, “The Strange Career of Atticus Finch,” *Southern Cultures* 6, no. 2 (2000): 10.

¹²³ Pierre Nora, preface to *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past. Volume 1: Conflicts and Divisions*, ed. Pierre Nora (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xv.

¹²⁴ Nora, preface to *Realms of Memory*, xvii.

such activities no longer occur naturally.”¹²⁵ Sites of memory are therefore instrumental in creating and sustaining collective memories.

According to literary scholar Aleida Assmann, collective memory is two-fold: there is the passive cultural memory, which she calls “archive,” and there is the active collective memory, the “canon.”¹²⁶ As she explains it, the archive consists of every surviving historical remnant, and forms “the basis of what can be said in the future about the present when it will have become the past.”¹²⁷ These remnants go through “rigorous processes of selection,” she observes, “which secure for certain artifacts a lasting place in the cultural working memory of a society.”¹²⁸ This, she explains, is the canon.

Sites of memory, then, are essentially the canon of collective memory. However, the memories are only collective for members within the same group. That group is typically the group in power – the ruling class. As Assmann points out, it is the institutions of power like the church and the state that own the archives, which means that those very institutions decide which memories become the canon. In other words, those who control the institutions of power determine which memories we remember. Therefore, she argues, archives “provide important tools for political power.”¹²⁹

In order for groups to achieve cultural hegemony, their collective memory needs to be recognized in society at large.¹³⁰ This means that other, contradicting memories have to be suppressed. One way groups can secure this kind of recognition is through mass media, as the Little Rock photograph is an example of.¹³¹ Another way, W. Fitzhugh Brundage observes, is “by colonizing public spaces with their version of the past.”¹³² Sites of memory are therefore often sites of conflict. This is most apparent in the public debates concerning Confederate commemoration.

¹²⁵ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire,” *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 12.

¹²⁶ Aleida Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 98.

¹²⁷ Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” 102.

¹²⁸ Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” 100.

¹²⁹ Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” 102.

¹³⁰ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, introduction to *The Southern Past: A Class of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, 2005): 4.

¹³¹ Bruce E. Baker, “Collective Memory,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 20: Social Class*, ed. Larry J. Griffin and Peggy G. Hargis (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 86.

¹³² Brundage, introduction to *The Southern Past*, 5-6.

Although Confederate commemoration has long been a controversial issue, it became a national conversation in the aftermath of the Charleston Church shooting in 2015, when the white supremacist Dylann Roof murdered nine African Americans attending a Bible study at the Mother Emmanuel Church.¹³³ The date, June 17th, marked the 150th anniversary of the death of Edmund Ruffin, the Virginia planter who famously fired the first shot in the Civil War.¹³⁴ Following Roof's arrest, photographs emerged of him sporting racist emblems and holding the Confederate battle flag.¹³⁵ His intention had been to start a new civil war.¹³⁶ Instead, however, he set in motion a nationwide movement to take down Confederate monuments, emblems and place names, beginning with the Confederate flag on the grounds of South Carolina's State Capitol.¹³⁷ Other cities and states quickly followed suit, notably the city council in Charlottesville, Virginia, which two years later voted to remove the city's statue of Robert E. Lee.¹³⁸ This decision was met with a backlash among the nation's far-right white supremacist groups who organized several rallies over the course of the summer to protest the decision. This culminated in the "Unite the Right" rally in August 2017, where a self-proclaimed neo-Nazi drove his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one person and injuring 35.¹³⁹

The violent backlash of the alt-right movement has tended to overshadow other voices of dissent. For the fact remains that many white southerners consider the Confederacy an important part of their heritage, and the battle flag a symbol of regional pride. At the same time, such individuals insist that they are not racist.¹⁴⁰ Heritage organizations like Sons of Confederate Veterans and Daughters of the Confederacy, which are responsible for having erected many of the Confederate monuments in the first place, have condemned the events that occurred in Charlottesville and

¹³³ "Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy." *Southern Poverty Law Center*. Updated February 1, 2019.

¹³⁴ Yoni Applebaum, "Why Is the Flag Still There?" Politics, *Atlantic*, June 21, 2015.

¹³⁵ "Whose Heritage?"; Frances Robles, "Dylann Roof Photos and a Manifesto Are Posted on Website," *New York Times*, June 20, 2015.

¹³⁶ Michael Safi, Jessica Glenza and Amanda Holpuch, "Charleston Shooting Suspect Dylann Roof 'Wanted to Ignite Civil War,'" *Guardian*, June 19, 2015.

¹³⁷ "Whose Heritage?"

¹³⁸ Oliver Laughland, "White Nationalist Richard Spencer at Rally Over Confederate Statue's Removal," *Guardian*, May 14, 2017.

¹³⁹ Paul Duggan, "Charge Upgraded to First-Degree Murder for Driver Accused of Ramming Charlottesville Crowd," Local, *Washington Post*, December 14, 2017.

¹⁴⁰ "Whose Heritage?"

Charleston.¹⁴¹ Their catchphrase in the ongoing debate is “heritage not hate,” a slogan often found printed on Confederate emblems on bumper stickers and license plates throughout the South. Their argument is that to take down monuments is to erase history, that the Civil War was about tariffs and states’ rights, not slavery, that slavery was in fact a benevolent institution, and that most southerners did not own slaves anyway, so how could that have been the cause of the war?¹⁴²

Admittedly, there is some truth to this. Less than a third of the population in the South in 1860 owned slaves, and legislation like the Twenty Slave Law made sure that many of those who did were excused from military service.¹⁴³ It was in other words the yeomen farmers and the poor whites, lower classes of whites who also suffered under planter rule, who made up the majority of the soldiers. In his study of their motivation to fight, historian James M. McPherson has found that most soldiers fought first and foremost to protect their state, their home, and their liberty from government interference.¹⁴⁴ Arguably, many Confederate soldiers did not fight the war in the name of slavery. That being said, soldier motivation and the cause of the war are not the same thing. Slavery was the pillar of the southern economy and part of a collective investment in whiteness. Historical sources like the vice president of the Confederacy Alexander Stephens’ “cornerstone speech,” as well as South Carolina’s and Mississippi’s Declarations of Secession, confirm that slavery was the primary reason for the Civil War.¹⁴⁵ To believe otherwise is to believe in the myth of the Lost Cause.

The term “Lost Cause” refers to the glorified memory of the antebellum Southern way of life, and first came into use towards the end of the Civil War.¹⁴⁶ Devastated politically and economically, and struggling with internal conflicts within the region, white elites in the South mythologized the past in an effort to gloss over differences and create a unified, regional identity.¹⁴⁷ They painted slavery as a

¹⁴¹ Daughters of The Confederacy, “Statement From the President General,” accessed November 21, 2020.

¹⁴² Paul Duggan, “Sins of the Fathers,” *Washington Post Magazine*, November 28, 2018.

¹⁴³ Alex Johnson, “Separating Hate from Heritage in the Lies They Told Us,” Folklore Project, *Bitter Southerner*, August 17, 2017.

¹⁴⁴ James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁴⁵ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Take Down the Confederate Flag – Now,” *Politics*, *Atlantic*, June 18, 2015; Yoni Applebaum, “Why Is the Flag Still There?”

¹⁴⁶ Karen L. Cox, “Lost Cause Ideology,” *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, August 23, 2017.

¹⁴⁷ Charles Reagan Wilson, “Myth, Manners and Memory,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson, 11.

benevolent institution that converted Africans from “savages” to good Christians, and insisted that the war was waged over states’ rights, not slavery – arguments that are still in use today among Southern hereditary associations.¹⁴⁸ Finally, they downplayed the vast amount of Confederate deserters, and highlighted instead the numeric strength of the Yankees.¹⁴⁹ This led many white southerners to believe that despite their defeat, the South remained “the superior civilization.”¹⁵⁰ The myth subsequently made its way into history textbooks, and inspired a movement to memorialize the Confederacy with statues and memorials, which in turn has strongly influenced the official memory of the Civil War.¹⁵¹

However, the obsession with the Lost Cause extends far beyond the Mason-Dixie line. One example is the number of Confederate statues in the United States. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, there are 780 Confederate monuments on public property in “23 states and the District of Columbia.”¹⁵² That is more than twice as many states as those who made up the Confederacy in its time. Until 2017, the report points out, “there was even a Confederate monument in Massachusetts, a stalwart of the Union during the Civil War.”¹⁵³ As the historian David M. Potter pointed out, “Union generals, for some reason, have never held the romantic interest that attached to Stonewall Jackson, Jeb Stuart, George Pickett, Bedford Forrest, and, of course, Robert E. Lee.”¹⁵⁴ Lost causes, he observed, “have a fascination even for those who did not lose them.”¹⁵⁵

The majority of the Confederate monuments were erected in the early twentieth century, not long after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision which consolidated the separate

¹⁴⁸ Karen L. Cox, “The Whole Point of Confederate Monuments Is to Celebrate White Supremacy,” PostEverything, *Washington Post*, August 16, 2017.

¹⁴⁹ Gaines M. Foster, “Lost Cause Myth,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 240.

¹⁵⁰ John M. Coski, “Lost Cause,” in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*, ed. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002): 453.

¹⁵¹ Dana Goldstein, “Two States. Eight Textbooks. Two American Stories,” *New York Times*, January 12, 2020.

¹⁵² “Whose Heritage? Public Symbols of the Confederacy.” Southern Poverty Law Center, February 1, 2019.

¹⁵³ “Whose Heritage?”

¹⁵⁴ David M. Potter, *The South and the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968): 4.

¹⁵⁵ Potter, *The South*, 4.

but equal-doctrine, and accelerated the establishment of Jim Crow in the South.¹⁵⁶ According to the American Historical Association, these memorials “were intended, in part, to obscure the terrorism required to overthrow Reconstruction, and to intimidate African Americans politically and isolate them from the mainstream of public life.”¹⁵⁷ The monuments were in other words deliberately put up as an assertion of white supremacy.¹⁵⁸ As the historian Jane Dailey observes about the Jackson-Lee statue in Baltimore:

Why should a city in a state that sat out the Civil War erect a Confederate monument in 1948? Who erects a statue of former Confederate generals on the very heels of fighting and winning a war for democracy? People who want to send a message to black veterans, the Supreme Court, and the president of the United States, that’s who.¹⁵⁹

Indeed, the mid-20th century saw a second wave of commemoration in response to the progress of the civil rights movement.¹⁶⁰ More importantly, it saw the revival of the Confederate battle flag, which for decades had been close to forgotten.¹⁶¹ When President Truman called for the desegregation of the armed forces in 1948, southern segregationists broke with the Democratic Party to form the Dixiecrats.¹⁶² They retrieved the flag and used it as a prop to symbolize their political difference from their former party.¹⁶³ In 1956, two years after *Brown*, Georgia incorporated the Confederate emblem into its state flag, and in 1961, South Carolina raised it on top of the state Capitol.¹⁶⁴ On his inauguration in 1963, the newly elected Governor of Alabama George Wallace had the battle flag with him on the podium as he infamously declared “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁶ “Whose Heritage?”; David A. Graham, “The Stubborn Persistence of Confederate Monuments,” *Atlantic*, April 26, 2016.

