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**SEGREGATION IN HARPER LEE'S "TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD": A**  
**CASE OF RACE, CLASS AND GENDER**

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I hereby declare that the substance of this dissertation is entirely the result of my investigation and that references or acknowledgement is made, whenever necessary, to the work of other researchers.

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**Date:** 12/03/2017

**Signed:**\_\_\_\_\_

## DEDICATION

*To my family in every sense of the word.*

*My family that gave me life, supported me unconditionally through it all, and put up with me all these “dissertation” years.*

*My family by choice, the friends I have made over the course of my life whose constant support and encouragement always keep me going.*

*My family that had no choice but tolerate me and learn to live with and, hopefully, cherish me, my colleagues and dear friends both at Hopeland and World Learning.*

*To all those I love, I dedicate this work.*

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation constructs a comprehensive reading of race, class and gender as portrayed through Harper Lee's 1960 novel "**To Kill a Mockingbird**", and attempts to separate those forms of segregation in order to better understand their interaction. This work aims to investigate to what extent "**To Kill a Mockingbird**" is an anti-racism novel. While race is at the heart of the novel, Lee strives to denounce different forms of bigotry such as class and gender. This dissertation also explores the extent to which Harper Lee's novel can be considered to be a progressive novel by analyzing the author's use of narration techniques and critiquing the solutions she suggests for social ailments. A question that is often brought up in this context is how well can a white author write black stories?

The dissertation uses two main literary theories to reach said objectives. The first one is Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism, a theory that explains a literary work reconnecting it with the time period in which it was produced and identify it with the cultural and political movements of the time. The second approach used in this work is Kenneth Burke's Sociological Criticism, which aims at placing literature within its economic, political and, especially social context, and seeks to find social flaws by looking into the structure of society.

Following the guidelines of these two theories, this work revolves around four main axes. The first chapter compares between the representations of black and white characters in the novel. Lee deals with blacks mostly in terms of masses, with little emphasis on individual agents, whereas whites receive much more developed characterization, raising

intriguing questions regarding her ambivalent attitude towards race. The second chapter aims at determining the extent to which the author succeeds in highlighting the individuality of blacks, and their role as individual agents of change. Third, the dissertation highlights the author's view on a decaying old South that clings to old perceptions of class, and her vision for a more progressive society. The fourth and final section of this thesis looks at gender as another basis for segregation, underlining the intersection of gender, race, class and religion and emphasizing the role of women in negotiating their roles in an oppressively prejudiced society.

On the one hand, the author echoes Twain and Emerson's progressive views that the Old South's salvation lies in the individual agents that have the power to let go of old traditions and follow human ethics and principles to bring about positive change. On the other hand, however, Lee's individual agents happen to be white male elite.

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## **GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

*“Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.”*<sup>1</sup>

This 19<sup>th</sup> century epigram by Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr is properly exemplified by the situation of race in America. Today, over a century and a half after the abolition of slavery as a social institution, and as the nation's very first African-American President prepares to leave office, one might be surprised to hear that some sort of a racial caste system still exists in the United States. Indeed, Black people still suffer the repercussions of a justice system that creates a strict stratification between whites and Blacks, and keeps America quite far from becoming the egalitarian democracy which it claims to be.

This situation is best illustrated by the story of Jarvis Cotton, an African-American from Mississippi who, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is still denied democracy's basic right to vote. None of Cotton's ancestors was able to vote before him. Slavery, Ku Klux Klan, intimidation, poll taxes and literacy tests are all factors that prevented the men in Cotton's family tree from participating in the political arena, and electing a representative to govern and look after their interests. What prevents Cotton from voting, however, is a whole different factor. He is a felon on parole in a country where “[d]isenfranchised black males account for 35 percent of all Americans now barred from voting because of felony convictions.”<sup>2</sup> While race is no longer used to justify social discrimination, the practice of using a corrupt justice system to discriminate against people of color is still in place. Commenting on Jarvis Cotton's story in her book, **“The New Jim Crow: Mass**

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: The more things change, the more they remain the same.

<sup>2</sup> "Study: Non-Voting Felons Increasing." ABC News. ABC News Network, n.d. Web. 21 Jan. 2017.  
“<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=121724>”

**Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness**", Michelle Alexander notes, "What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it." This is what she euphemistically calls "The New Jim Crow," the mass incarceration of people of color that is otherwise explained in race-neutral terms<sup>3</sup>. Race is, therefore, still a current issue, and revisiting literature that delves into race is still relevant today.

One can hardly discuss the issue of race in literature without invoking Harper Lee's 1960 Pulitzer Prize winner, the classic of modern American literature, "**To Kill a Mockingbird**." Set in the mid 1930's, the novel chronicles two years of six-year-old Jeane Louis Finch (Scout)'s formative years in Maycomb, a small Alabama town in the American South. Through the eyes of Scout, the reader gets a detailed account of Southern living during the Depression Era as her family faces the dire repercussions of her father's defending Tom Robins, an innocent black man, against Mayella Ewells, a poor, white, young woman, in a rape case that shakes the entire town and unravels the social evils of a Jim Crow society.

Published during the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement when segregation in the Deep South was violently beginning to end, Lee's masterpiece soon attracted the attention of readers and critics alike and sparked unparalleled controversy over the issues it deals with, notably race. The novel made it to the list of the ten most frequently required books

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander, Michelle. *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. The New Press, 2012. Page 6.

in secondary schools<sup>4</sup>, but has also appeared on a list of 30 books most frequently challenged since 1965, and has often been censored in schools and libraries. On the one hand, it has been praised for challenging racial and gender stereotypes, and influencing generations of people in the U.S. and around the world. Referring to the work's social relevance and literary aesthetics, Hovet and Hovet elaborately note, "its powerful critique of racism and its sophisticated use of established elements of the American literary tradition such as the 'coming of age' or 'initiation' formula, the American Gothic, and classic realism... make it both a 'readerly' and a 'teacherly' work."<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, however, the novel has often been challenged for several reasons including, but not limited to: use of black dialect, depictions of violence, references to sex, lack of portrayal of the family unit as the basis of American life as well as negative presentations of blacks<sup>6</sup>. Isaac Saney goes as far as interpreting the novel's "mockingbird" metaphor used in the title as a reminiscence of the abolition movement thinking that fought to end slavery but did not promote for the equality of African Americans. Lee explains the metaphor through Miss Maudie, Scout's neighbor, who says, "Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird" (Page 100). Saney comments on these very words, positing that "they

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<sup>4</sup> Applebee, Arthur, *The Teaching of Literature in Programs with Reputations for Excellence in English* (Albany, New York: Center for the Study of Teaching and Learning of Literature, 1989), 10-25.

<sup>5</sup> Hovet, Theodore R., and Grace-Ann Hovet. "Fine Fancy Gentlemen" and "Yappy Folk": Contending Voices in "To Kill a Mockingbird." *Southern Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2001): 67.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, Claudia Durst. *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries*. No. 139. Twayne Pub, 1994. Page 15.

are not a paean to the intrinsic equality and humanity of all peoples, nor do they acknowledge that blacks are endowed with the same worth and rights as whites...By foisting this mockingbird image on African Americans, the novel does not challenge the insidious conception of superior versus inferior ‘races.’” Instead, Saaney thinks Lee’s rhetoric is similar to the prevention of cruelty to animals movements, and only attacks the excessive violence of the racist social order<sup>7</sup>.

It is, nonetheless, undeniable that “**To Kill a Mockingbird**” still spurs conversations around issues such as race and gender half a century after its publication, impacting readers and professionals both in the literary and legal realms. It is important to note, though, that despite its widespread popularity, surprisingly little academic criticism has been devoted to study this novel. Johnson noticed this lack of critical readings back in 1994 when she noted, “... [I]n the 33 years since its publication, [**To Kill a Mockingbird**] has never been the subject of a dissertation, and it has been a subject of only six literary studies, several of them no more than a couple of pages long.” This, she posits, “forms one of the most astonishing chapters of American literary history.”<sup>8</sup> Even more astonishing is the fact that the novel received more critical readings by legal scholars than literary scholars. Countless educational materials have also been published to support the teaching of the novel in the classroom.

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<sup>7</sup> Saaney, Isaac. "The Case Against To Kill a Mockingbird." *Race and Class* 45.1 (2003): 99-104.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, Claudia Durst. *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries*. No. 139. Twayne Pub, 1994. Page 20.

The most notable literary articles that Johnson refers to include two written by Fred Erisman: **The Romantic Regionalism of Harper Lee** (*Alabama Review*)<sup>9</sup> and a second one in 1981 in the *Journal of Regional Culture*. Erisman provides an acute analysis of Lee's Emersonian version of romanticism embodied through the transcendental character of Atticus. Another article was authored by R.A. Dave in *Indian Studies in American Fiction* in 1974, where he stresses the book's creativity by exploring its various allusions and metaphors, and analyzing the implications of names<sup>10</sup>.

However, since Johnson's "**To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries**," which itself provides illuminating insights on the novel's background, themes and issues, Lee's work has attracted the attention of several other literary scholars across the world. More recent articles studying the different aspects of the novel have appeared in journals and books such as *Southern Literary Journal* 32, 2 (2000); *Southern Cultures* 6, 2 (2000); *Philosophy and Literature* 25, 1 (2001); and **The History of Southern Women's Literature** (2002). In addition to other dissertations that have dealt with the issues of racism, patriarchy, class system and historicism, to name a few<sup>11</sup>, the novel's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2012 also drew more attention to the novel. Magazines such as *Life* (September 2015) devoted whole issues to revisit this classic.

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<sup>9</sup> Erisman, Fred. "The Romantic Regionalism of Harper Lee." *Alabama Review* 26.2 (1973).

<sup>10</sup> Dave, R. A. "To Kill a Mockingbird: Harper Lee's Tragic Vision." *Indian Studies in American Fiction* (1974).