¹⁵⁷ American Historical Association, “Statement on Confederate Monuments,” *Historians.org*, August, 2017.

¹⁵⁸ Cox, “The Whole Point.”

¹⁵⁹ Jane Dailey, “Baltimore’s Confederate Monument Was Never About ‘History and Culture,’” *Huffington Post*, August 17, 2017.

¹⁶⁰ “Whose Heritage?”

¹⁶¹ Applebaum, “Why Is the Flag Still There?”

¹⁶² Keith, *The South*, 164.

¹⁶³ Applebaum, “Why Is the Flag Still There?”

¹⁶⁴ Applebaum, “Why Is the Flag Still There?”

¹⁶⁵ Alabama Department of Archives and History, “George Wallace 1963 Inauguration Address,” *YouTube*, February 26, 2015, video, 08:00.

Confederate statues, monuments, and flags are examples of what Boym called “restorative nostalgia.”¹⁶⁶ They idealize a certain past, and attempt to restore, or simply sustain, that past in the present. In short, these sites of memory are efforts to exempt a certain version of the past from the inevitability of historical revision. Sites of memory like these create narratives that are so powerful, so integral to our sense of self, that when the narratives are contested, so are we – and we react emotionally, defensively, and sometimes violently. Disputes over statues are essentially disputes over conflicting interpretations of history.¹⁶⁷ Some will see a statue of a Confederate general as a hero who fought for the South’s independence, and others will see that same general as a white supremacist. Confederate iconography can imply both freedom and oppression, depending on who you ask.

According to a Pew Research Center survey from 2011, only “one-in-ten Americans (9%) have a positive reaction when they see the Confederate flag displayed. Fewer than a third (30%) have a negative reaction.”¹⁶⁸ The solid majority, however, 58%, “have neither a positive or negative reaction when seeing the Confederate flag.”¹⁶⁹ Arguably, 30 per cent is a large share of Americans. When a third of the population reacts negatively to a flag that routinely decorates their surroundings, this should be reason enough to remove it. However, what these numbers reveal more than anything, is that sites of memory alone do not teach us about history – they only confirm what we already know, or believe we know. It is the stories that contextualize them – in other words, the reception – that define how we understand them.

Mockingbird is arguably one of the most influential books in the American collective consciousness. As Adam Gopnik writes in *The New Yorker* in 2015:

in what is supposed to be an amnesiac society, the memory of a fifty-five-year-old novel burns so bright that an auxiliary volume is still a national event. Of course, the memory is assisted by the universal appearance of “To Kill a Mockingbird” in eighth-grade curricula, but most of what appears in eighth-grade curricula vanishes quickly from memory—has basic biology or beginning algebra ever held our minds as Scout and Atticus have?¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001): 41.

¹⁶⁷ Simon John, “Statues, Politics and The Past,” *History Today* 69, no. 9 (2019).

¹⁶⁸ Russell Heimlich, “Positive Reaction to the Confederate Flag,” FactTank, *Pew Research Center*, May 18, 2011.

¹⁶⁹ Heimlich, “Positive Reaction.”

¹⁷⁰ Adam Gopnik, “Sweet Home Alabama,” *Books, New Yorker*, July 15, 2015.

Ever since its publication, the novel has consistently been one of the ten books most frequently taught in secondary schools, and it has become a touchstone for teaching young Americans about racism.¹⁷¹ It is one of the most popular titles in the “One City, One Book” initiative, and in January 2020, the New York Public Library listed the novel as the fifth most borrowed book of all time.¹⁷²

As a result, the book is one of the most widely read in the American canon. In her introduction to her 2007 collection *On Harper Lee: Essays and Reflections*, Alice Hall Petry sums up *Mockingbird*'s lasting legacy thus: “one would be hard pressed to think of a novel besides *To Kill a Mockingbird* that has been more read, studied, loved, and cherished in the United States over the last forty years.”¹⁷³ Indeed, Oprah Winfrey has called it America’s “national novel.”¹⁷⁴ Librarians have voted it the best book of the twentieth century, and in a survey conducted by the Library of Congress in 1991, Americans voted it the second most life-changing book after the Bible.¹⁷⁵

The most celebrated character in the book, Atticus Finch, has received a similarly holy standing in American culture. The white, small-town lawyer who defends a black man in the Jim Crow South quickly became a liberal icon and hero of racial justice, and has been described as “the moral conscience of 20th century America.”¹⁷⁶ As the former chief book critic for *The New York Times* Michiko Kakutani writes, “people named their children after Atticus. People went to law school and became lawyers because of Atticus.”¹⁷⁷ Civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. described Atticus’s philosophy of nonviolence as the “gold badge of heroism rather than the white feather of cowardice.”¹⁷⁸ As literary scholar Eric J. Sundquist once observed that the vast majority of Americans would more readily recognize the fictitious white lawyer

¹⁷¹ Claudia Durst Johnson, *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), 14.

¹⁷² Lisa Peet, “Harper Lee, Author of Library Mainstay *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Dies at 89,” *Library Journal*, February 20, 2016; Annabel Gutterman, “Here Are the 10 Most Borrowed Books of All Time at the New York Public Library,” *Entertainment, Books, Time Magazine*, January 13, 2020.

¹⁷³ Alice Petry Hall, introduction to *On Harper Lee: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), xv.

¹⁷⁴ Ginni Chen, “10 Famous Authors on *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” *Barnes and Noble Reads* (blog), March 18, 2015.

¹⁷⁵ Peet, “Harper Lee”; Claudia Durst Johnson, *Reading Harper Lee: Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird and Go Set a Watchman* (California: Greenwood, 2018), 135.

¹⁷⁶ Gaby Wood, “Go Set a Watchman, Review: ‘An Anxious Work in Progress,’” *Telegraph*, July, 2015. Reprinted February 19, 2016.

¹⁷⁷ Kakutani, “Review.”

¹⁷⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Penguin, 1964), 38.

than they would Thurgood Marshall, the real life NAACP-lawyer who dedicated his life to the fight for civil rights – who served as chief attorney in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and who went on to become the first African-American Associate Justice of the Supreme Court.¹⁷⁹

Yet, as time has passed, Atticus’s image has become tarnished. While he was celebrated as a liberal icon in the 1960s, by 2015, with the publication of *Watchman*, liberals wanted nothing to do with him, and those who did, elegantly ignored this newly revealed racist version of him. When Lee passed away a year later, the reactions to her death focused on *Mockingbird*, not *Watchman*.¹⁸⁰ That same year, *The Guardian* reported that a UK survey of 2000 readers had voted Atticus Finch the most inspiring character in literature.¹⁸¹ Undoubtedly, these readers had the first Atticus in mind, not the latter. In 2018, *Mockingbird* was voted America’s favorite novel on PBS’s “Great American Read,” and books were published that insisted on the novel’s continued relevance and importance.¹⁸² That same year, conservatives invoked Lee’s hero when they called the hearing of the Supreme Court Justice nominee Brett Kavanaugh “our Atticus Finch moment.”¹⁸³ “Our colleagues across the aisle claim to be looking out for the victim – they claim to be on the side of empathy,” the Republican senator from Texas John Cornyn said from the senate floor:

But there’s nothing empathetic about the cruelty that they have shown Judge Kavanaugh, his wife, and their children [...] Atticus Finch was a lawyer who did not believe that a mere accusation was synonymous with guilt. He represented an unpopular person, who many people presumed was guilty of a heinous crime because of his race, and his race alone. We could learn from Atticus Finch now during this time when there has been such a vicious and unrelenting attack on the integrity and the good name of this nominee.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁹ Eric J. Sundquist, “Blues for Atticus Finch: Scottsboro, *Brown*, and Harper Lee,” in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 86.

¹⁸⁰ Megan Garber, “Go Set a Legacy: The Fate of Harper Lee,” *Culture, Atlantic*, February 19, 2016.

¹⁸¹ Alison Flood, “To Kill a Mockingbird’s Atticus Finch Voted Most Inspiring Character,” *Guardian*, February 4, 2016.

¹⁸² “Results,” *The Great American Read, PBS*, 2018; Tom Santopietro, *Why To Kill a Mockingbird Matters: What Harper Lee’s Book and the Iconic American Film Mean to Us Today* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018); Claudia Durst Johnson, *Reading Harper Lee: Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird and Go Set a Watchman* (California: Greenwood, 2018).

¹⁸³ Eugene Scott, “Cornyn calls Kavanaugh Nomination Fight ‘Our Atticus Finch Moment,’” *The Fix, Washington Post*, October 4, 2018.

¹⁸⁴ Scott, “Cornyn calls Kavanaugh nomination fight ‘Our Atticus Finch moment,’ *The Fix, Washington Post*, October 4, 2018, video, 01:04.

With this statement, Cornyn likened the white, privileged, Ivy League educated Kavanaugh who was accused of rape, with the dirt poor African-American Tom Robinson, who is subjected to a racially motivated miscarriage of justice in the Depression era South. In so doing, Cornyn reveals how Atticus Finch's hero status far exceeds his heroic deed. All this goes to show that Atticus Finch can be viewed as a site of memory.

"From their earliest inception," art critic Kelly Grovier observes, "statues were less about the individuals they depict than about how we see ourselves."¹⁸⁵ Their function is to preserve a certain version of history from historical revision. The trouble with such acts of commemoration, however, is that we lock our identities to a certain version of the past. As time goes by, this past will inevitably become contested, and when it does, so do we. This has also been the case with Atticus. The scholarship on *Mockingbird* suggests that some readers are so emotionally attached to him that they choose to overlook, or even dismiss, criticism of him. For them, the collective memory of Atticus has more import than what the actual text shows. The reason why Atticus made such an impression was his moral integrity. He stands up to racism and acts on what he believes is right, even though it is difficult. The irony is that when it all comes down to it, his admirers fail to do the same thing. They are unable to stand up to Atticus's racism, and they are unwilling to do the right thing – to investigate the ways in which the interpretation of the novel and its hero have informed their own prejudices.

2.3 Concluding remarks

The aim of this chapter has been to demonstrate how nostalgia has influenced the reception of *Mockingbird*. The reception from the 1960s bears witness to the immense influence of the myth of southern exceptionalism. In the North, the majority of reviewers readily accepted the nostalgic, backwards South as the geographical location of racism. In the South, the majority of reviewers were most concerned with how the

¹⁸⁵ Kelly Grovier, "Black Lives Matter Protests: Why Are Statues So Powerful?" Art History, *BBC*, June 12, 2020.

novel portrayed the South and Southerners in general. They were relieved to find that *Mockingbird* was not another grotesque tale that painted southerners as sexually and morally depraved. This suggests that for Southerners, at least those who made up the interpretive community, the poor white Ewells were considered a breed a part; maybe even considered the reason why the educated white middle-class had to put up with such insults from the North in the first place.