<sup>11</sup> Dissertations include: a) Hakala, Laura, *Scouting for a Tomboy: Gender-Bending Behaviors in Harper Lee's To Kill A Mockingbird* (2010). Electronic Theses & Dissertations. Georgia Southern University; and b) Stiltner, MitziAnn, *Don't Put Your Shoes on the Bed: A Moral Analysis of To Kill a Mockingbird*. (2002). Electronic Theses and Dissertations.

What most of these studies tend to do, however, is focus on one aspect of the novel. Few critics have attempted to either separate or look at the interaction of the three forms of segregation in the novel: race, class and gender. The present study aims to contribute to the novel's existing literary criticism by providing a new angle to understand the issue of segregation. Capitalizing on previous analysis of "**To Kill a Mockingbird**," this dissertation constructs a comprehensive reading of race, class and gender as portrayed through the novel, and attempts to separate those forms of segregation in order to better understand their interaction. This work also studies the issue of segregation as it relates to technique and narration to understand how the author's technique effects the themes discussed.

The objective is to answer two overarching questions. First, to what extent is "**To Kill a Mockingbird**" an anti-racism novel? Lee's work has always been dubbed as such for its fight against racial segregation, but is that all there is to it? While race is at the heart of the novel, Lee strives to denounce several social evils and different forms of bigotry that impact other disadvantaged groups such as women and the poor. The second question I attempt to answer through this dissertation is: to what extent can we consider "**To Kill a Mockingbird**" to be a progressive novel? How well does the author use narration techniques to portray the 1930's reality, and to what extent can we consider her solutions for social ailments to be based on progressive views as it relates to race, class and gender? A question that is often brought up in this context is how well can a white author write black stories?

In order to answer these questions, two literary theories best fit this work. The principal critical approach is New Historicism. Developed in the 1980s primarily through the work of Stephen Greenblatt in his introduction to a special issue of *Genre* in 1982<sup>12</sup>, this theory aims at understanding a literary work by placing it within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical context. In their book, “Practicing New Historicism,” Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher note, “[C]ulture... renders the fragment explicable, both as something that could have only been written in a moment characterized by a particular set of circumstances, structures, and assumptions and as something that conveys the life-world of that moment.”<sup>13</sup> I find it to be the most useful approach since the novel at hand deals with issues that were part of a common ideology circulating at that time.

Another reason why I chose this approach is because it seeks to reconnect a work with the time period in which it was produced and identify it with the cultural and political movements of the time. It is exactly what Lee tries to do by narrating a story that took place decades before the time of narration and creating a cultural and political movement that, according to her, fits the contexts of their story. Through New Historicism, we shall be able to analyze the interpretations of the writer and the people around them. New historicists, as Tyson puts it, believe that we interpret events as products of our time and culture and that we do not have “clear access to any but the most basic facts of history... our

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<sup>12</sup> Greenblatt, Stephen. "King Lear and Harsnett's Devil-Fiction in The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance." *Genre* Norman NY 15.1-2 (1982): 239-242.

<sup>13</sup> Gallagher, Catherine, and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing new historicism*. University of Chicago Press, 2000. Page 35.

understanding of what such facts mean is ... strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact.”<sup>14</sup>

This attitude matches with my research because through novels, and this novel in particular, we only see history through the writer’s eyes and interpretations of events.

In addition to culture, I have felt the need to relate the novel to economy and society. For that end, another approach that I have used in this research is Sociological Criticism. First introduced by Kenneth Burke, and later developed by Jameson Frederick, who himself was heavily influenced by Erich Auerbach, this method aims at placing literature within its economic, political and, especially social context. Whereas New Historicism focuses more on ideology and power, this approach looks into the social structure of society to find social flaws, which is exactly what Lee does in her novel. Even though the Marxist tendencies to evaluate literature have been criticized for being too judgmental, my tendencies will be more like Kenneth Burke’s, endeavoring to utilize art as a manifestation of society. In his article “*Literature as Equipment for Living*” where he clearly outlines Sociological Criticism, Burke suggests an approach that “would derive its relevance from the fact that it should apply to both works of art and to social situations outside of art.”<sup>15</sup>

The aim, therefore, is to understand society through literature and the author’s interpretation of reality. In this case, the interest will be to understand race, class and gender issues from the perceptions of Harper Lee, keeping in mind that these perceptions are most definitely influenced by the reality of the time. Following this approach, which goes hand

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<sup>14</sup> Tyson, Lois. *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide*. Routledge, 2014. Page 268.

<sup>15</sup> Burke, Kenneth. "Literature as equipment for living." *The philosophy of literary form* (1973): 293-304. Page 303.

in hand with New Historicism, should add more emphasis on the social, political and economic settings of the novel I intend to work on. Hence, using Sociological Criticism is especially useful when analyzing the author's depiction of communities.

Following the guidelines of these two theories, this dissertation revolves around four main axes. The first chapter compares between the representations of black and white characters in the novel with the objective of investigating the impact of representation differences, and the extent to which this portrayal is close to the reality of the time. While this chapter focuses more on technique and narration, I find it to be of extreme importance as it impacts the way we interpret other aspects of segregation in later chapters. Lee deals with blacks mostly in terms of masses, with little emphasis on individual agents, whereas whites receive much more developed characterization, making it harder to analyze the issue of racial segregation and raising intriguing questions regarding her ambivalent attitude towards race.

The second chapter of this thesis looks at the depiction of black characters in Harper Lee's "**To Kill a Mockingbird**," highlighting the ugly sides of a racially discriminate society such as lynching, anti-miscegenation and judicial injustice. This section aims at determining the extent to which the author succeeds in highlighting the individuality of blacks, and their role as individual agents of change. It also attempts to investigate Lee's success in telling black stories.

Third, my dissertation discusses the portrayal of white community life, with all its restricting segregation boundaries and conservative attitudes with the objective of

identifying the pivotal elements that, according to the author, create a class-based social stratification, impacting the lives of individuals. The third chapter also highlights the author's view on a decaying old South that clings to old perceptions of class, and her vision for a more progressive society.

The fourth and final section of this thesis looks at gender as another basis for segregation. It studies how women suffer the consequences of a social standstill in the American South, bringing everything together by highlighting the intersection of gender segregation with race, class and religion and underlining the role of women in negotiating their roles in an oppressively prejudiced society.

The general conclusion synthesizes findings from the four chapters, highlighting both Lee's view of a progressive South and her ambivalent attitude towards civil rights. On the one hand, the author echoes Twain and Emerson's progressive views that the Old South's salvation lies in the individual agents that have the power to let go of old traditions and follow human ethics and principles to bring about positive change. On the other hand, however, Lee's individual agents happen to be white male elite.

**CHAPTER ONE: LEE'S SEGREGATED PORTRAYAL OF  
BLACKS AND WHITES: A CASE OF TECHNIQUES AND  
NARRATION**

## 1. Limited Black Representation

Due to the importance of race in “**To Kill a Mockingbird**,” we find it necessary to devote a part of this work to capture the way Harper Lee portrays her black and white characters before delving into the topic of racial segregation. In a novel that is best known for its fight against racism and social prejudice, one cannot help noticing limited representation of black characters in comparison to the rich, in-depth characterization of whites. This chapter highlights how Lee deals with blacks mostly in the form of masses, with little emphasis on individual agents, whereas whites receive much more developed characterization, raising intriguing questions regarding her ambivalent attitude towards race. By doing so, my objective is to discuss the impact, be it positive or negative, of this difference of representation on both white and black characters and to what extent these representations reflect the reality of the time.

Harper Lee’s ambivalent attitude is clearly visible through their limited representation in the narrative. Two main parts stand out when studying “**To Kill a Mockingbird**.” First, there is a remarkable absence of black individual agents in the novel, and their presence does not provide an extended account of the black community. Whereas there are only two main black characters in the book, Calpurnia, the Finches’ help, and Tom, Atticus’s defendant in the rape case, none of them is as fully developed as the white characters, such as Scout’s father, Atticus, or her brother, Jem. Secondly, the author often presents blacks in the form of anonymous masses rather than individual agents.

### **1.1. Absence of Individual Agents in the Novel**

Most of the characters in the novel are white. Scout's daily contact is primarily with her neighbors, Miss Maudie, Mrs. Dubose and Miss Rachel, and they are all white. Similarly, when she goes to the all-white school, her interactions are exclusively with whites such as Miss Caroline, her teacher, and Walter Cunningham, her classmate. While two of the main characters (Calpurnia and Tom Robinson) are black, and even though a major part of the novel's plot revolves around Tom's trial, they have little impact on plot development. Also, all of Tom's scenes show him under duress because of his trial and the impending danger from the Southern white community. Therefore, almost all of his appearances show him passively quiet until asked to do otherwise. Awaiting white Atticus's intervention, Tom does not even act to change his own situation.

Cal and Tom are Scout's, and therefore the reader's, only way to learn about the black community. However, while Scout manages to describe the blacks through these two characters, neither of them can provide an actual portrayal of blacks in Maycomb. The novel still does not provide as exhaustive a portrayal of the black community as it does of the whites. While there are also a few other black characters in the novel such as Reverend Sykes and Zeebo, their minor roles do not tell enough about the personalities, opinions or beliefs of black characters, nor about how they feel, act or react to certain situations.

Paul Thomson notes that one way to justify why black characters do not appear in the story is that the writer's main purpose is to depict limited contact between blacks and whites. Paul Thomson says, "It is possible that the novel intentionally gives us a limited

perspective on African Americans in order to illustrate a point: since blacks lived on the absolute periphery of society in 1930's Alabama, a story told from the perspective of an average white person should reflect this in both its narrative structure and content."<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, this is not to say that Scout has absolutely no contact with the black community. In fact, blacks are constantly present in Scout's life as well as in the narration, but their presence almost never highlights their individuality, nor recognizes their role as agents of change in the community. Instead, in most of the scenes that feature blacks, Harper Lee presents them as part of the background.

## **1.2. Blacks as Anonymous Masses**

In fact, the treatment of black characters in "**To Kill a Mockingbird**" is in the form of an anonymous mass rather than individuals. While static passivity characterizes these masses, even when they do perform actions, it is always in the form of masses, leaving almost no room for individual initiatives. Apart from Cal and Tom, the narrator's contact with the black characters is always with an entire group. This is especially apparent in the episode where Scout and Jem go with Cal to the black church as well as the numerous chapters that narrate Tom's trial. Also, according to the town's Sheriff, Maycomb's jail is filled with "niggers," and he would not want to put white Boo Radley with them.

While this presentation of blacks as masses is different from the various singled-out white profiles in the novel, it paints the blacks as passive, and massively oppressed groups.

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<sup>16</sup> "Racism Among Characters in To Kill a Mockingbird." N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Jan. 2017.

Unlike the white groups who act together in the form of a lynching mob and take justice to their hands, blacks show little to no resistance against the oppressions and injustices forced upon them. They actually spend their time between hiding and obediently entering and exiting the courtroom behind the whites. For instance, during Tom's trial, as people are going back into the courtroom, the blacks not only have separate seating areas from the whites, but they also have to wait for all the whites to enter before they come in. And when it is their turn to walk in, a member of the Idlers' Club (a group of "suspended old men who had spent their lives doing nothing [except being] attentive critics of courthouse business") holds up his walking stick and decides they should not "start up them there stairs yet awhile." His simple order holds back an entire mass of blacks, and no one talks back to him. They wait for him to go up the stairs before they "surged upstairs" like a herd of sheep (Page 180).

However, Isaac Saney, in his commentator, "**The Case Against To Kill a Mockingbird**," notes that Lee presents an inaccurate portrait of blacks' reality in the 1930's. The novel, Saney further writes, "is set in the 1930's and portrays Blacks as somnolent [sleepy, inactive], awaiting someone from outside to take up and fight for the cause of justice."<sup>17</sup> This reality is sharply different from the historical accounts of the era. It is worth keeping mind, in particular, the maelstrom of activity that swept across the African-American masses, North and South, following the injustices that took place during the Scottsboro case.

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<sup>17</sup> Saney, Isaac. *The Case Against To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Race & Class*, vol. 45, July 2003, pp. 99-100.

The Scottsboro Boys Case (1931-1938), named after a small town in Alabama, was a case that revealed blatant liabilities in the administration of the Alabama justice, and “represented an indictment against courtrooms and cultural norms throughout the South.”<sup>18</sup> After a fight between black and white youth on a train, nine black boys were wrongfully accused of raping two white women, and immediately sentenced to death. African-Americans soon took action by organizing massive protests across the country, ultimately altering the fate of the black defendants. In particular, several conferences were organized in Tennessee in support of the Scottsboro boys. An all-Southern conference was organized in Chattanooga, and was attended by over two hundred delegates, and soon after thousands of black and white workers paraded the streets of Harlem, New York denouncing the sentences against the Scottsboro Boys. This mass activity managed to halt the executions pending an appeal to the Alabama Supreme Court<sup>19</sup> and unravelling the shortcomings of the Southern justice system.

Harper Lee was a young child during the Scottsboro trials, and case received extensive media coverage at the time. That in addition to Lee’s father being a lawyer, it is very unlikely that she was not aware of all these happenings or the active role blacks played in defending the Scottsboro boys. Nevertheless, her novel, as Saney comments, “gives no inkling of this mass protest and instead creates the inedible impression that the entire black

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<sup>18</sup> Macpherson, Heidi Slettedahl. "Frankie Y. Bailey and Steven Chermak (eds.), Famous American Crimes and Trials. 5 Vols (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004)." *Journal of American Studies* 40.1 (2006): 161-163.

<sup>19</sup> Howard, Walter T. *Black Communists Speak on Scottsboro: A Documentary History*. Temple University Press, 2007. Page 11.

community existed in a complete state of paralysis.” By doing so, Lee strips the blacks of their role as agents of history.

### **1.3. Negotiating History without the Black Man: The Civil Rights Movement**

When dealing with history in “**To Kill a Mockingbird**,” one can hardly fail to notice that even though the setting of the novel is 1933-1935, a lot of the historical events mentioned in the novel actually happened later. For instance, the Works Progress Administration was created in 1935, but it is mentioned very early in the novel (Page 23). Also, there is a mentioning of Mrs. Roosevelt’s attendance of the Southern Conference on Human Welfare when she defied separate seating regulations. Although the incident is referred to as a present history of the novel (Page 258), it did not actually happen until 1938.

It is because of these foreshadowings of future history that Patrick Chura argues that “the novel is best understood as an amalgam or cross-historical montage.” Its “historical present,” Chura goes on to explain, is “diluted by the influence of events and ideology concurrent with its period of production.” For him, more important than references such as the WPA and Mrs. Roosevelt’s incident, or what he calls “chronological lapses”, is “the ideology that characterized not the Depression Era, but the Civil Rights era.”<sup>20</sup> While the Depression and its repercussions are felt all throughout the novel, the overall social ambiance and dynamics depicted are more civil rights oriented. The racial tension and the

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<sup>20</sup> Chura, Patrick. “Prolepsis and Anachronism: Emmet Till and the Historicity of *To Kill a Mockingbird*”. *Southern Literary Journal*; Spring 2000; 32, 2; Platinum Periodicals. Page 1.

conflicts orient a major part of the novel to a reality that is more related to the book's period of production (1950s) than it is to its "setting period" (1930s).

One major argument that Chura uses to support his point of view is the Tom Robinson Trials. Since the publishing of the book, most works and critics have argued, with doubtless confidence, that Harper Lee's depiction of the Tom Robinson trials is largely inspired by the Scottsboro Boys trials that took place in the 1930s. Claudia Johnson, for instance, believes that "Tom Robinson's trial bears striking parallels to the "Scottsboro Trial." The two trials, Johnson argues, share similarities of timeframe (1930s), place (Deep South, Alabama to be more precise), and the defendants are both black men accused of rape by white women. "A study of the Scottsboro trials," she further writes, "will sharpen the reader's understanding of 'To Kill a Mockingbird.'" <sup>21</sup> For her part, Stiltner joins opinions with Johnson as she notes, "Because Lee's trial of Tom Robinson similarly recasts the 1930s Scottsboro trial, it seems likely she chose to use the high-profile, nationally exploited trial as the foundation for her novel." <sup>22</sup>

Patrick Chura, however, utterly disagrees with these views. In fact, he insists that the Tom Robinson case in "To Kill a Mockingbird" is certainly inspired by the Emmet Till case. <sup>23</sup> "There is a long list of similarities both circumstantial and deeply ideological between the 1955 lynching of Emmet Till and Lee's account of the conviction and murder

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<sup>21</sup> Johnson, Claudia. "Historical Context: The Scottsboro Trials." *Understanding To kill a mockingbird: a student casebook to issues, sources, and historic documents*. Vol. 1. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994. Page 15.

<sup>22</sup> Stiltner, MitziAnn, *Don't Put Your Shoes on the Bed: A Moral Analysis of To Kill a Mockingbird*. (2002). Electronic Theses and Dissertations. Paper 722. <http://dc.etsu.edu/etd/722>. Page 7.

<sup>23</sup> Emmet Till was a "14-year-old boy from Chicago who was brutally murdered by two white men in the Mississippi Delta on August 28, 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman in a store in Money, Mississippi."

of Tom Robinson, similarities which point to the common origin of both texts in a particularly trouble period in the southern history of race."<sup>24</sup> Apart from the long list of similarities, the Till Case events happened during the production period of the novel, and it received overwhelming media coverage across the world. The Scottsboro Trials also received their share of media coverage, but it was nothing like the attention granted to Emmet Till.

Though the Scottsboro trials in the 1930s had excited considerable media interest, the lurid details of alleged gang rape and the provocative testimony of two alleged white prostitutes that were part of that case are cited by Whitaker as obvious factors. The Till case for the first time saw a noticeable majority of media take a strongly progressive stance on issues of civil rights.<sup>25</sup>

With all this media coverage and coming from a legal background, Harper Lee must have been well informed of the case details, which are clearly reflected through various instances of the Robinson trial.

“Lee’s 1930s historical background,’ Chura concludes, “though developed in some detail, should not be allowed to obscure the real conditions which governed the text’s production in the years from roughly 1955 to 1959.”<sup>26</sup> However, regardless of whether the Tom Robinson trial is inspired by Emmet Till or the Scottsboro Trials, or whether the novel is more oriented by Depression Era mood or early Civil Rights Era ambiance, Harper Lee, once again, focuses on capturing Southern community life from a complex 1930s/1950s

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<sup>24</sup> Chura, Patrick. “Prolepsis and Anachronism: Emmet Till and the Historicity of *To Kill a Mockingbird*”. *Southern Literary Journal*; Spring 2000; 32, 2; Platinum Periodicals. Page 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

point of view, all the while ignoring the dynamics of the black community during the time. Both Scottsboro boys and Emmet Till sparked a massive surge of movements and initiatives across the U.S. in reaction to the injustices against blacks, many of these movements such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama were initiated by blacks themselves, but Harper Lee utterly ignores all these actions in her novel.

Chura defends the author arguing that “Lee’s novel ... ends where the civil rights movement begins,”<sup>27</sup> but while she inserts hints of change such as the jury taking longer than usual before making their decision, and she expresses her hope for a change in society through the younger generation, the author does not include the smallest hint of black activity, much less an indication of the Civil Rights Movement. This decision further proves the author’s ambivalent attitude, and her clear way of dealing with racism as a white man’s issue, totally ignoring its impact on blacks and their role in driving change in society.

While Lee’s act of reducing the black community into a passive mass might reinforce the critical view that dubs her to be ambivalent and her novel to be racist, the tendency to draw blacks in masses nevertheless serves certain motifs in the novel. First, grouping blacks together reflects the Jim Crow Southern society whose racially discriminate acts put all black people under one single “niggers” category on which they apply all types of stereotypes and injustices. All throughout the novel, racist white characters constantly refer to blacks as “niggers,” and they often link them to several moral deficits and foul flaws. Bob Ewell, in his testimony in Tom’s trial, states that the “nigger-nest” next to his house

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid

devaluates his property. For fifteen years he has asked Maycomb County to “clean [it] out” for he thinks “they’re dangerous to live around.”