When white liberals put *Mockingbird* on middle school curricula in the 1960s, they effectively erected a statue on public grounds. Their interpretive strategy wrote poor whites as violent racists, African Americans as helpless victims, and Atticus Finch as a hero for racial justice. This strategy was taught to generations of Americans, more or less uncontested, for thirty years. Yet, it gave a false impression of how racism works in America. When the strategy later became contested, readers were confronted with their own misconceptions about what anti-racism actually entails. They reacted to this criticism with restorative nostalgia, which effectively canonized Atticus. Yet, as art historian Erin L. Thompson observes, when it comes to statues, “destruction is the norm and preservation is the rare exception.”¹⁸⁶ Ever since we first started making statues, she writes, “other people have started tearing them down.”¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Jonah Engel Bromwich, “What Does It Mean to Tear Down a Statue?” *New York Times*, June 11, 2020.

¹⁸⁷ Bromwich, “What Does It Mean to Tear Down a Statue?”

3 Scout's Lost Cause: The Forgotten Alternative of the 1930s

In his influential essay "The Irony of Southern History," published in 1953, the noted historian C. Vann Woodward reflected on the similarities between the Civil War and the Cold War.¹ They had both been waged over a system of labor, he wrote: slavery in the former; modern capitalism in the latter. And because the wars centered around a system of labor, so too did the defense. Both the South in the 1860s and the United States in the 1940s, he observed, allowed their whole cause, their traditional values, and their way of life to be associated with one single institution. This made the institution all but impossible to criticize.

Another similarity Woodward observed, however, was that both wars had been preceded by a period of critical self-examination. In the 1820s, he pointed out, there were more antislavery societies in the slave states than in the free states. Slavery was by no means on its way out, he noted, but at the time, the South was "a society unafraid of facing its own evils."² Similarly, during the Great Depression in the 1930s, he wrote, "there occurred the most thoroughgoing inquest of self-criticism that [the] national economy has ever undergone [...] No corner nor aspect nor relationship of American capitalism was overlooked."³ America in the 1930s, he observed, was "a healthy and self-confident society, uninhibited by fear."⁴ But then, in the mid-1940s, everything changed:

It happened rather suddenly. The floodstream of criticism dwindled to a trickle and very nearly ceased altogether. It was as if some giant sluice gate had been firmly shut. The silence that followed was soon filled with the clamor of voices lifted in accusation, denial, or recantation. No reputation was now secure from the charges of the heresy hunters, the loyalty investigators, and the various committees on public orthodoxy and conformity.⁵

¹ C. Vann Woodward, "The Irony of Southern History," *Journal of Southern History* 19, no. 1 (1953): 8-12.

² Woodward, "The Irony of Southern History," 11.

³ Woodward, "The Irony of Southern History," 9.

⁴ Woodward, "The Irony of Southern History," 9.

⁵ Woodward, "The Irony of Southern History," 10.

Indeed, when the Cold War developed between the United States and the Soviet Union, American politics, culture and society became permeated with fear of the Red Scare.⁶ To criticize capitalism, or merely advocate class consciousness, became for many Americans the same as to support the communist regime in the U.S.S.R., which ultimately meant that you were a traitor to the U.S. When the Republican senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin declared in his 1950 Lincoln Day Address that there were communist infiltrators within the State Department itself, he accelerated the national campaign to hunt down supposed communist spies.⁷ Addressing class inequality became not only difficult, but outright dangerous. When a few years later, the Supreme Court decided to dismantle Jim Crow, it led to a white backlash that spiked racial tensions. Once again, white elites pitted poor whites and blacks against each other in an effort to maintain the status quo. The class oppression that they shared became obscured with hatred and fear. Thus, the possibility that presented itself in the 1930s for progressive social change became a forgotten alternative of the past.

This chapter argues that *Mockingbird* can be read as a critique of the American class system. When reading Jean Louise's nostalgia as reflective, rather than restorative, the novel reveals the unrealized possibility of the 1930s for social justice. Many tend to think of nostalgia as an idealization of the past, or in the words of historian Michael Kammen, "history without guilt."⁸ This is also how Jean Louise's nostalgia in *Mockingbird* has been interpreted. While defenders of the novel, such as Claudia Durst Johnson, argue that part of the novel's appeal is the nostalgia it invokes in the reader for a "time of innocence in which children live before harsh truths enter their lives," others consider it part of the novel's problem.⁹ One in particular is literary scholar Eric J. Sundquist. In his essay "Blues for Atticus Finch: Scottsboro, *Brown*, and Harper Lee" (1995), Sundquist argues that by setting her story in the South during the Great Depression, Lee effectively suspends the reader's judgment; it creates the illusion that

⁶ Landon R. Y. Storrs, "McCarthyism and the Second Red Scare," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, July 2, 2015.

⁷ Joseph R. McCarthy, "Lincoln Day Address, February 20, 1950," in *The Rise of Conservatism in America, 1945-2000: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Ronald Story and Bruce Laurie (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008): 41.

⁸ Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, Knopf, 1991), 688, quoted in Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," *Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (2007): 9.

⁹ Claudia Durst Johnson, *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historic Documents* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1994): xii.

the racism dramatized in the book is a phenomenon of the past, or the South, or both.¹⁰ As a result, he argues, *Mockingbird* becomes “a masterpiece of indirection.”¹¹ Jean Louise’s nostalgia, he concludes, is “an allegory of the South’s own temporality and its public philosophy of race relations: ‘Go slow.’”¹²

More recently, in her article “*Mockingbird, Watchman* and the Adolescent” (2017), Karly Eaton similarly reads the novel’s nostalgia as a form of escapism. She argues that it expresses “a desire to preserve southern exceptionalism within the temporalized and fictive space of Scout’s childhood in Maycomb, Alabama.”¹³ While Sundquist interprets the nostalgia as an allegory of gradualism, Eaton reads it as a refusal of accountability. “Nostalgia that does not defamiliarize and mourn, nostalgia that is not reflective of its own desires,” she concludes, “‘breeds monsters’ of racism and exceptionalist narratives within its enactors.”¹⁴

Eaton draws on Svetlana Boym’s theory on nostalgia, and concludes, like Sundquist before her, that Jean Louise’s nostalgia is restorative. However, both Eaton and Sundquist read the novel through a racial lens. Such a reading centers on Atticus as the protagonist and moral standard bearer. Yet, as author and journalist Casey Cep notes in *The New Yorker*: “[*Mockingbird*’s] charm, and its internal logic, is that Atticus is a hero in the eyes of his young daughter, not that he is objectively heroic.”¹⁵ Cep’s comment nods to an aspect of Atticus’s portrayal that has scarcely been recognized in the scholarship on the novel, namely that it is Jean Louise’s memory of her father we encounter, not the father himself. We are never invited into the inner workings of Atticus’ mind. Whatever worries he might have or problems he may grapple with, we only learn of them under the guise of general life lessons that he teaches his children, or from eavesdropping on his conversations with other adults.

For many, an important part of growing up is to realize that one’s parents are simply human beings with vices and shortcomings like everyone else. Jean Louise’s nostalgia does not idealize her father. Rather, her nostalgia is a critical investigation of a

¹⁰ Eric J. Sundquist, “Blues for Atticus Finch: Scottsboro, *Brown*, and Harper Lee,” in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007) 81.

¹¹ Sundquist, “Blues for Atticus Finch,” 81.

¹² Sundquist, “Blues for Atticus Finch,” 80.

¹³ Karly Eaton, “*Mockingbird, Watchman*, and the Adolescent,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (2017): 340.

¹⁴ Eaton, “*Mockingbird, Watchman*, and the Adolescent,” 352.

¹⁵ Casey Cep, “The Contested Legacy of Atticus Finch,” *New Yorker*, December 10, 2018.

man she loves and the society in which she grew up, both of which have changed beyond recognition. In other words, Jean Louise is what Svetlana Boym called the modern day nostalgic: “homesick and sick of home – occasionally at the same time.”¹⁶ She does not eclipse Atticus’s moral shortcomings – on the contrary, she lingers on them. She emphasizes Atticus’s inherent racism and classism, and ultimately his failure to combat both.

The late Toni Morrison once observed how little attention has been paid to the impact of white supremacy on upper class whites. “The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behavior of slaves is valuable,” she allowed, “but equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behaviour [sic] of masters.”¹⁷ This thesis attempts to heed to Morrison’s call. Accordingly, this chapter reads *Mockingbird* as an alternative plantation myth. By focusing on the role of the upper class in five plantation myth tropes, this chapter aims to prove the novel’s central claim to be that racism is rooted in classism, and only by dismantling the class system can one successfully weed out racism. Finally, this chapter concludes that the novel’s use of nostalgia reveals the unrealized possibility of the 1930s for social justice.

3.1 The Plantation Myth

Although the plantation has served as a literary setting in American literature since the early eighteenth century, plantation fiction as a genre typically refers to fiction written in defense of slavery in the three decades preceding and succeeding the Civil War.¹⁸ According to author and literary scholar Lucinda H. MacKethan, the genre emerged in answer to the immense increase in abolitionist literature in the North.¹⁹ At its core, she

¹⁶ Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” *Hedgehog Review* 9, no. 2 (2007): 18.

¹⁷ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1992): 11-12.

¹⁸ Lucinda H. MacKethan, “Plantation Fiction,” in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*, ed. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002): 650.

¹⁹ MacKethan, “Plantation Fiction,” 650.

writes, plantation fiction was “propaganda designed to promote a white southern racist vision of the past.”²⁰

Historian Darden A. Pyron distinguishes between four sources that fueled the plantation myth. The first source dates back to the antebellum period and the South’s need to underscore its ideological difference from the North. It presented the South as an Edenic garden that stood in stark contrast to the industrialization and urbanization that was characteristic of the North. The second source, Pyron observes, was the South’s defeat in the Civil War, which led white southerners to romanticize the past as a means to come to terms with their sacrifices and losses, as well as to stifle conflicts within the region. This added a new element to the plantation myth; the “lost cause.” The third source of the plantation myth, writes Pyron, came from the North. “Rooted partially in guilt and ambivalence about the war,” he observes, “Yankee celebration of the plantation myth derived a powerful dynamic from a bourgeois impulse to fantasize an alternative to the North’s egalitarian, commercial, materialistic social order.”²¹ And finally, the fourth source is the myth’s “historical reality,” by which Pyron means the very real, material traces of the history that has sustained the myth in the first place.²²

The plantation myth is characterized by certain tropes. It typically opens in a state of post-war destitution, and looks back nostalgically to the pre-capitalistic, agrarian antebellum way of life – the cause – that the Confederates lost in the Civil War. In this idealized version of the past, writes Pyron, “relationships are ordered along hierarchical lines, and the patriarchal family is the central defining device and metaphor.” At the top is the father, or the plantation master, and his sons; then come his wife and daughters; then his younger children; and at the bottom are the “white dependents and black slaves.”²³ In this feudal system, writes Pyron, “Individuals function less as autonomous figures than as parts of a living social organism.”²⁴

Over the years, the typical characters in the plantation myth have developed into stereotypes. Among the most common is the southern gentleman, the courteous and honor-bound patriarch who treats his dependents with a noblesse oblige. Then, there is

²⁰ MacKethan, “Plantation Fiction,” 651-652.

²¹ Darden A. Pyron, “Plantation Myth,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 142.

²² Pyron, “Plantation Myth,” 142.