Similarly, many characters in the novel judge the blacks to be inherently immoral human beings. This is reflected through Mrs. Merriweather, a self-proclaimed devout Christian from Aunt Alexandra’s missionary circle, when she reports that “We can educate ‘em till we’re blue in the face, we can try till we drop to make Christians out of ‘em, but there’s no lady safe in her bed these nights” (Page 255). This statement indicates the unjust preconceptions against blacks during that time. As Atticus puts it in his closing argument of Tom’s trial, the all-white jury members in the court, just like most of the Southern society of the time, have “an evil assumption- that all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, that all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women, an assumption one associates with minds of their caliber.” Atticus seems to be one of the few characters who are aware of this truth.

#### **1.4. Strength in Numbers: From a Passive Mass to Helpful Supporters**

Interestingly enough, the portrayal of blacks as a mass of people shows interesting moments of solidarity and gratitude where the mass is transformed into a community. blacks, as depicted in the novel, have the chance to set up establishments such as the church where they can host community activities. Despite their paralyzing inability to act in a way that changes their situation and lifts up the maltreatment that haunts their quotidian life, the black community members never hesitate to contribute with what they can to show support and make things better for their friends in need or express gratitude to those who

honor them. When Scout goes to the black church with Cal, she witnesses communal solidarity as the church-goers collect ten dollars for Helen, Tom's wife, who is impoverished due to her husband's imprisonment and her unemployment. Also, the next morning after Tom's trial, the black families bury Atticus's kitchen in food presents, expressing their appreciation of his services as Tom's devoted lawyer, though it is a time of depression when food is scarce.

Over the years, the black people's limited access to well-paying jobs has never hindered them from showing a high level of communal support. Lee illustrates this through the manner in which First Purchase, a black church in Maycomb, was initially established. "[P]aid for from the first earnings of freed slaves" (Page 130), First Purchase is a living monument of the blacks' solidarity and commitment to their community. It is also a haven where they can host activities with a certain level of distance from the white intervention. Situated outside town limits, the church provides physical distance, and, relatively speaking, allows blacks to host non-white activities. In this regard, Sanderfer notes, "Although often not as wealthy as whites, after the Civil War blacks developed cultural resources in the form of black churches, colleges, and activist organizations that nonetheless empowered their communities and provided opportunities to exercise power."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Sanderfer, Selena Ronshaye. *For Land and Liberty: Black Territorial Separatism in the South, 1776-1904*. Diss. Vanderbilt University, 2010. Page 218.

In reality, however, the power exercised in black churches was not limited to collecting money for the poor, contrary to what Lee shows through the scene when they collect money for Tom's wife. Between the Civil War and the 1950's, churches were used for education, preaching social ideals such as black separatism, and recruiting activists for reform actions. Sanderfer writes, "Black churches in the antebellum South were cauldrons for many forms of black protest including separatism."<sup>29</sup> The church was a place to voice black opposition against racial injustices, and promote social movements such as the black separatist cause. Based on the works of Gerlach and Hine<sup>30</sup>, McAdam<sup>31</sup> and Polletta<sup>32</sup>, Sanderfer effectively summarizes the role of the church in the black community as she writes:

"The church is a hallmark of the black community and has served as a communal center for a variety of both secular and spiritual interactions. The existence of a reticulate organization such as a church involves significant personal contact and is vital in mobilizing potential participants. The black church was an important institution in southern separatist movements by producing its leaders and serving as a free space where African Americans could contemplate and/or deliberate without interference from repressive groups. Under these indigenous organizational setting black communities could discuss separatism and decide upon separatist organizations, leaders, and goals."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Page 118.

<sup>30</sup> Gerlach, Luther P., and Virginia H. Hine. "Five factors crucial to the growth and spread of a modern religious movement." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (1968): 23-40.

<sup>31</sup> McAdam, Doug. *Political process and the development of black insurgency, 1930-1970*. University of Chicago Press, 2010. 124-132.

<sup>32</sup> Poletta, Francesca. "Free Spaces in Collective Action," *Theory and Society*. Vol. 28 no. 1 (February 1999):1-38.

<sup>33</sup> Sanderfer, Selena Ronshaye. *For Land and Liberty: Black Territorial Separatism in the South, 1776-1904*. Diss. Vanderbilt University, 2010. Page 207.

This important role held by the church in the fight against racism, both during the time of the book production and earlier in the 1930s, is utterly neglected in Harper Lee's depiction of the black church and its role as a social institution. In fact, while she emphasizes the role of whites in fighting against social injustices, she diminishes the contribution of the church in the black struggle to a minor part characterized mainly by a sense of charity support. By doing so, the writer once again denies blacks their role as active agents of change and their contribution in the making of history.

It is worth noting that Harper Lee uses an interesting narrative technique to capture both the whites' prejudices and the blacks' solidarity. The narrator toggles between reporting what other characters supposedly know about blacks, and what she actually witnesses first hand in order to make the distinction between presumptions and reality. In all of the scenes where the reader is presented with the "mischiefs" and "immoralities" of the African-Americans, it is always through someone other than Scout. The child narrator hears white adults, such as Bob and Mayella Ewells, talk about the crime that Tom supposedly committed, but she never saw the action in person. Also, Mrs. Merriweather talks about how blacks are not to be trusted; but Scout, though lives with Cal, never has any reason not to trust a black person. However, Scout witnesses the aspects of communal solidarity and gratitude first hand. The narrator tells about the donations at the church and presents for Atticus without the filters of other characters, hence adding more credibility to the stories.

To sum up, while racism is one of the overarching themes in Harper Lee's **"To Kill a Mockingbird,"** the novel does not offer as detailed and complex a depiction of black

characters as individual personalities. Regardless of whether that proves the writer's ambivalent attitude or demonstrates her intended attempts to paint realistic images, the infrequent appearance of black characters, their minor impact on the plot and the dominance of submissive masses make the task of analyzing their individual identities harder. While stereotypical behavior attributed to her black characters make no room for them as individual agents of history as it was actually the case in the 1930s, Harper Lee keeps emphasizing the role of whites in bringing about positive change and, and she seems to go to the point of dealing with racism as a white man's issue.

## **2. A Rich White Representation of Whites**

### **2.1. Diverse and Complex Personalities**

Comparing with its portrayal of blacks, this novel sheds a lot more light on whites than it does on blacks. Scout narrates stories of a much larger abundance of whites than she does of blacks. She develops complex characters such as Scout's brother, Jem, and father, Atticus and even Aunt Alexandra. Scout's entire neighborhood, apart from Calpurnia and Mrs. Dubose's caretaker, is all white, and so are most of the people she interacts with. Scout's life is heavily influenced by her interaction with Miss Maudie, the good neighbor who cares for her and supports Atticus's endeavors to defend Tom in a time where the entire town turns its back on him. There is also Miss Rachael, the gossipy neighbor, and Mrs. Dubose, the racist conservative from the house down the street. All these white people and others surround Scout who gives detailed portrayals of their lives, personalities and opinions. While this difference between the presence of whites and the of blacks can be

justified by Paul Thomson's argument that Lee's narrative should reflect the level of contact a white girl had with blacks in reality, it is worth noting that number is not the only difference.

Lee's white characters are not only more numerous than blacks, but they also receive richer personalities and more complex profiles. Lee manages to do this by assigning white characters both positive traits such as determination and family love, and negative flaws like prejudice and conservative attitudes rendering the task of judging them or determining whether they are good or evil to be difficult. A good example of this is Mrs. Dubbose, Atticus's neighbor. She is first presented as a mean, racist old woman who is impossible to like. Her statement to the Finch children that Atticus is "no better than the niggers and trash he works for" (Page 113) is heavy with both racial and class prejudices, while her continuous criticism and attacks on Scout and Jem make them hate her to the point that she drives Jem to act out of character and destroy her camellias. However, when Atticus forces Jem to go read to her every day, to redeem his bad behavior, he and Scout gradually learn more about her person; they learn that beneath her rough surface, there is a very strong passion for romantic literature and stories of chivalry. When she eventually dies, Atticus reveals another aspect of her personality that no one knew before. Mrs. Dubose had been addicted to morphine, and her insisting on Jem's reading sessions was her solution to distract herself from the addiction in an attempt to free herself of morphine dependence. While her story has little impact on the novel's plot, it teaches the two children a great lesson about courage. Commenting on this complex individual, Harold Bloom states that

“she may represent the South’s prejudice and its ugliness, but also stand for its pride and willpower.”<sup>34</sup> While these two contrasting qualities present whites in a less evil manner, they also create a certain complexity of character that she shares with a lot of the white individuals, both main and secondary, such as Miss Maudie and Aunt Alexandra.

Another way Lee achieves character complexity is through their mental disability. Different forms of disability appear throughout the novel; but while both black and white characters in the novel receive their share of disability, the whites’ disabilities are either mental (Boo Radley) or intellectual (The Ewells), underlining an intriguing richness of character and adding to the complexity of psychology. On the other hand, the black characters’ disabilities, as discussed in Chapter Two, are mostly physical, emphasizing the body. For instance, from the beginning of the novel, the kids are curious about Boo because of his reclusiveness. In the very first chapter, Jem provides a horrific description of Boo that stems from a rather wild imagination.

Jem gave a reasonable description of Boo: Boo was about six-and-a-half feet tall, judging from his tracks; he dined on raw squirrels and any cats he could catch, that’s why his hands were bloodstained—if you ate an animal raw, you could never wash the blood off. There was a long jagged scar that ran across his face; what teeth he had were yellow and rotten; his eyes popped, and he drooled most of the time. (Page 14)

This description puts the kids on an immediate quest to draw Boo out of his house in series of gothic scenes. Throughout the novel, however, bits and pieces tell us about Boo’s love for art and care for the kids. When he finally makes an appearance by the end, the frightening Boo suddenly turns into a hero, saving Jem and Scout from Bob’s murderous

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<sup>34</sup> Bloom, Harold. *Harper Lee's To kill a mockingbird*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, (Chelsea House 2010).

hands. By doing so, Lee makes out of Boo's mental disability, which alienates him from society, a richness of character that the Finch kids, along with the reader, discover bit by bit. Black disability, however, emphasizes their body, therefore highlighting their basic role as physical laborers. Unsurprisingly, disability is also used in the novel to emphasize black poverty and social fragility, hence continuing their inferiority. In Tom's case, for instance, contrary to Jem's temporarily physical disability when his arm is broken, Tom's is a permanent one, and it stresses a certain imperfection of the black race<sup>35</sup>.