²³ Pyron, “Plantation Myth,” 139.

²⁴ Pyron, “Plantation Myth,” 139.

the southern lady, who is loyal, self-effacing, and the one who runs the plantation household.²⁵ Their daughter, the southern belle, is young and charming, submissive but also resourceful, and usually the one the story centers around.²⁶ The goal is for her to get married and as a result, a lady.²⁷ And finally, there's the happy slave who is better off in slavery where he is taken care of by a benevolent master, than alone and free in a cold and materialistic world. One example is Uncle Tom, the slightly older, obedient and good Christian slave who supports the racial order, and at some point will save a young, white child. Another is the Mammy, the house-slave who cares for the children, who is loving yet scolding, and loyal to the white family. Accordingly, this chapter investigates five stereotypes and tropes typical for the plantation novel: the mammy, the lady, the belle, the gentleman, and the lost cause.

3.2 The Mammy

According to sociologist David Pilgrim, the mammy character is the best known and most enduring caricature of black women in American culture.²⁸ “Her wide grin, hearty laughter, and loyal servitude,” he observes, “were offered as evidence of the supposed humanity of the institution of slavery.” The mammy character is typically portrayed as religious, wise, and loyal. She treats her white family with love and affection, while she treats her own with scorn.²⁹ She does not belong in her black community, writes Pilgrim; instead, “the white family [is] her entire world.”³⁰

In *Mockingbird*, the mammy takes the form of Calpurnia, the housekeeper and nanny. As John Carlos Rowe observes, Calpurnia is named after the third wife of Julius

²⁵ Diane Roberts, “Ladies and Gentlemen,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 87; Dorothy M. Scura, “Lady,” in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*, ed. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002): 413.

²⁶ Carol S. Manning, “Belle,” in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*, ed. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002): 95

²⁷ Manning, “Belle,” 95.

²⁸ David Pilgrim, “The Mammy Caricature,” Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, last modified 2012.

²⁹ Pilgrim, “The Mammy Caricature.”

³⁰ Pilgrim, “The Mammy Caricature.”

Caesar – the one foresaw his assassination.³¹ Calpurnia’s name thus establishes her as someone worth listening to. It is Calpurnia, for example, who warns the neighborhood about the mad dog, a scene which is widely recognized as a metaphor for racism.³² In the scene, Jem is the first to notice the dog, who goes by the name Tim Johnson. It is only February, and the dog does not look mad, precisely, but there is something ominous about the way it behaves. He and Scout therefore run back home to ask Calpurnia to have a look. As soon as she sees the dog, she recognizes it for what it is, and calls Atticus for help. When Atticus arrives, he walks out into the street and shoots the dog dead in one shot. “Atticus allows himself to be the target of an irrational force,” writes Carolyn Jones, in order to protect innocent people. Jones argues that this scene foreshadows the trial of Tom Robinson, where Atticus repeats this heroic act as he defends Tom from that irrational force that is racism.³³

The internal logic of Jones’s interpretation makes Bob Ewell the mad dog, which effectively places the blame for racism on the rural poor. Literary scholars Theodore and Grace-Ann Hovet call this strategy the “white trash scenario,” which they observe, long has been considered a truism in American popular culture.³⁴ This strategy works, they argue, “because the accused is a natural scapegoat. Mostly uneducated and without voice in the media,” they write, “poor rural whites were helpless to counter the negative stereotype created by the southern apologists and perpetuated by the national media.”³⁵ Thus, making the rural poor the scapegoat for racism has proved an efficient way to redirect attention away from the sins of the ruling class.

However, Scout seems to understand this. After Calpurnia’s son Zeebo, the garbage man, has come to collect the dead dog, Scout muses to herself: “I thought mad dogs foamed at the mouth, galloped, leaped and lunged at throats, and I thought they did it in August. Had Tim Johnson behaved thus, I would have been less frightened.”³⁶ The

³¹ John Carlos Rowe, “Racism, Fetishism, and the Gift Economy in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” in *On Harper Lee: Essays and Reflections* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007): 5.

³² This interpretation was first introduced by Carolyn Jones in her essay “The Mad Dog as Symbol,” in *Readings on To Kill a Mockingbird*, ed. Terry O’Neill (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000). It has since been supported by several critics, among them Joseph Crespino and Claudia Durst Johnson.

³³ Carolyn Jones, “The Mad Dog as Symbol,” in *Readings on To Kill a Mockingbird*, ed. Terry O’Neill (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000): 35.

³⁴ Theodore R. Hovet and Grace-Ann Hovet, “‘Fine Fancy Gentlemen’ and ‘Yappy Folk’: Contending Voices in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” *Southern Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2001): 70.

³⁵ Hovet and Hovet, “‘Fine Fancy Gentlemen,’” 71.

³⁶ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 103.

lesson Scout learns in this scene is crucial: appearances can be deceptive. All dogs can have rabies, even when it does not show. In other words, all people can harbor racism, even the people we know. Perhaps even the people we love.

Calpurnia has worked for the Finch family ever since Atticus was a child, and like Atticus, she grew up on Finch Landing, where her ancestors were slaves. Calpurnia shares many characteristics with the stereotypical mammy. She is a loving maternal figure for the children, but she scolds them when they misbehave. She is a “faithful member of [the] family,”³⁷ Atticus says, yet she is seated in the back of the car when they drive together. As Jennifer Murray points out, she is only family in the way that “slaves were considered to be part of the ‘family’ of their white masters.” It does not go both ways, Murray argues: “Atticus and his children are not part of ‘her family,’ they do not share in her world.”³⁸ This is true when Atticus is present. However, when Atticus is away, the children’s world and Calpurnia’s merge. *Mockingbird* reveals that in Atticus’s absence, integration is possible. This is illustrated in the scene where Calpurnia brings Jem and Scout with her to church.

With Atticus away for an emergency session with the state legislature, Calpurnia has a choice to let the children go by themselves to the white church, to have them not go to church at all, or to bring them with her to the First Purchase African M. E. Church, the black church in Maycomb. To Scout and Jem’s surprise, she decides on the latter. As they arrive at First Purchase, the churchgoers all make “gestures of respectful attention,” which indicates that Calpurnia is very much a member of her black community. However, there is one woman, Lula, who disapproves of Calpurnia bringing her white charges to church.³⁹ “You ain’t got no business bringin’ white chillun here – they got their church, we got our’n,” she tells Calpurnia, to which she retorts “It’s the same God, ain’t it?”⁴⁰

Martin Luther King Jr. famously observed that the most segregated hour in America was 11 o’clock on Sunday.⁴¹ This is something Lee undoubtedly was well aware of. In this scene, however, *Mockingbird* inverts the traditional racial hierarchy

³⁷ Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (London: Vintage Books, 2004): 149.

³⁸ Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 149; Jennifer Murray, “More Than One Way to (Mis)Read a ‘Mockingbird,’” *Southern Literary Journal* 43, no. 1 (2010): 85.

³⁹ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 128.

⁴⁰ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 129.

⁴¹ “Interview on ‘Meet the Press,’” The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, accessed September 3, 2020.

with a simple color switch. Suddenly, it is the white people who want to enter a building marked “Blacks Only.” Lula is the sole critical black voice in the novel, and scholars have interpreted her primarily in the negative. Katheryn Lee Seidel describes her as a “proto-black militant,” and John Carlos Rowe accuses her of reverse racism.⁴² Zeebo describes her to Scout and Jem as a “troublemaker” with “fancy ideas an’ haughty ways,” which both establishes Lula as someone out of her place, as well as an anomaly from the rest of the congregation.⁴³ Many readers would, and perhaps still will, undoubtedly find it ironic or even absurd that the black Lula has the audacity to deny white children entrance to a black church. Because segregation is rooted in the idea that one race is superior to another, this scene reverses the traditional power hierarchy in Maycomb.⁴⁴ This effectively makes white people the inferior race. Calpurnia’s association with Scout and Jem makes her white by proxy. The reader is meant to side with Calpurnia, and when we do, the novel tricks us into admitting the absurdity of segregation.

Despite Calpurnia’s many years in service for the Finch family, it is only when Scout and Jem join her in church that they start to know her and her black community. During the morning offering, they learn of the humanity of Tom Robinson, who hitherto has only been a name, but now is revealed as a husband and a father. Because of the practice of lining songs, they learn that most of the African-American population cannot read, and those who do, like Zeebo, have learnt it at home because there were no black schools when he was a child. They already know that Zeebo is Calpurnia’s son, which suggests that unlike the typical Mammy, Calpurnia has a good relationship with her children. What Jem and Scout have not realized until now, however, is how old that makes Calpurnia. As Scout explains: “If I had ever thought about it, I would have known that Calpurnia was of mature years – Zeebo had half-grown children – but then I had never thought about it.”⁴⁵ Finally, they learn that Calpurnia speaks two languages – one for the white folks including the Finch family, and another for her black

⁴² Katheryn Lee Seidel, “Growing Up Southern: Resisting the Code for Southerners in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” in *On Harper Lee: Essays and Reflections*, 87; John Carlos Rowe, “Racism, Fetishism, and the Gift Economy in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” in *On Harper Lee: Essays and Reflections* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007): 13.

⁴³ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 130.

⁴⁴ Jean Van Delinder, “Segregation, Desegregation, and Resegregation,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 24: Race*, ed. Thomas C. Holt and Laurie Green (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2013): 147.

⁴⁵ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 135.

community. “The idea that she led a modest double life never dawned on me,” Scout says, further underscoring how few thoughts they have offered the woman who has taken care of them all these years.⁴⁶

The mention of Calpurnia’s double life brings to mind what the renowned sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois dubbed “double-consciousness,” by which he meant:

this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁴⁷

Scout’s observations draw attention not only to the invisibility of Calpurnia’s experience in the Finch household and family life, but more broadly, to the invisibility of black experiences to the white people in Maycomb. The only interaction whites have with blacks is either as employers to their house servants, or with Zeebo who, in his capacity as a garbage man, literally is doing the white people’s dirty work. When Scout realizes that Calpurnia has a whole separate life outside the Finch household, she promptly asks her, on their way back home from church, if she can visit her sometime. “Any time you want to,” Calpurnia replies, “We’d be glad to have you.”⁴⁸ Scout is so excited by the idea that when Jem tells them to look to the porch, she mistakenly assumes that he means the Radley porch, half-expecting to see her reclusive neighbor finally coming out of his house and joining the rest of the community. When she looks, however, he is not there. “I mean our porch,” Jem says, and she sees her Aunt Alexandra “sitting in a rocking chair exactly as if she had sat there every day of her life.”⁴⁹

A visit to the black quarters never comes to pass. Aunt Alexandra’s presence effectively puts an end to any attempt at integration. Although Atticus seems to be amused by the idea, Alexandra forbids Scout to go, and Atticus lets her word be the last on the matter. This goes to show that Atticus is not necessarily opposed to integration, it is rather that he caves to the wishes of the white elite. Whatever progress he works for is so slow that he is actually standing in the way of it. If Scout and Jem had never visited

⁴⁶ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 136.

⁴⁷ W.E.B. Dubois, “Strivings of the Negro People,” *Atlantic*, August, 1897.