Lee also puts her white characters through ethically challenging situations in order to uncover different aspects of their personality, resulting in reality-like complex characters. An example of these situations is Atticus's struggle between the constraints of his past, represented by his sister Alexandra, and the unconventionality of his future, embodied by his free-willed children. At one point Atticus gives in to Alexandra's pressure and sits down with his kids for a lecture about how they are not from "run-of-the-mill people" but rather "the product of several generations' gentle breeding" (page 147), and that they should behave accordingly. While Scout is clearly surprised by his unusual attitude, Atticus is obviously not comfortable with the situation because he is only repeating what his sister instructed him to without necessarily agreeing with her. Fidgeting his fingers, he admits that he does not know how to say it, which implies his uncertainty and inner struggle with the predicament. He finally decides to end it by telling them to forget everything, giving in to his instinct about what is right to do. Commenting on this scene, Fred Erisman notes that

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<sup>35</sup> Tom's Disability is discussed further in this work in Chapter One.

Atticus “approach[es] his past and its traditions with tolerant skepticism.” In this scene, Atticus’s complexity lies in his uncertain attitude towards his past and traditions. While he “recognizes that his culture is retrospective,” he “has no hostility towards his past.”<sup>36</sup> Atticus, therefore, constantly struggles with similarly challenging situations where he has to find a balance between his constraining past and progressive morals, creating a complex personality that people can easily identify with.

To sum up, Lee achieves reality-like complexity for her white characters by contrasting positive and negative qualities, employing mental disorder and putting individuals through challenging situations. While these struggles contribute to the emotional and ideological development of her white characters, creating timeless lessons for all humanity to learn from, none of the blacks receives this level of character complexity. Unlike whites, blacks are deprived a richness of character that people can identify with. On the other hand, unlike blacks, several of Lee’s white characters undergo growth in personality over the course of the narration. In fact, it is worth noting that it is difficult to determine the main protagonist, and it is rather easier to settle on the idea that “**To Kill a Mockingbird**” actually has several protagonists.

## **2.2. It Is Not All about Scout: Multiple Developing White Protagonists**

In her article, “*More Than One Way to (Mis)Read a Mockingbird*,” Jennifer Murray highlights the multi-protagonist characteristic of the novel, noting, “It might be most accurate to say that “**To Kill a Mockingbird**” is a novel without a clear protagonist,

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<sup>36</sup> Fred Erisman, *The Romantic Regionalism of Harper Lee*. Alabama Review, Vol. 26, April 1973. Page 129.

making do with a double-perspective first-person narrator instead.”<sup>37</sup> While Tom’s trial occupies a major part of the narrative, several episodes such as the Mrs. Dubose episode and the mad dog episode do not necessarily contribute to Scout’s character development but revolve around other characters’ evolution. In fact, there is even a sub-story involving Boo Radley that unfolds in parallel to the Tom Robinson narrative, and eventually crosses paths with it at the end of the novel when Boo saves the kids from Bob Ewell. Some chapters of the novel, however, especially in the beginning, focus so much on Boo that the reader is tempted to believe he, instead of Scout, is the main protagonist.

One of the results this episodic structure is that it highlights more than one protagonist. In fact, while Scout is the only narrator of the novel, there are several scenes where she is a mere observer, and is no way affected by the events taking place around her. She rather focuses on capturing the effect on other characters, and portraying their personal development as it is in progress. For instance, the chapter where Atticus shoots the mad dog clearly has Jem as a main protagonist, and does not affect Scout the way he is affected. Having complained about Atticus’s age-related frailty and lack of physical fitness, Jem undergoes a life-changing moment upon learning about their father’s extraordinary shooting skills. This epiphany only impacts Jem while, unclear how she reacts to the new discovery herself, Scout seems to be more surprised by and occupied with Jem’s reaction and the growth taking place before her. “Jem stayed in numb confusion,” she reports (Page 108). Jem’s own personal growth is visible as he springs in an energetic run proudly

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<sup>37</sup> Murray, Jennifer. "More than one way to (Mis) read a mockingbird." *The Southern Literary Journal* 43.1 (2010): 75-91. Page 76.

shouting that “Atticus is a gentleman, just like [himself]” (Page 109). Commenting on this scene, Murray notes, “Indeed, the focus on Atticus’s weakness is a way of setting up the reversal of Jem’s view of him, not Scout’s, after he reveals himself as ‘One-Shot Finch.’”

<sup>38</sup> The scene, therefore, augments Jem’s sense of class consciousness, and boosts his self-esteem. Similarly, several other scenes in the novel highlight other white characters as protagonists-in-development, while Scout simply observes their personal growth.

Actually, Lee’s focus on more than one white protagonist provides more room for character development. While Calpurnia and Tom’s personalities remain static all throughout the story, Scout, Jem, Atticus and other whites all undergo a certain level of character growth, and not necessarily in a positive way. Bob Ewell, for instance, is presented as a racist and domestically violent character at the beginning of the book, but never portrayed as a murderer. Nevertheless, he is remarkably impacted by the trial during which he feels humiliated in front of all of Maycomb. Despite the jury’s decision in his favor, Bob feels that Atticus’s defense of Tom Robinson negatively affects his reputation, which was not a good reputation in the first place. This experience makes a murderer out of him when he premeditates to murder the Finch kids in avenge for his lost dignity.

The multiplicity of Lee’s protagonists, and their character development is achieved thanks to the episodic structure of her novel. Critics have tried to justify this diffraction by what Murray dubs as “the product of marketing pressures.” The novel originated from a collection of short stories that Lee wrote in the mid 1950’s about her childhood

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid

experiences, and her literary agent suggested taking a “step further” by combining the stories into a novel, which she successfully did. Nevertheless, critics, including Murray, have often pointed out the shortages of this episodic structure.

By focusing on multiple protagonists, Lee provides the reader with enough materials to construct an informed social criticism of the American South, all the while limiting her black characters to flat, unchanging and simple personalities. While Lee’s South reflects neither the time of the novel (1930s) nor its period of production (late 1950s), in terms of its portrayal of black characters, she still manages to capture instances of racial segregation which the next chapter is devoted for.

**CHAPTER TWO: LEE’S MAMMIES AND TOMS: THE  
DEPICTION OF BLACK CHARACTERS IN “TO KILL A  
MOCKINGBIRD”**

## 1. Introduction

**“To Kill a Mockingbird”** is known for denouncing racial segregation in the American South as much as its contribution to the 1960s fight against racism. Yet, as hinted in the previous chapter, a closer look at the manner in which blacks are dealt with in the novel raises questions about the author’s attitudes towards race, and brings a new perspective as to her ability as a white writer to objectively write black stories. This chapter studies the depiction of black characters in Harper Lee’s **“To Kill a Mockingbird,”** and highlights characteristics of a racially discriminate society such as lynching, anti-miscegenation and judicial injustice. My purpose is two-fold. First, I will deal with the stereotypical way used by Lee to portray the black characters, and then assess how these traits compare to the common stereotypes about blacks that occur in the daily life and literature of the era. Second, I will try to determine how the author, in her fight against racism, succeeds in highlighting the individuality of blacks, and their role as individual agents of change. The overall objective of the chapter is to determine to what extent Harper Lee’s individuals are close to the reality of the 1930’s, and, therefore, how she, as a white writer, succeeds in telling black stories that fight against racism in a time when the Black Civil Rights Movement was at its prime.

## 2. Hardworking “Tom” and Affectionate “Mammy”: Stereotypes and Resistance

In many ways, Calpurnia, Tom and the other black characters in **“To Kill a Mockingbird”** duplicate stereotypical figures of Tom and Mammy that circulated at the

time. Mammy and Tom are the best known and enduring caricatures of African American Women (Mammy) and men (Tom). Mainly based on the depiction of Aunt Chloe and Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel, "**Uncle Tom's Cabin**," these two images remarkably developed over the slavery and Jim Crow eras, and were often used to serve the various political, social and even economic interests of mainstream Southern society in the U.S.<sup>39</sup>. Healthy, caring and motherly Mammy and hardworking, loyal and dependent Tom were used to justify the institution of slavery and reinforce the "contented slave" image that covered up all the mistreatments and injustices suffered by the black community. In "**To Kill a Mockingbird**," Mammy and Tom's characteristics are clearly reflected through Calpurnia and Tom Robinson. This section will study these characteristics, comparing them with stereotypes of the time and highlighting the emergence of resistant black personalities in white literature.

## 2.1. The Uncle Tom Image

Tom, the smiling, submissive servant who is happily loyal to his white master, has been used to sing the benefits of slavery, but judged paternalistic by critics such as Thomas Riggio who claims that the Tom image "projects a paternalistic conception of the 'negro character.'"<sup>40</sup> While the name originated, ironically, from Stowe's "**Uncle Tom's Cabin**," an antislavery novel that was intended to stimulate sympathy for the slaves among white readers, the figure of Tom has developed over the years to symbolize the pathetic, passive

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<sup>39</sup> Pilgrim, David. "*The Mammy Caricature*." Ferris State University, Dec 2000. Web. 21 Jan. 2017.  
<http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/mammies/>

<sup>40</sup> Riggio, Thomas P. "Uncle Tom Reconstructed: A Neglected Chapter in the History of a Book." *American Quarterly* 28.1 (1976): 56-70.

and defenseless Tom who does not complain much about his situation. Stowe's Tom is a pious and selfless creature who considers his loyalty to his master a dutiful obligation. "Mas'r," he once says, "if you was sick, or in trouble, or dying, and I could save ye, I'd give ye my heart's blood; and, if taking every drop of blood in this poor old body would save your precious soul, I'd give 'em freely, as the Lord gave his for me." Interestingly, he emphasizes his limitless loyalty as he pleads not to be beaten to death by his master. "Oh, Mas'r!" he continues, "don't bring this great sin on your soul! It will hurt you more than't will me! Do the worst you can, my troubles'll be over soon; but, if ye don't repent, yours won't never end!"<sup>41</sup> Even in a moment when his master is beating him to death, Tom thinks more about the master's sin than he does about his own life. Tom is the perfect image of a contented slave who is happy to serve his white master his entire life as if he were born to be a slave.