⁴⁸ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 136.

⁴⁹ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 137.

Calpurnia's church, there is no telling whether they would have ever thought of Calpurnia as a person in her own right. This suggests that integration can only really happen in Atticus' absence. In other words, the upper class is standing in the way of social progress.

3.3 The Lady

In her satirical field guide to the South, author Florence King made the following observation about the southern lady:

Antebellum Southern civilization was built upon the white woman's untouchable image. In order to keep her footing on the pedestal men had erected for her, she had to be aloof, aristocratic, and haughty."⁵⁰

The southern lady serves as an integral part of the patriarchy as the one in charge of the plantation household. Integral too is her chastity and purity, which, as King points out, the white elites used to justify both slavery and segregation.⁵¹

According to historian Janet Allured, the model southern lady is white, upper-class, and "a staunch defender of both patriarchy and white supremacy."⁵² Her duty is to raise her children as "virtuous, patriotic citizens," and to be faithful to her husband – her "lord and master."⁵³ Nicknamed "steel magnolia" for her combination of femininity and fortitude, she is a formidable hostess and "miraculously immune to desire."⁵⁴ Literary scholar Dorothy M. Scura writes that the southern lady most importantly is "the moral center of the household, pious, self-effacing, and kind."⁵⁵

In *Mockingbird*, there are several characters that share characteristics with the southern lady. The most conventional example is Aunt Alexandra, Atticus's sister. Aunt Alexandra is a stickler for propriety, intensely class conscious, obsessed with heredity,

⁵⁰ Florence King, *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975): 37.

⁵¹ King, *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen*, 38.

⁵² Janet Allured, "Stereotypes, Female," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 20: Social Class*, ed. Larry J. Griffin and Peggy G. Hargis (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012): 268.

⁵³ Allured, "Stereotypes, Female," 268, 269.

⁵⁴ Diane Roberts, "Ladies and Gentlemen," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 86.

⁵⁵ Scura, "Lady," 413.

and, as Claudia Durst Johnson observes, she “is at the center of Maycomb social life.”⁵⁶ She regularly tries to impress upon the children that they are the product of “gentle breeding,” and that there are rules for how they may and may not behave, and who they may or may not associate with.⁵⁷ She is the sole family member to remain on Finch Landing, the old plantation, which implies that she is living in the past. Jean Louise explains:

To all parties present and participating in the life of the county, Aunt Alexandra was one of the last of her kind: she had river-boat, boarding-school manners; let any moral come along and she would uphold it; she was born in the objective case; she was an incurable gossip.⁵⁸

Her steely demeanor prompts Scout to liken her to Mount Everest. There is one other reference to mountains in the novel, and that is to Mrs. Dubose and her Snow-on-the-Mountain camellias. Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose is also a member of the old aristocracy of Maycomb. A widow of a Confederate general, she is now on her deathbed, and struggling to overcome her morphine addiction before her time comes. Reportedly, she wants to “leave this world beholden to nothing and nobody.”⁵⁹ Atticus explains to Jem and Scout: “When you’re as sick as she [is], it’s all right to take anything to make it easier, but it [is not] all right for her.”⁶⁰

According to David T. Courtwright, author of *Dark Paradise: A History of Opiate Addiction in America*, “Mrs. Dubose personifies the American opium or morphine addict of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”⁶¹ That is:

a native Southerner, possessed of servant and property, once married, now widowed and homebound, evidently addicted since late middle age. In all respects – her sex, age of addiction, nationality, region, class, occupation (or lack thereof) – she is typical. Typical, too, is the origin of her condition: she was addicted by her physician.⁶²

⁵⁶ Johnson, Reading Harper Lee, 118.

⁵⁷ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 144.

⁵⁸ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 140.

⁵⁹ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 120.

⁶⁰ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 120.

⁶¹ David T. Courtwright, *Dark Paradise: A History of Opiate Addiction in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2001): 42.

⁶² Courtwright, *Dark Paradise*, 42.

Morphine is a pain reliever, and as such, it distorts the reality by creating a comfortable, numb, and painless dream world. Much like the myth of the Lost Cause, morphine allows people to avoid confronting painful realities. Contrary to what Courtwright claims, the reader is not told when Mrs. Dubose was first prescribed morphine. Nor is the reader told why. However, she is a widow, and her husband served in the Confederate army. One possible explanation for her addiction therefore, is the pain of her husband's untimely death in the Civil War. The Civil War was fought over slavery.⁶³ Broadly speaking, therefore, the tenacious defense of white supremacy is the cause of Mrs. Dubose's pain. It is significant that it was her doctor who first got her addicted to morphine. It was the very same people, the white elites, who created the myth of the Lost Cause in order to unite the southern whites against blacks. Atticus would readily keep Mrs. Dubose on her medication, which suggests that he prefers to keep the status quo. However, as he tells his children, Mrs. Dubose was "too contrary [...] She said she meant to break herself of it before she died, and that's what she did."⁶⁴

The literary scholar Robert C. Evans observes that there are several paired characters in *Mockingbird*.⁶⁵ Aunt Alexandra and Mrs. Dubose is one example. They are both traditional southern ladies, and they are both ardent defenders of the order of the Old South. However, whereas Aunt Alexandra represents the ideal southern lady, Mrs. Dubose represents the reality of the cult of southern womanhood: pain and suffering. In *Mockingbird*, the trope of the southern lady reveals that racism is rooted in classism. The only way to weed out racism therefore, is to dismantle the class system. This is illustrated in the scene where Jem destroys Mrs. Dubose's flowers.

Mrs. Dubose regularly yells insults at the children as they pass by her house, telling them off for not greeting her correctly or wearing proper attire. She strongly disapproves of Atticus, and never misses a chance to let the children hear it. It is on one such occasion that she spits at them that their father is "no better than the niggers and trash he works for!"⁶⁶ Jem in particular is visibly upset by her comment – he turns scarlet – but resorts to emulate his stoic father and simply keep on walking. The

⁶³ James Oakes, "The Great Divide," *New York Review of Books*, May 23, 2019. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/05/23/civil-war-history-great-divide>.

⁶⁴ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 120.

⁶⁵ Richard C. Evans, "Unlikely Duos: Paired Characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird*," in *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird: New Essays*, ed. Michael J. Meyer (Lanham, Toronto and Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2010): 101.

⁶⁶ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 111.

children are on their way into town to spend Jem's birthday money. As they arrive at the store, Jem significantly buys himself a steam engine, but as Jean Louise notes, he takes no pleasure in it. Instead, he puts it in his pocket.⁶⁷

Jem is only twelve, and despite his valiant attempt, he is not yet able to control his emotions as well as his father. As they pass by Mrs. Dubose's house on their way back, he finally succumbs to them. In a fit of fury, Jem blows off steam by knocking the head off of every single camellia in Mrs. Dubose's garden.

This act of violence does not go unpunished, of course. For a little more than a month, Jem has to visit with Mrs. Dubose and read to her. It is her idea – she needs a distraction from the agony she is experiencing now that she is no longer taking her pain medication. The book is *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott, which was a favorite among the gentry of the antebellum South.⁶⁸ However, Mrs. Dubose is bored with the book, and much prefers to antagonize the children. One afternoon, she starts:

'Jeremy Finch, I told you you'd live to regret tearing up my camellias. You regret it now, don't you?'

Jem would say he certainly did.

'Thought you could kill my Snow-on-the-Mountain, did you? Well, Jessie says the top's growing back out. Next time you'll know how to do it right, won't you? You'll pull it up by the roots, won't you?'

Jem said he certainly would.⁶⁹

Arguably, Mrs. Dubose's camellias are a reference to the Knights of the White Camelia, a white supremacist organization that was formed in 1867, whose members swore to marry white women and to prevent what they considered the degeneration of the white race.⁷⁰ As opposed to the Ku Klux Klan, which was formed around the same time, and was primarily made up of the lower classes, the Knights of the White Camellia was an organization for the white elite.⁷¹ This suggests that Mrs. Dubose's flowers are a reference to the white upper class's responsibility for racism.

Southerners of all classes supported white supremacy, but the very idea that human beings were divided into separate races, and that one race was superior to others,

⁶⁷ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 111.

⁶⁸ Johnson, Reading Harper Lee, 117.

⁶⁹ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 119.

⁷⁰ Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Viking, 2016): 183.

⁷¹ Johnson, Reading Harper Lee, 116.

was developed by the educated white elite.⁷² In the South, writes historian Paul Harvey, “White supremacy was an ideology of power that enveloped white southerners in an imagined community.”⁷³ Yet, in a system in which whites are considered superior to blacks, poor whites became an oxymoron.⁷⁴ Their very existence challenged the notion of white superiority. Upper-class whites therefore had to find a way to make sense of them. One explanation that gained ground in the antebellum South, was that poverty was the sign of the ill-bred; a consequence of “bad blood,” by which was meant either “vulgar inbreeding” or “race-mixing.”⁷⁵ Poor whites were considered “a distinct breed,” whose qualities, or lack thereof, were understood to be the result of their genetic inheritance.⁷⁶ Thus, in order to preserve the white race it became important to keep the races a part. The means to do so became racial segregation.

It is ironic that Mrs. Dubose, the very symbol of the Old South, should be the one to admit that the white upper class are to blame for racism, and that the only way to defeat racism is to dismantle the class system. It is significant therefore to note her timing. Mrs. Dubose is able to overcome her morphine addiction before she dies. In other words, she delivers this wisdom as a sober woman. This suggests that it is the morphine that has prevented her from admitting it earlier.

It is significant, too, that it is Jessie, Mrs. Dubose’s black house servant, who informs her that the flowers are growing back. As a victim of racism, Jessie will be the first to recognize its symptoms. This further underscores the connection between class and race: only treating the symptoms will not help in the long run. For lasting change, one has to address the underlying problem.

When Mrs. Dubose finally passes, Jem asks Atticus whether she died free. “As the mountain air,” Atticus replies: “She was conscious to the last, almost. Conscious [...] and cantankerous. She still disapproved heartily of my doings,” he smiles to Jem, and hands him a candy box which Mrs. Dubose had Jessie prepare for him before she

⁷² Jeanette Keith, *The South: A Concise History Volume II* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002): 24.

⁷³ Paul Harvey, “Religion, White Supremacist,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 24: Race*, ed. Thomas C. Hoult and Laurie B. Green (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2013): 144.

⁷⁴ Annalee Newitz and Matthew Wray, “What Is ‘White Trash’? Stereotypes and Economic Conditions of Poor Whites in the United States,” in *Whiteness: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mike Hill (New York: New York University Press, 1997): 169.

⁷⁵ Isenberg, *White Trash*, 136-137.

⁷⁶ Isenberg, *White Trash*, xvi.

died.⁷⁷ When Jem opens the box he panics. Inside it lies “a white, waxy, perfect camellia.”⁷⁸ “Old hell-devil,” he screams, “Why can’t she leave me alone!”⁷⁹ Mrs. Dubose’s gift post-mortem underscores her point: even though she is dead, white supremacy will prevail. Lashing out at one person does not solve anything; action must instead be directed towards the system. In other words, the only way to weed out racism, is to dismantle the class system.