Over a century later, Lee finds difficulty to get rid of the characteristics of the stereotypical Tom from Stowe's novel as well as the Tom figure that developed during the Jim Crow era. First, just like Stowe, Lee portrays a pious Tom whose religion is an integral part of his identity. For instance, in the scene when Scout asks Atticus if and why he is defending a Negro, after hearing nigger-lover accusations at school, Atticus's response first personifies the Negro by stating his name and where he lives. The third point Atticus mentions to identify Tom is his religious affiliations. "I am simply defending a Negro\_ his name's Tom Robinson. He lives in that little settlement beyond the town dump. He's a

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<sup>41</sup> Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *"Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly, 2 vols."* Boston: John P. Jewett & Company 1 (1852): 45. Page 274.

member of Calpurnia's church and Cal knows his family very well." (Page 83) This statement is an indication of how blacks are identified by their religious affiliations just like they are by name and address. But just like Stowe's Uncle Tom, religious affiliation does not protect Tom Robinson from the injustices of his fellow white Christians.

Stowe and Lee further play with physical appeal of the black body. While Stowe portrays Uncle Tom as "a large, broad chested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black," (68), Scout describes Tom Robinson as "a black-velvet Negro, not shiny, but soft black velvet [...]. If he had been whole, he would have been a fine specimen of a man" (192). While he also has powerful shoulders to work with, his physical incompleteness is due to his amputated left arm, which he injured while working on a white man's farm.

Another characteristic attributed to Tom Robinson is hard work. As presented through his testimony in trial, and confirmed by his employer Mr. Deas, Tom Robinson is a salve-like twenty-five-year-old father of three who has worked for the same employer for eight years. He works on the farm and lands all year long, and as Mr. Deas puts it, "I ain't had a speck o' trouble outa him." The only work he seems to do, though, is physical chores that do not involve intellectual skills. Lee's emphasis on the slave-like body and role of blacks is also reflected through Tom's interaction with Mayella Ewell. Tom is portrayed as a helpful person, and Mayella Ewell often asks him to assist her with hard chores around the house on his way back home, which he does free of charge. Again, these chores are often lifting heavy stuff or chopping off hard wood, tasks that require physical strength and lessen Tom's role to that of the uneducated slave.

Unlike the educated white Atticus, Tom can neither read nor write, and he obviously cannot even defend himself properly in front of a jury without the support of Atticus. In a racially segregated society, Intellectual work is, therefore, dominated by the white genteel class, and the role of blacks in the community is strictly limited to bodily tasks, leaving their status not much better than the slaves of the 1800's.

In fact, the black man's role in this southern society is so limited that Tom can't even defend himself, reinforcing the image of a helpless, voiceless black. Just like Uncle Tom, Robinson's life is entirely ruined by Mayella's rape accusation, and there is nothing anyone could do to prevent it from happening. He is taken away from his family, wrongfully jailed, almost lynched and finally murdered. Throughout all this time, he is allowed to do absolutely nothing to change the situation except his testimony in trial when he testifies to his own innocence. When the Cunninghams come to lynch Tom, he only hides silently as Atticus faces them. Even Scout and her brother make a strong stand against the mob, and succeed in sending it away, but it is only after they are all gone that Tom's voice is even heard inside the jail.

At first glance, Lee's intentions behind filtering Tom's voice might have been to present the contrast between the loudly audible white voice and the voicelessness of blacks. As Eric Sandquist notes, this filtering of Tom's voice "[sets] in motion a dialectic between Atticus's voluble, nearly sacrosanct white voice and Tom's proscribed, muted black voice." However, the author's choice conceals from the reader much about Tom's personality and opinions. Even while in trial, Tom's testimony is largely edited by Atticus,

and later by Scout, the narrator, before it reaches the reader. This is the case with him all throughout the novel. “The novel silences him,” Sandquist comments. “[A]nd largely deletes from view his life and that of his family.”

The result is a portrayal of a Tom as a character whose role in the fight against racism is not clearly defined. “Because it filters Tom’s story through the legal representation of Atticus Finch and the storytelling representation of Scout Finch,” Sandquist concludes, “‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ denies Tom even this much of a voice in his story and therefore precludes a full portrait of the African-American struggle for justice.”<sup>42</sup> Even when he defends himself, the black man still depends on the white man to speak for him. In this respect, the depiction of Lee’s Tom reflects the stereotypical image of the pathetic and defenseless Negro that circulated during and after the Civil War.

The blacks’ dependency on white legal counsel is directly related to the history of black education. Records show that black lawyers were not easy to find in the South, during most of the 1930s there were only four black lawyers in all of Alabama, and it was very unlikely that any of them would be practicing in a small town like Maycomb<sup>43</sup>. In the novel, there are only four black people who can *read* in all of Maycomb; one of them is a housemaid, and the other is a garbage collector. What Lee fails to add is that even if there were black lawyers in town, the profession was very dangerous at the time. A black lawyer practicing

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<sup>42</sup> Sundquist, Eric J. “Blues for Atticus Finch: Scottsboro, Brown, and Harper Lee”, reprinted in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird* 78, Harold Bloom, ed. (Chelsea House 2007). Pages 94 & 95.

<sup>43</sup> Houston, Charles H. “The Need for Negro Lawyers,” *African Americans and the Legal Profession in Historical Perspective*, ed. Paul Finkelman, (New York: Garland 1992) p.149.

in the American South was perceived as a threat to social order in the first place. This conjures disturbing memories of the Reconstruction Era, or what J. Clay Smith, Jr. labels, “the zenith for the entry of blacks into the legal profession.”<sup>44</sup> During this time, Smith argues, black lawyers were not welcomed by whites in Southern states. This was probably due to the role those black lawyers played to “[identify] the inequities in the legal order [,] lay the foundation for social change... and expand the rights of African-Americans and to ensure, case by case, that justice would not forever be delayed.”<sup>45</sup> Given the hostile circumstances of Harper Lee’s South, a black lawyer could not hope to represent black clients against white complainants without being assaulted, much less defend a black man in a very sensitive case where he is accused of raping a white woman<sup>46</sup>. Tom’s life, therefore, rested on the hands of a white lawyer.

Tom’s voicelessness and helplessness are also stressed by his physical disability. Apart from her focus on the black body, the way Lee handles Tom’s disability can be seen from different perspectives. The scene when Tom tries to take the oath during his trial and he is unable to keep his crippled hand up is one that bears several multifaceted interpretations. Lee uses it to shock readers with the grotesque dimension of reality as well as highlight the epistemic injustice in southern society and denounce its practice.

First, the scene comes as a shocking epiphany to both Scout and readers for until this point in the novel, while a lot of information about Tom’s personality and life is provided,

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<sup>44</sup> Smith Jr, J. Clay. *Emancipation: The Making of the Black Lawyer, 1844-1944*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. Page 143.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. Page xi.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Page 272.

his disability is never mentioned. Having well established the fact that Mayella's injuries were inflicted with a left-handed person, Tom's amputated left arm constitutes solid proof of his innocence; his conviction, regardless of the present evidence, indicates the epistemic injustice upon which Southern courthouses functioned at the time. Tom might have been exonerated had he gone against another black man.

Tom's physical disability symbolically reflects his "credibility deficits" which result from the society's racially negative prejudices. Putting his word, albeit sound and well-founded, against that of a white man implicates what José Medina describes as "an entire hierarchy of credibility assumptions." Simply put, whites have epistemic advantages that blacks don't. Several characters in the novel are fully aware of this epistemic injustice<sup>47</sup> as shown through their acts and quotes. In the trial scene, for instance, when Tom is asked why he had run from the scene if he had not really raped Mayella, his answer is that he was scared because he is a nigger. His statement, "Mr. Finch, if you was a nigger like me, you'd be scared, too" (Page 215) indicates his consciousness of the danger he was in due to his skin color, despite his innocence. Also, after Tom's death, Mr. Underwood's article against the senseless killing makes it clear for Scout that despite all the judiciary procedures and despite all of Atticus's efforts to defend him, "Tom was a dead man the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth and screamed." (Page 266).

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<sup>47</sup> Initially developed by British philosopher Miranda Fricker, "epistemic injustice" refers to the idea that a person is epistemically wronged when they are not believed based on prejudiced reasons. In this case, Maycomb doesn't believe Tom because he is black, giving white Mayella, an "epistemic advantage."

Under the unjust Southern system, a black man simply has not a slim chance going against a white man. Reverend Sykes confirms it when he tells Jem, “I ain’t ever seen any jury decide in favour of a coloured man over a white man.” (Page 230) In relation to this point, Medina explains, “Under conditions of oppression, social disparities often result in differential presumptions of epistemic authority and credibility.”<sup>48</sup> In this specific case, Lee uses disability to criticize how far southern society was willing to go to follow their unfounded presumptions and strengthen their discriminatory cast system. A system that they are able to control only due to their intellectual advantage over the blacks. Unable to read or write, Tom stands helpless while a white jury manipulates the law the way they see fit to serve their interests.

Another approach to understand Tom’s oath-taking scene is that it subtly denounces southern laws. Tom’s disabled hand, which he injured working on a white man’s land, symbolizes the paralyzing oppression that blacks suffer on a daily basis; and his inability to take the oath is a humble way to challenge the justice system where blacks do not have a voice.

Between illiteracy and social injustice, there is not much room for blacks to drive positive change in a southern community. Tom Robinson’s fate is in the hands of a white lawyer because he does not have much of a choice. It is Atticus Finch’s responsibility to defend Tom, Lee, therefore, portrays him as the ethical hero who stands by justice even if

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<sup>48</sup> Medina, José. "The relevance of credibility excess in a proportional view of epistemic injustice: Differential epistemic authority and the social imaginary." *Social Epistemology* 25.1 (2011): 15-35.

it means going up against his own people and risking his life in the process. The image of Atticus as the White Hero and Savior contributes in the making of Tom's caricature figure as the helpless poor man who desperately needs white intervention. Alas, even Atticus the Hero can't save Tom's life.

While one is a slave and the other is a paid worker, in both Stowe's and Lee's novels, Tom suffers the injustices of white society somehow more intensely than the rest of the black community. Despite their perfect virtues and pure innocence, they are both murdered in a very cruel way by evil racist whites. Holy Blackford calls it "a crucifixion." He further notes, "We are to understand the suffering of the black characters named Tom as a ritual sacrifice for the sins of white culture."<sup>49</sup>

## **2.2. The Affectionate, Devoted Mammy: Calpurnia in Times of Poverty**

Tom's female counterpart in "To Kill a Mockingbird" is Calpurnia, and just like him Calpurnia's image duplicates that of Stowe's Aunt Chloe, a commonly familiar caricature in white literature. Most of Calpurnia's scenes show her, much like Aunt Chloe, in the Finch kitchen cooking or serving. She comes in early in the morning and does everything from cleaning and cooking to taking care of the kids and educating them. When Scout first introduces her in the novel, she describes her as "our cook." Calpurnia has been with the Finches since Jem's birth, and she is the one to look after every single detail of their domestic lives. Atticus, being one of the few anti-racist characters, is aware of her role.

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<sup>49</sup> Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harold Bloom, ed. (Chelsea House 2013). Page 171.

When his sister Alexandra suggests letting Cal go while she could take on her tasks, Atticus says he does not want her [Alexandra] “working [her] head off” for the family the way Calpurnia does. Despite his sincere intentions, Atticus’ statement proves his probably unconscious belief that hard work is meant for the colored help. For Mammy.

Just like Tom, Calpurnia’s hard work is also stressed by with a strong emphasis on the body. In the first passage that introduces Calpurnia Scout emphasizes her “angles and bones.” However, unlike Mammy’s well-fed, healthy body, her “bones and angles” suggest her poverty and malnourishment, which reflects the impoverished state of the black community in the 1930’s following the Great Depression which heavily impacted Southern farmers, notably the blacks who depended on farming as a main source of income.

Cal clearly suffers the heavy impact of the crisis (she can’t even afford glasses). But while she certainly does all the work that she is paid for, and although her pay is not enough to keep her afloat in times of depression, she always shows genuine love, care and devotion for the Finches. In the summer time, Cal makes it a ritual to call the kids in for a cold lemonade midmorning so that they do not “fry alive” in the hot sun. Cal also cares about Scout’s education, so she often gives her writing tasks and rewards her if Scout completes them satisfactorily. Her service extends to the protection of her white family and neighborhood. Despite her nearsightedness, her disability does not prevent her from seeing and recognizing the impending danger of the mad dog approaching the town even though the dog was far away. She quickly runs to call for help and warns everyone around. Calpurnia genuinely loves her white family, and never complains about having to work

hard, which is another resemblance she shares with the devoted Aunt Chloe and, therefore, the stereotypical Mammy image.

Also, just like Aunt Chloe, religion is a vital element in Cal's life and a defining aspect of her identity. Just like all the black community, religion is present in Cal's quotidian routine, and is an important part of her activities. For instance, when she is teaching Scout to write, she makes her reproduce parts of the Bible. Also, when she is scared for Atticus as he faces the mad dog, she prays for "Sweet Jesus [to] help him." The Sunday Mass at the church is an activity that Cal will miss under no circumstances. When Atticus is away on Sunday and she cannot leave Jem and Scout alone at home, she would rather take them with her to church and risk all the uncomfortableness than miss the Sunday mass.

Unlike the whites whose religion is portrayed as showy and hypocritical, the blacks' faith and piety is especially reflected through their actions and behavior with other characters in the novel. An example of a good Christian behavior is when Calpurnia takes the Finch kids to her church and defends them against Lula's outraging assaults, teaching them a great lesson about race equality in religion. "It's the same God," is Calpurnia's response to Lula's objections against bringing the white kids to a black church.

It is worth mentioning, however, that this is an example of how Lee is using religion, through Calpurnia, for the benefit of the white man. Calpurnia never tries to go to a white church and says that it is the same God. In the case of Cal, religion is a tool that is used to exploit the blacks and, most importantly, ensure their submissiveness and avoid resistance. It prevents blacks from threatening the hierarchical social order, despite its destructive

consequences on their lives. Servitude would not have been successful, however, had the blacks not been religious people themselves, another similarity Cal shares with the Mammy. Despite all these similarities, however, one cannot help noticing that Lee's Cal is not an exact replica of the Mammy image.

### **2.3. Departing From Stereotypes: A Reluctant Admission of Change**

While Calpurnia has many common characteristics with the caricature figure of Mammy, however, Harper Lee makes a point of depicting her with traits that make her distinct from the stereotypical image and extend her presence in the novel and role in the plot development. Regarding this point, Michelle S. Ware notes in her commentator **"Influences on Scout's Childhood,"** "Although Calpurnia has some of the qualities of stereotypical 'Mammy' figure, Lee's characterization extends beyond that limited portrayal." Throughout the novel, Scout gradually discovers several aspects of Calpurnia's life which she leads separately from the Finches. Though it is not fully exposed, the reader does get to know about Cal's son, Zeebo and his family.

The church scene also displays parts of Calpurnia that Scout never knew about her before such as her ability to switch between "white" and "black" English. Being surrounded with an all-African-American community, Cal shows a completely different attitude and behavior than what the reader is used to in the rest of the novel. It is the first time Scout hears her talk like "them" (that is "niggers"). This makes her think, for the very first time, about the possibility that Cal may actually lead a totally independent life away from the Finches. Scout is not familiar with this life, and the reader, therefore, does not get

to read about it. This personification of the Negro is quite distinct from that of the common image attributed to Mammy during that time.

Calpurnia also plays a major role in the plot connecting Scout, and therefore the reader, with the black side of Maycomb. “She is the necessary figure who moves comfortably through both sides of this racially divided Southern town,” Ware says. When she takes Jem and Scout to church, Scout has the chance to see the black community and meet black characters, such as Reverend Sykes, that she would not have the chance to meet otherwise.

Cal’s role as an intermediary is expanded even further in the brief scene at the church when she presents both the good side, communal solidarity, and the bad side of the black community. As Ware puts it, “Taking Scout and Jem to her church with her one Sunday, Calpurnia exposes them to another side of racism in Maycomb- the hatred of some members of the Black community.” Since one of the overarching themes of the novel is coming of age, Calpurnia’s revelation of this side of town helps Scout with her understanding of the reality around her. This visit to the church emphasizes Calpurnia’s most important role in the novel. She is here to teach “the Finch kids about shared common humanity with their African-American neighbors.”<sup>50</sup> Additionally, the scene serves to inform the white people about their image amongst the blacks. This role makes all the difference between Calpurnia and Mammy.

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<sup>50</sup> Ware, Michelle S. “Influences on Scout’s Childhood ” reprinted in *Harper Lee's To kill a mockingbird*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004. Print. Page 64

Whether it is simply because Scout lives with Calpurnia and, therefore, she gets to learn a lot more about her than she does about Tom, or whether it has to do with the author's purposeful encouragement of rising female agents in society, one cannot help noting that Cal also possesses traits that distinguish her from Tom Robinson. Unlike him, she is not exactly voiceless. Often times in the novel, she voices her opinion regarding several issues, and her authority is well respected by her white entourage. For instance, she once describes Radley, a white man, as the "meanest man God ever blew breath into." Also, Cal plays the role of the mother, educating the Finch kids and teaching them manners. Atticus trusts her, and gives her full authority over his children who also follow her directions and obey her. In fact, as Jeffery B. Wood describes it, "Calpurnia seems to represent the stern taskmaster with a wide, hard hand with tyrannical presence."<sup>51</sup>

While this strong presence of a black woman can be received as a positive attitude from the author, opponents refute it with the argument that while Calpurnia's opinion is voiced throughout the novel, her views are always in complete alignment with those of the Finch family, namely Atticus. Her beliefs, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, reaffirm patriarchal white culture, and her actions do little to change the situation of blacks in the community. For instance, Calpurnia's strongest stand occurs when she faces Lula as she tries to stop the white kids from entering the black church. However, she never acts in attempt to integrate blacks into white spaces. Also, when Tom is wrongfully convicted, she joins Atticus' opinion blaming the injustice on the complexity of the law. "First thing you

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<sup>51</sup> Wood, Jeffrey B. "Bending the law: The search for justice and moral purpose." *Harper Lee's to kill a mockingbird: New essays* (2010): 81-99. Page 89.

learn when you are in a lawin' family is that there ain't definite answers to everything," she explains (Page 237). She does not blame it on racial inequality or link it to the social injustices in the community.

In fact, Harper Lee pictures Calpurnia as a cement of white social stability. Acting as the agent of white man, she explicitly reinforces the idea of "white genteel class" and patriarchal order that is encouraged by other white characters, such as Aunt Alexandra. For instance, when Scout is rude to Walter Cunningham, a poor boy from school, Calpurnia scolds Scout for her impoliteness, and says, "Yo' folks might be better'n the Cunninghams but it don't count for nothin' the way you're disgracin' 'em- if you can't act fit to eat at the table you can just set and eat in the kitchen." As Jeff Abernathy puts it, Calpurnia's "guidance largely reaffirms white social order within which she is employed." He further notes that "[her] sense of propriety galls within the parameters of patriarchal white culture."<sup>52</sup> While Cal is different than Chloe, she doesn't do much to affirm the black identity. Not as well Lula, anyway.