3.4 The Belle

The southern belle is, as literary scholar Carol S. Manning puts it, “the younger, unmarried, and hence incomplete version of the southern lady.”⁸⁰ She is stunningly beautiful, both coquettish and virtuous; she is adventurous, yet loyal to her family; and she is a damsel in distress, but brave and strong when and where the situation demands it.⁸¹ Traditionally, the belle will grow up to become a lady, Manning writes, and it is “the getting-there that create[s] action, tension and story.”⁸²

According to Kathryn Lee Seidel, author of *The Southern Belle in the American Novel*, the belle is usually “the daughter of the aristocratic father, often a plantation owner during antebellum days or a lawyer in the postbellum South.”⁸³ She is “typically portrayed as a motherless child,” Seidel writes, “with a close – sometimes abnormally close – relationship with her father.”⁸⁴ While this sounds a lot like Scout and Atticus, Seidel continues:

The absence of a strong and loving female parent in many such novels distorts the father-daughter relationship; the young girl practices her wiles on her father for her eventual days of courtship. The goal of this behavior is to attract a wealthy young man, preferably one whose family lands are adjacent and whose

⁷⁷ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 121.

⁷⁸ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 121.

⁷⁹ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 121.

⁸⁰ Carol S. Manning, “Belle,” in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*, ed. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan, 95.

⁸¹ Manning, “Belle,” 95.

⁸² Manning, “Belle,” 95.

⁸³ Kathryn Lee Seidel, “Growing Up Southern: Resisting the Code for Southerners in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” in *On Harper Lee: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Alice Hall Petry (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007): 80.

⁸⁴ Seidel, “Growing Up Southern,” 80.

lineage is impeccable. Not having developed any inner qualities, she as an adult cannot let go of her narcissism and becomes a source of chaos in the lives of her family.⁸⁵

As Seidel observes, the character who most resembles the stereotypical southern belle in *Mockingbird* is, despite her class status, the poor white Mayella Ewell. Scout is able to reject the southern belle paradigm, Seidel argues, because she learns to emulate her stoic father. *Mockingbird*, she writes, demonstrates “that without careful instruction by a loving parent, a girl such as Scout could become another Mayella, an outcast because of her destructiveness.”⁸⁶

Several critics have, like Seidel, noted the similarities between Scout and Mayella. Both Robert C. Evans and Claudia Durst Johnson read Mayella and Scout as paired characters, and argue that Mayella is an inversion of Scout.⁸⁷ Yet, while Scout rejects the southern belle paradigm, so too does Mayella. Mayella does not practice her wiles on her father – she tries to attract the young man living on the land adjacent. He is neither wealthy nor, at least by the white people of Maycomb’s standards, of impeccable lineage; he is dirt poor and black, and in any case, Mayella is unsuccessful. Most importantly, however, her infatuation with Tom Robinson, her care for her siblings, as well as her red geraniums, suggest inner qualities that are far more developed than those of her father. Her narcissism, if one can call it that, is rooted in a very human need for love and affection, something she has been denied for most if not all of her life. To dismiss Mayella, as Seidel does, as an “anti-belle, whose uncontrolled passions engender a series of violent acts against innocent people,” seems an unnecessary harsh case of victim blaming.⁸⁸ For Mayella too is a victim, both of abuse by her father and of an abusive societal order. She is spared the racial violence of Jim Crow, but like her black neighbors, she is also segregated from the good society of Maycomb.

What Seidel fails to account for, is that the Maycomb Lee portrays is so entrenched in classism that there is simply no way Scout could ever become Mayella. A

⁸⁵ Seidel, “Growing Up Southern,” 80-81.

⁸⁶ Seidel, “Growing Up Southern,” 88.

⁸⁷ Robert C. Evans, “Unlikely Duos: Paired Characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” in *Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird: New Essays*, ed. Michael J. Meyer (Lanham, Toronto and Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2010): 103; Johnson, *Reading Harper Lee: Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird and Go Set a Watchman* (California: Greenwood, 2018): 50.

⁸⁸ Seidel, “Growing Up Southern,” 79.

case in point is Mr. Dolphus Raymond, a white man from good stock who lives with an African-American woman with whom he has several children. Mr. Raymond usually keeps to his property on the other side of the river, but the few times he does come into town, he adds a sway to his walk and drinks from a bottle in a brown paper bag. It is only soda, but as he tells Scout: “I try to give ’em a reason [...] folks can say ‘Dolphus Raymond’s in the clutches of whisky – that’s why he won’t change his ways.’”⁸⁹ There is even a rumor circulating that Mr. Raymond was once engaged, but on the eve of their wedding day his fiancée committed suicide, a tragedy which only adds to the explanation of Mr. Raymond’s eccentricity. That same luxury of understanding, however, is not afforded to Bob Ewell, Mayella’s father, who is also a widower and an alcoholic. The most significant difference between Mr. Raymond and Mr. Ewell is, of course, their class background. Scout cannot become Mayella because similar to Mr. Raymond, she comes from good stock.

Nor can Mayella ever become Scout, for that matter. To paraphrase Aunt Alexandra, you can scrub Mayella Ewell until she shines but she’ll never be like Scout.⁹⁰ In fact, Scout herself observes that Mayella Ewell’s plight is similar to that of a “mixed child”:

white people wouldn’t have anything to do with her because she lived among pigs; Negroes wouldn’t have anything to do with her because she was white. She couldn’t live like Mr. Dolphus Raymond, who preferred the company of Negroes, because she didn’t own a river bank and she wasn’t from a fine old family. Nobody said, ‘That’s just their way,’ about the Ewells. Maycomb gave them Christmas baskets, welfare money, and the back of its hand.⁹¹

Despite the color of her skin, Mayella has more in common with the African-American community than she does the white town’s people. Just like her black neighbors, she is dirt poor and a social outcast. In *Mockingbird*, the southern belle stereotype reveals how white supremacy is not only oppressive for blacks, it is also oppressive for whites. Mayella demonstrates that the only way to break the cycle of oppression is to resist the patriarchy. This is illustrated in the scene where she gives her testimony in court.

Only a few minutes into Mayella’s testimony in the trial against Tom Robinson, a slight confusion arises. After Atticus offers a few pleasantries, Mayella suddenly

⁸⁹ Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 219.

⁹⁰ Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 244.

⁹¹ Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 209.

refuses to answer any more of his questions. “Long as he keeps on callin’ me ma’am an sayin’ Miss Mayella,” she explains, “I don’t hafta take his sass, I ain’t called upon to take it.” A baffled Judge Taylor tries to explain to Mayella:

That’s just Mr. Finch’s way [...] We’ve done business in this court for years and years, and Mr. Finch is always courteous to everybody. He’s not trying to mock you, he’s trying to be polite. That’s just his way.⁹²

Good manners is a characteristic of the white southern elite. According to historian Charles Reagan Wilson, “Southerners have traditionally equated manners – the appropriate, customary, or proper way of doing things – with morals, so that unmannerly behavior has been viewed as immoral behavior.”⁹³ Thus, manners have proved a useful way for the upper class to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. However, as journalist W. J. Cash observed in his seminal work *The Mind of The South*, the upper class have also used manners to stifle class conflict. If a disgruntled member of the lower class should confront him, Cash writes, the southern gentleman could:

patronize him in such a fashion that to his simple eyes he seemed not to be patronized at all but actually deferred to, to send him home, not sullen and vindictive, but glowing with the sense of participation in the common brotherhood of white men.⁹⁴

When Mayella refuses to answer Atticus’s questions it is because she sees through his polite manners. Neither Atticus nor the town of Maycomb have ever cared about her before, and save for this one time will they ever care about her again. The only time someone like Mayella is afforded the status of a white lady in the South is when it is her word against that of a Black person. Indeed, the proceedings of the trial show that if it were not for the rape charge against the black Tom Robinson, there would be no case. The physical attack on Mayella’s person is of less concern than the threat posed to the racial order by blacks and whites intermingling. In other words, Mayella is merely a token in what Cash referred to as the South’s “rape complex”:

⁹² Lee, *Mockingbird*, 198.

⁹³ Charles Reagan Wilson, “Manners,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 96.

⁹⁴ W. J. Cash, *The Mind of The South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941): 41.

[The] Southern woman's place in the Southern mind proceeded primarily from the natural tendency of the great basic pattern of pride in superiority of race to center upon her as the perpetuator of the superiority in legitimate line, and attached itself precisely, and before anything else, to her enormous remoteness from the males of the inferior group, to the absolute taboo on any sexual approach to her by the Negro.⁹⁵

As Cash explains it, whites justified violence against blacks by claiming that they were defending the white woman, even though the vast majority of the so-called offenses "had nothing immediately to do with sex."⁹⁶ These rape charges were therefore less about the woman they claimed to be defending, and more about asserting white supremacy by keeping whites and blacks apart.

Arguably, it was not Mayella's idea to take the case to court. As her father's testimony reveals, he uses her to push his own racist agenda. He tells Judge Taylor, "I've asked this county for fifteen years to clean out that nest yonder, they're dangerous to live around 'sides devaluin' my property."⁹⁷ The Ewells live in what used to be slave cabins on an old plantation that has since been turned into a garbage dump. Their sole possessions are objects discarded by wealthier whites. It is in other words not the Black community that devalues the Ewells' property, it is literally the white. Moreover, his full name, Robert E. Lee Ewell, further underscores how poor whites internalize white supremacy. They imitate the upper classes by appropriating their trash, their land, their names and their ideology, in the belief that this will increase their social status. Blind to the power structures that hold him down, he instead lashes out at the Black community.

But Mayella Ewell is different from her father. She rejects his prejudice against the Black community, and chooses instead to remedy her loneliness by breaking out of her isolation. By approaching Tom Robinson, she breaks what Atticus refers to as "a rigid and time-honoured [sic] code of our society, a code so severe that whoever breaks it is hounded from our midst as unfit to live with."⁹⁸ However, Mayella is already hounded from Maycomb's midst. Her isolation is the root of her loneliness.

⁹⁵ Cash, *The Mind of The South*, 116.

⁹⁶ Cash, *The Mind of The South*, 117.

⁹⁷ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 190.

⁹⁸ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 222.

In his concluding statements, Atticus admits that Mayella is “the victim of cruel poverty and ignorance,” but that he “cannot pity her.”⁹⁹ As a white woman, he argues, Mayella “knew full well the enormity of her offence, but because her desires were stronger than the code she was breaking, she persisted in breaking it.”¹⁰⁰ This passage is indicative of Atticus’s stance on social issues. He regards the Ewells’ ignorance as the cause of their poverty rather than the other way around. It is this ignorance, he argued, that caused Mayella to break that time-honored code, and he berates her for it. Because she is white, she should have known what she was doing. His focus on Mayella’s race reveals that Atticus only acknowledges the existence of racial segregation, not economic and social segregation.

However, Mayella is not ignorant; on the contrary, she is fully aware that she is trapped in a system in which her status as both white and woman depends on Tom being charged with rape. Mayella lies, and it has devastating consequences. Yet, she does not lie because of her destructiveness, as Seidel argues, but because she is destroyed – she is physically abused by her father, and verbally abused by Scout’s father, which effectively makes her the victim of the patriarchy. The southern belle stereotype reveals that in order to break the cycle of oppression, the belle has to break with the patriarchy. In order to become a lady, Scout has to do what Mayella does; she has to break with her father. And she does. After the trial, when one of her neighbors, Miss Stephanie, asks Scout if she wants become a lawyer like Atticus when she grows up, Scout mildly replies, “Nome, just a lady.”¹⁰¹

3.5 The Gentleman

In the standard plantation novel, the gentleman is the patriarch of the plantation system. According to literary scholar Richie D. Watson, the gentleman is “defined by a code of gentility that expresses the ethos of the planter class throughout the South.”¹⁰² He is

⁹⁹ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 222.

¹⁰⁰ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 222.

¹⁰¹ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 250.

¹⁰² Richie D. Watson, “Gentleman,” in *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs*, ed. Joseph M. Flora and Lucinda H. MacKethan (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002): 292.

courteous, honor-bound, well-dressed and well-spoken, and treats his dependents with a noblesse oblige.¹⁰³ His primary purpose, Watson writes, is “to possess and maintain a personal honor that [commands] the respect of all his peers as well as of all those of lower social order.”¹⁰⁴

If the Confederate hero Robert E. Lee was the quintessential southern gentleman, Atticus Finch is a close second. He is courteous, honor-bound, and well-mannered. He is a kind and loving father, an avid reader, a church-goer, and a pacifist who believes guns give him “an unfair advantage.”¹⁰⁵ He is the patriarch in the society of Maycomb, and he tests, and consequently earns the respect of his peers by taking on Tom Robinson’s case, even though he has no hope that he will win it. This is ultimately why he fails. In *Mockingbird* the southern gentleman stereotype reveals how the white upper class depend on racial animosity to maintain their elite status. Atticus’s strategy to combat racism in Maycomb does not work, because he refuses to admit to the existence of systemic racism.

“Naming people after Confederate soldiers,” Atticus tells Scout, makes for “slow, steady drinkers.”¹⁰⁶ He himself is named after Titus Pomponius Atticus, life-long companion of the Roman stoic Cicero.¹⁰⁷ While the name evokes the virtue of friendship, it more importantly points both to Atticus’s social class and his philosophy of life. Stoicism came to the South during the Enlightenment, but as Charles Reagan Wilson points out, it was in the antebellum period that the philosophy grew to become influential.¹⁰⁸ Robert E. Lee reportedly found solace in the works of Marcus Aurelius both before and after his defeat.¹⁰⁹ Since then, Wilson observes, stoicism has been the “philosophy of the educated southern elite”¹¹⁰

Like Cicero, Atticus is a lawyer and a state legislator, and a member of the professional class. He belongs to the old aristocracy of Maycomb County; he grew up

¹⁰³ Watson, “Gentleman,” 292.

¹⁰⁴ Watson, “Gentleman,” 292.

¹⁰⁵ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 106.

¹⁰⁶ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 171.

¹⁰⁷ Cep, “The Contested Legacy of Atticus Finch,” *A Critic At Large*, *New Yorker*, December 17, 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Charles Reagan Wilson, “Stoicism,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 4: Myth, Manners, and Memory*, ed. Charles Reagan Wilson (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2006): 176.

¹⁰⁹ Kenneth S. Sacks, “Stoicism in America,” in *The Routledge Handbook of the Stoic Tradition*, ed. Jon Sellars (London: Routledge, 2016): 335.

¹¹⁰ Wilson, “Stoicism,” 179.

on the plantation Finch Landing, and his family used to hold slaves. He is devoted to the law and will defend its principles no matter the consequences, and his neighbors describe him as a man who is “the same in the court-room as he is on the public streets.”¹¹¹

Theologian Randall S. Rosenberg observes that the defining characteristic of stoicism is “an acute awareness of the tragic situation of the human person fundamentally conditioned by fate.”¹¹² True to the stoic credo, Atticus does not engage in anything that is beyond his own control. He does not try to change the status quo; he only does what he is bound by duty to do and leaves it at that, well knowing that it will not be enough. As author and legal scholar Steve Lubet observes, Atticus is “neither a firebrand or a reformer.”¹¹³ In fact, he tells his brother Jack that he had hoped he would get through life without a case like Tom’s.¹¹⁴ When Scout asks her father if he thinks they will win the case, he answers her:

‘No, honey.’

‘Then why –’

‘Simply because we were licked a hundred years before we started is no reason for us not to try to win,’ Atticus said.

‘You sound like cousin Ike Finch,’ I said.¹¹⁵

Cousin Ike Finch, Jean Louise explains, is “Maycomb County’s sole surviving Confederate veteran.”¹¹⁶ In comparing Atticus to him, she makes an astute observation: that already from the beginning, Atticus regards Tom’s case as a lost cause. He has no hope whatsoever that Tom will see justice served, and he does not seem all that concerned about it. In fact, he is more concerned with himself. Atticus’s determination to defend Tom does not stem from any anti-racist agenda, but rather from his own personal code of honor. When Scout asks him why he defends Tom, Atticus replies that there are “a number of reasons,” but that “[t]he main one is, 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

¹¹¹ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 216-217.

¹¹² Randall S. Rosenberg, “Walker Percy and the Racist Tragedy of Southern Stoicism,” *Church Life Journal*, June 25, 2018.

¹¹³ Steven Lubet, “Reconstructing Atticus Finch,” *Michigan Law Review* 97, no. 6 (1999): 1349.

¹¹⁴ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 95.

¹¹⁵ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 82.

¹¹⁶ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 82.

tell you or Jem not to do something again [emphasis added].”¹¹⁷ In fact, Atticus regularly cites as his motivation for defending Tom the ability to look his children in the eyes. He is more concerned about what his children, and the town in general, will think of him, than what might happen to Tom. Atticus’s idea of courage is “when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what.”¹¹⁸ This aligns well with how author Walker Percy understood the southern stoic: “His finest hour,” Percy observed, “is to sit tight-lipped and ironic while the world comes crashing down around him.”¹¹⁹

Theodore and Grace-Ann Hovet observe that Atticus struggles to call racism by its name. Instead, they point out, he refers to it as simply “it,” “something,” or a “disease.” His failure to name racism, they argue, “is symptomatic with his failure to combat racism in Maycomb and in the state legislature.”¹²⁰ Moreover, he describes a lynch mob as good men with blind spots, and declares to his children that there are no mobs in Maycomb, even after a mob appears at the prison where Atticus sits guard, presumably because he knows that a mob will appear.¹²¹ Adding to the fact that he describes the Klan as “a political organization more than anything,” this all suggests that Atticus refuses to acknowledge the existence of systemic racism. To admit systemic racism is to acknowledge that there is a system of oppression, and such an acknowledgement would reveal that he is the oppressor. Therefore, he instead insists that racism only happens in isolated instances.

Where Atticus places the blame of racism on the poor white Bob Ewell, Scout places the blame on classism. Atticus’s strategy to combat racism does not work, because he refuses to acknowledge that racism is the symptom of a larger problem. To acknowledge the existence of such a system would ultimately point the finger at him. However, his daughter has a different strategy – a strategy, it turns out, that ends up saving her life.

¹¹⁷ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 82.

¹¹⁸ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 121.

¹¹⁹ Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, 86.

¹²⁰ Theodore R. Hovet and Grace-Ann Hovet, “‘Fine Fancy Gentlemen’ and ‘Yappy Folk’: Contending Voices in *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” *Southern Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2001): 73.

¹²¹ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 171.

3.6 The Lost Cause

In Harper Lee's alternative plantation myth, the unrealized possibility of the 1930s for social justice becomes the Lost Cause. This is illustrated by Scout's desire to make her reclusive neighbor Boo Radley come out of his house. Every time she passed it she looked for him, she tells us, hoping she one day would finally see him:

I imagined how it would be: when it happened, he'd just be sitting in the swing when I came along. 'Hidy do, Mr. Arthur,' I would say, as if I had said it every afternoon of my life. 'Evening, Jean Louise,' he would say, as if he had said it every afternoon of my life, 'right pretty spell we're having, isn't it?' 'Yes, sir, right pretty,' I would say, and go on. It was only a fantasy. We would never see him.¹²²

Much has been made of the character Boo Radley. He has been interpreted to represent the mad, the ill, the disabled, the gay, the queer, and the black or nonwhite. Boo has in other words been read as a symbol of many, if not all, of society's marginalized groups. This thesis proposes that Boo Radley represents the opposite: the privileged, white middle class. It is only when Boo finally comes out of his house that racism, symbolized by Bob Ewell, is defeated. In other words, the only way to end racism is to end segregation. In order to end segregation, the middle class have to come out of their houses.

According to the town gossip, when he was a teenager, Arthur "Boo" Radley fell in with some of the Cunninghams, "an enormous and confusing tribe," Scout explains, "domiciled in the northern part of the county."¹²³ The Cunninghams are poor whites, primarily sharecroppers, with little or no education, rarely enough food on the table, and usually lacking proper clothing and footwear, which causes the children to suffer from hookworms and malnourishment. For someone like Arthur Radley, they were the wrong crowd:

they hung around the barber-shop, they rode the bus to Abbotsville on Sundays and went to the picture show; they attended dances at the county's riverside

¹²² Lee, *Mockingbird*, 263-264.

¹²³ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 10.

gambling hell, the Dew-Drop Inn and Fishing Camp; they experimented with stumphole whisky.¹²⁴

One night the town sheriff had enough of their ruckus and arrested the boys for disorderly conduct. The judge decided to send the boys to the state industrial school. For the Cunninghams, being sent to industrial school was a relief – it provided them with more comfortable living conditions and not least, “the best secondary education to be had in the state.”¹²⁵ But Arthur Radley is not a Cunningham. His was a respectable family that lived on the main street in town, and his father thought it a disgrace to have his son mix with the loud and rowdy poor whites. This class anxiety is what makes Mr. Radley resolve to have his son locked inside, and as a result, the entire Radley family becomes completely segregated from the rest of the community. Maycomb has only seen him once after that, when Boo stabbed his father in the leg with a pair of scissors, and was apprehended by the police. His father did not press charges, and Boo returned back home and was not seen again. It is only when old Mr. Radley dies that things start to change.

When the Radleys withdrew from society, gossip and ghost stories flourished. Rumor had it that Boo was a patricidal squirrel-eating “malevolent phantom,” who peeped in people’s windows at night.¹²⁶ Most people in Maycomb are scared of the Radleys. As Scout explains:

A Negro would not pass the Radley Place at night, he would cut across to the sidewalk opposite and whistle as he walked [...] A baseball hit into the Radley yard was a lost ball and no questions asked.¹²⁷

While most of the neighbors take great care in the maintenance of their houses and gardens, the Radley place is in a state of decay: once white with green shutters, the house has greyed, the roof has rotted, the picket fence is in disarray, and the yard is overgrown with weeds and wildflowers.¹²⁸ The Radley place mirrors another house in Maycomb – the Ewells’ house. Theirs is a dilapidated, varmint-infested, leaky and dirty

¹²⁴ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 10.

¹²⁵ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 11.

¹²⁶ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 9.

¹²⁷ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 9.

¹²⁸ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 8-9.

old cabin. Their fence is made up of “tree-limbs, broomsticks, and tool shafts,” and their yard is littered with trash.¹²⁹

Robert C. Evans reads Boo Radley and Bob Ewell as paired characters.¹³⁰ They are “ironic counterparts,” he argues, because they are the exact opposite of each other.¹³¹ However, although the Radleys and the Ewells are on opposite sides of the social hierarchy, they share in common their complete isolation as a result of segregation. While Mr. Ewell has a red neck, a nod to his social status, Boo Radley is “sickly white,” Scout observes, as if he had:

never seen the sun. [...] His cheeks were thin to hollowness; his mouth was wide; there were shallow, almost delicate indentations at his temples, and his grey eyes were so colourless [sic] I thought he was blind. His hair was dead and thin, almost feathery on top of his head.¹³²

It is not until Dill arrives that the children have the idea to make Boo come out. Dill is a city boy from Meridian, Mississippi, who visits Maycomb during the summers. More importantly, Dill has no father. The children start small by daring each other to touch the Radley house. Then they up the stakes and compose a letter to Boo which they try to deliver with a fishing pole. Their desire to make Boo come out is not borne out of malice. At first they are intrigued by him, and act out his life story on their front lawn. Eventually they start to worry about him, wondering what is making him stay inside all this time. Jem suggests that maybe Boo is kept chained to his bed, but Atticus replies that “there were other ways of making people into ghosts.”¹³³ This suggests that Atticus is well aware of the mistreatment of Boo, yet true to the stoic credo, he does nothing to help.

Atticus respects the Radleys very much. He does not gossip about them, he does not judge them, and he certainly does not interfere with how they run their lives. He scolds his children when they appear to be making fun of them, and whenever Scout and Jem asks about them, he always replies that they should “mind their own business and let the Radleys mind theirs, they had a right to.”¹³⁴ This brings to mind the

¹²⁹ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 185-186.

¹³⁰ Evans, 101.

¹³¹ Evans, 106

¹³² Lee, *Mockingbird*, 294.

¹³³ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 12.

¹³⁴ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 11.

argument of states' rights, the most popular argument against government-sanctioned social reform. For Atticus, the principle of states' rights trumps whatever trauma is inflicted upon Boo. Despite Atticus's orders, the children persist, and after repeated efforts, Boo finally makes contact. He patches up Jem's pants, he covers Scout with a blanket, and he hides special gifts for them in a knothole in a tree. Finally, he saves their lives.

On their way home from the Maycomb Halloween pageant, Jem and Scout are attacked by the vengeful Bob Ewell. He is angry with Atticus and decides to take his anger out at Atticus's children. However, Boo Radley comes to the rescue. In the chaos that ensues, the children manages to escape. When the sherriff investigates the scene of the crime, he reports back to Atticus: "Bob Ewell's lyn' on the ground under that tree down yonder with a kitchen knife stuck up under his ribs. He's dead," Sherriff Tate tells Atticus:

'Are you sure?' Atticus said bleakly.

'He's dead all right,' said Mr. Tate. 'He's good and dead. He won't hurt these children again.'

'I didn't mean that,' Atticus seemed to be talking in his sleep.¹³⁵

What Atticus meant, was whether Heck Tate was sure that Bob Ewell died falling on his knife. Stoicism is the defining characteristic of the white upper class, and falling on one's sword is the Stoic way to die in honor. If Bob Ewell fell on his knife, that effectively includes him in the brotherhood of white men. Therefore, Atticus initially refuses to believe it. He insists instead that it was Jem who killed Bob, but Heck will not have it. Heck insists that it was suicide by accident, because Heck knows that the one who actually killed Bob was the recluse Boo.

If it had not been for Scout and Jem's interest in Boo, Bob Ewell would most likely have killed them both with his knife. They survived because Boo Radley came out of his house. In other words, desegregation stopped racism. Yet, it did not last. Atticus and Heck decides that the best thing is for Boo Radley to return to his house. They compromise, and admit Bob Ewell into the brotherhood to maintain the status quo.

¹³⁵ Lee, *Mockingbird*, 290-291.

3.7 Concluding Remarks

The aim of this chapter has been to demonstrate how reflective nostalgia can be used as a tool for social critique. By reading *Mockingbird* as a plantation myth, the novel becomes a critique of American class system. The mammy stereotype reveals that the upper class is standing in the way of social progress. The lady stereotype reveals that racism is rooted in classism. The Belle stereotype reveals that the only way to fight the cycle of oppression is to fight the patriarchy. The Gentleman stereotype reveals that the upper class depend on racial animosity to maintain their elite status. Finally, the Lost Cause reveals that to combat racism, the middle-class have to come out of their houses and join forces with the poor and working-class. A coalition along class and racial lines is the only thing that can topple the upper class. In the end, this never came to pass. The middle-class moved to the suburbs, and the rest is history.

Mockingbirds are so called because they copy the songs of other birds. “To kill a mockingbird” can therefore be understood to mean Scout’s break with Atticus. She will not be a mockingbird and copy his song. She rejects her father’s world view, and choses another path for herself. However, despite their differences, Atticus is still her father. He was the one reading to her each night, he was the one who taught her that you never really know a person until you climb into their skin and walk around in it. To part ways with ones parents is a difficult thing to do, but ultimately, what makes it difficult to leave is also what makes it easy to return. Maybe that is why Harper Lee called the novel “a love story, pure and simple.”¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Charles J. Shields, *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2007): 12.

4 Conclusion

While attending a press conference promoting the soon-to-be released movie adaptation of her debut novel, Harper Lee was asked whether her book was “an indictment against a group in society.”¹ “The book is not an indictment,” she replied, “so much as a plea for something, a reminder to people at home.”²

If the alternative of the 1930s was forgotten at the time Lee wrote her book, in 2020, it seems to have entered back into the national conversation. The pandemic has revealed the glaring disparities between the country’s rich and poor. It has also revealed that African Americans are hit exponentially harder by the virus than the general public. Then, as millions of Americans have taken to the streets in response to the brutal police killing of George Floyd on May 25th, systemic racism and classism has become all but impossible to ignore.

In a conversation with journalist Ezra Klein, author Ta-Nehisi Coates refers to a conversation he had with his father this summer. His father, he says, had been in Baltimore for the 1968-riots that broke out following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Coates had asked him if he could compare what happened then with the demonstrations that were happening now all across the country. His father’s reply surprised him: “there was no comparison.” The current movement, his father told him, is far more sophisticated.³ The idea that Floyd’s murder “would resonate with white folks in Des Moines, Iowa, that it would resonate in Salt Lake City, that it would resonate in Berlin, that it would resonate in London,” Coates says, “was unfathomable to him. In ’68,” he explained, “it was mostly black folks in their own communities, registering their great anger and great pain.”⁴

Indeed, in 1968, MLK was the most hated man in America.⁵ At the time he was killed, he had a disapproval rating of a staggering 75 percent.⁶ In 2020, however, the

¹ Bob Ellison, “The Interrogation of ‘Mockingbird’ Author Harper Lee,” Hollyblogs, *The Wrap*, last modified July 16, 2014.

² Ellison, “The Interrogation.”

³ Ezra Klein, “Why Ta-Nehisi Coates is hopeful,” The Ezra Klein Show, *Vox Media*, June 4, 2020, podcast audio, 03:50.

⁴ Klein, “Why Ta-Nehisi Coates is hopeful,” 04:55.

⁵ Klein, “Why Ta-Nehisi Coates is hopeful,” 29:38.

⁶ James C. Cobb, “Even Though He Is Revered Today, MLK Was Widely Disliked by the American Public When He Was Killed,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 4, 2018.

numbers have almost flipped. A poll conducted amid this summer's protests shows that 67 percent of all Americans either somewhat support or strongly support the Black Lives Matter protests.⁷ Among white respondents, the approval rating is 60 percent.⁸ Adding to the fact the increasing approval of socialism, and the enduring popularity of progressive democratic socialists like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the future gives room for hope.⁹ It may well be that a new window of opportunity has opened for a more egalitarian society.

In its initial phase, this thesis rested on the assumption that in order to understand America's social ills, one had to look to the South, and in particular, to the South's white rural poor. Over the course of this project, however, it has become increasingly clear that this assumption was rooted in the myth of southern exceptionalism. Focusing on the poor, even when it is in an effort to vindicate them, may ultimately do more harm than good, because the poor become the center of attention in purely negative narratives. As history has shown, such narratives are typically explained away with claims that the poor are to blame for being poor, that they are poor because of some degenerate trait, or even that they are a distinct breed. More importantly, focusing on the poor averts the critical gaze away from the ruling class. Such narratives create breeding grounds for fear and racial bigotry, as the white elites will pit poor whites against blacks in order to maintain the status quo. Real social change can only happen if poor whites and blacks unite against their shared oppressor.

The aim of this thesis has been to investigate the political uses of nostalgia in *Mockingbird*. Chapter 2 demonstrates the detrimental effects of using nostalgia to make a region the scapegoat for a nation's ills. Southern exceptionalism has perpetuated a false portrayal of racism in America which has ultimately shaped how some white Americans understand the problem and their own participation in it. On the other hand, Chapter 3 demonstrates how nostalgia can be used as a tool for social critique. It is never a good idea to idealize the past, but that should not defer us from idealizing certain aspects of the past in order to challenge the supposed inevitability of the present.

⁷ Kim Parker, Juliana Menasce Horowitz and Monica Anderson, "Amid Protests, Majorities Across Racial and Ethnic Groups Express Support for the Black Lives Matter Movement," *Pew Research Center*, June 12, 2020.

⁸ Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson, "Amid Protests."

⁹ Hannah Hartig, "Stark partisan divisions in Americans' views of 'socialism,' 'capitalism,'" *Pew Research Center*, June 25, 2019.

As this thesis comes to a close, an opportunity lends itself to sketch out some ideas for future research. There are many perspectives and themes that proved beyond the scope of this thesis, which nevertheless would be interesting to investigate further. How we remember the past and how we let the past define our present has proved an interesting field of study. As this thesis has shown, our collective memory is determined by our institutions of power. A critical investigation of collective memory is therefore a crucial part of dismantling oppressive power structures. A reevaluation of southern literature hitherto dismissed as nostalgic can potentially reveal critical voices that question and challenge the status quo.

Another line of inquiry that would have been interesting to explore further is sense of place. Author Wilma Dykeman argued that the Southern way of life, which has now come to be associated with racial segregation, was first and foremost agrarian: “Dependence on, and closeness to, the earth,” she wrote, “gave rise to certain distinctive characteristics,” such as “close family ties,” a certain “sense of time,” “an awareness of ‘place,’” and “strong individualism.”¹⁰ Those very characteristics have inspired many derogatory slurs towards southerners, and poor whites in particular. The intersection between this definition of the southern way of life and anti-capitalism and eco-criticism, for example, could prove quite revelatory.

¹⁰ Wilma Dykeman, “What Is the Southern Way of Life?” *Southwest Review* 44, no. 2 (1959): 164.

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