#### **2.4. Lula and the Unwilling Revelation of Black Identity**

Calpurnia is not the only character that differs from Stowe's Mammy image. In "**To Kill a Mockingbird**" an even more pronounced difference is found in Lula, the African-American character from the church scene. Despite her very brief appearance in the novel, Lula's presence raises intriguing questions about race and reveals parts of reality that Scout is not used to. When Cal takes Scout and Jem to her all-black church, Lula is the only one

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<sup>52</sup> Abernathy, Jeff. *To Hell and Back: Race and Betrayal in the Southern Novel*. Taylor & Francis US, 2003.

who objects, bluntly and even rudely, to the presence of white children and defends the sanctity of black folks' place of worship. Pryal comments on this point noting, "She [Lula] is angry that white people have invaded the church sanctuary, which had also functioned as a metaphorical sanctuary from white regulations of black behavior."<sup>53</sup> Up until this point, the church, a very poor venue with very poor resources and no ventilation, has been an all-black institution where, unlike other places such as the courthouse, blacks do not have to bow to whites or limit themselves to certain seating areas. While whites use the church yard for drinking and gambling on weekdays, Sundays are the blacks-only days at the church, and Lula feels threatened by the arrival of the white Finch children and concerned for her little haven of freedom.

In the case of Lula, religion is used as a form of resistance. Lula's church scene illustrates how a black character's rebellious personality is reflected through their religious practices. She endeavors to apply her "Black Separatist" ideals by preventing white children from attending the Sunday mass, thus protecting the sanctity of the black community's place of worship. Regardless of the validity of her ideals, Lula's act emphasizes the significance of the church as an essential component of her identity, and showcases the role of religion in resisting social injustices.

By rejecting the presence of the Finches, Lula's behavior advocates for the separation of religious institutions and indicates strong Black Separatist ideals. A sub-category of

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<sup>53</sup> Pryal, Katie Rose Guest. "Walking in another's skin: Failure of empathy in *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird: New Essays* 174-189 (Michael J. Meyer, ed., Scarecrow Press, 2010). Page 187

Black Nationalism<sup>54</sup>, Black Separatism is an ideological movement that has existed in the United States since the 1700s, but came to the forefront of battling against racial oppression in the twentieth century. The movement advocates for the creation of separate institutions for each of the two nations, black and white, and has taken several approaches such as Back-to-Africa and a nation-within-a-nation<sup>55</sup>. It was led by activists like Marcus Garvey who preached that Africa was the motherland, and that it was all blacks' responsibility to "march back to Africa 400 million strong" in order to free it from colonial domination. Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which was established in 1919, soon became popular in Harlem, where it was first started, and eventually throughout the world during much of the 1920s. Though he was one of the most well-known activists in the era, however, his conviction in 1924 was not the defeat of Black Separatist struggle. Many of Garvey's followers such as Daddy Grace and Father Divine, and other activists, such as Du Bois, continued the fight through much of the 1930s. Organizations such as The Moorish American Science Temple emphasized the Asiatic heritage of black people just like the Ethiopian Peace Movement preached for the identification with Ethiopia. Finally, the Forty-Ninth State Movement called for the establishment of a state for blacks.

But none of these movements matched Garvey's resonance. Raymond Hall notes that "the 1930s were characterized by the proliferation of small sect-like separatist groups with

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<sup>54</sup> Robert E. Terrill defines Black Nationalism as "an umbrella term, encompassing back-to-Africa movements, efforts to lay claim to a portion of the continental United States as a separate nation, proposals to establish all-black political parties, and various artistic and cultural endeavors to claim African and African-American culture as sources of racial pride and solidarity." (Sloane, Thomas O. *Encyclopedia of rhetoric*. Vol. 1. Oxford University Press on Demand, 2001. Page 14.)

<sup>55</sup> Hall, Raymond L., ed. *Black separatism and social reality: Rhetoric and reason*. Elsevier, 2013. Page 1.

none approximating the size and intensity of the Garvey movement.”<sup>56</sup> The Great Depression also heightened the struggle though with the New Deal programs many activists soon adopted the idea of “Get a piece of the pie”, and “Don’t buy where you can’t work” campaigns were a form of economic separation.

Just like Black Nationalism, however, Black Separatism received controversial reactions from both whites and blacks. It was opposed by integrationists such as -Max Shachtman, Oliver Cox, Daniel Guérin, and Richard S. Fraser who favored a struggle for equality for the blacks through a social revolution of working class. Later integrationists such as Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks soon took unprecedented popularity at the zenith of the Black Civil Rights movement.

In “**To Kill a Mockingbird**,” Lula embodies Black Separatist ideals and defends the church as a blacks-only institution. Lula is also the only black character in the novel who is not submissive. In fact, she is Calpurnia’s direct foil and, therefore, opposes the stereotypical caricature of Mammy. She questions the type of relationship between Calpurnia and the Finches, and hints that it is a servant-master relationship. Rude as it may, this is what Pryal describes as “one of the few voices in the novel that presents the unfiltered point of view of a black person.”<sup>57</sup> This confrontation, Pryal further notes, “has the potential to shock white readers into a position of cross-racial empathy in which they

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Page 7.

<sup>57</sup> Pryal, Katie Rose Guest. "Walking in another's skin: Failure of empathy in to kill a mockingbird." *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird: New Essays* 174-189 (Michael J. Meyer, ed., Scarecrow Press, 2010). Page 187

must wonder what exactly black people think of white people, and, by implication, what it is like to be a black person in our society.”

Lula’s character, strong, defiant and rebellious, has the ability to cause fracture in the Mammy image. She brings out the worst out of Calpurnia. All through the novel, we see Calpurnia following white people’s norms and even language, but her very first words upon seeing Lula are said “in tones [Scout] had never heard her use before.” She starts speaking like “the rest of them” and calling her “nigger.” It is as if Lula inspires Calpurnia to bring out the real African-American personality that she has had to bury below the new persona she has learned to adopt working for white families for so long. Lula’s role, therefore, goes beyond raising Black Separatist ideals. Echoing the contemporary black community’s awareness of the impossibility of full assimilation, she goes on to reject complete assimilation of blacks into white societies, and Calpurnia’s behavior supports her convictions.

The aggressiveness of this scene at the church is heightened by Lee’s emphasis on Lula’s strange physical appearances to paint a hostile confrontation that is building up between her and Calpurnia, the white man’s servant. The use of war weapons imagery such as “bullet-headed” and “Indian-bow mouth” to describe Lula emphasizes the aggressive nature of the relationship between blacks and whites. Her very brief presence, however, as well as her offbeat appearance that resembles that of an unfit outsider in society do not leave strong validity to her attitude.

Exploring themes of separatism and impossible assimilation for the very first time in the novel, this scene also has the potential of impacting the plot and Scout's growth to a large extent. Lee, however, chooses to terminate her presence in a very dismissive way. The other black characters at the church literally banish her, and Zeebo apologizes to the Finch kids, asking them not to mind Lula and expressing everyone's warm welcome. This dismissal, Pryal says, "[reassures] us that Lula is simply a disgruntled outlier rather than a prophet, Zeebo weakens the effects of the shock of Lula's words."<sup>58</sup> By doing so, the writer suggests that people like Lula are not the kind of black people to be protected by society. It is the submissive Mammies and the Toms that speak "white" language and are happy with so little in life that they have to make do with\_ it is these Mammies and Toms that need protection. Lee is apparently reluctant to recognize this separatist fight. Interestingly, the author treats the topics of miscegenation and lynching with equal unwillingness.

### **3. Miscegenation and Lynching: Social Oppressions against the Black Man**

#### **3.1. Miscegenation: The Southern Belle and the Black Beast**

Through her depiction of two interracial relationships (Mr. Raymond and his nameless black woman, and Tom Robinson and Mayella Ewells), Lee exposes a reality where miscegenation is "illegal, illicit and socially repugnant."<sup>59</sup> However, though her presentation of these two interactions demonstrates a certain level of resistance against constraining social norms, both initiated by whites, and both negative, one with even fatal,

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Pilgrim, David. "What was Jim Crow." Jim Crow Museum: Origins of Jim Crow. Ferris State University. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Jan. 2017. "[www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm](http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm)"

repercussions on blacks. Historically not an uncommon practice, miscegenation was the South's worst nightmare, forming the justification on which many of the whites' brutal crimes against blacks were committed.

The Mayella-Tom interaction is the most significant in the novel, and its aftermath constitutes a major part of the narration. Once the entire story is revealed, the reader collects from different testimonies that what really happened the day of the alleged raping incident was Mayella Ewells trying to seduce Tom Robinson. Having developed some affections for the helpful Tom, Mayella had planned the entire scenario. She had collected enough money to send all her siblings to town for ice-cream to have the house for herself around the same time Tom usually walks past her house. She called him in, and immediately started kissing him. Tom, however, resisted and was trying to escape when Mayella's father walked in and saw the scene. His calling his daughter "whore" confirms that he understood that she was the assailant, which is why he immediately beats her up.

Regardless of Tom's clear innocence, however, Bob chooses to hide his family shame by accusing Tom of raping Mayella, and forcing her to testify against Tom. Even though he knows that nothing really happened, Bob is mortified by the prospect of having his daughter involved in interracial relationship, and in some way he plays on the town's strong resistance against miscegenation to sell his story. Tom's skin color only strengthens the plausibility of the story and increases the likelihood of his guilt.

Maycomb, like the rest of the American south, fears interracial relationships because it purportedly provides an upgrade to the black man's social status as well as produce a race

that would destroy America. Whites therefore refrained from any kind gestures towards blacks in fear of giving them the allusion that they were equal, hence encouraging sexual interactions. In this context, Cabarrus Jr. notes, “A Black male could not offer his hand (to shake hands) with a white male because it implied being socially equal. Obviously, a Black male could not offer his hand or any other part of his body to a white woman, because he risked being accused of rape.”<sup>60</sup> Violence was, therefore, viewed necessary to keep blacks at the bottom of this racial hierarchy. This is why blacks were to blame for all interactions, and white women were pictured as victims of rape. Statistically speaking, a considerable number of lynched victims (19.2% of lynchings taking place between 1882 and 1951) were accused of rape. The southern definition of rape, as Myrdal points out, included all sexual relations between Negro men and white women. He further notes that there were “psychopathic fears of white women in their contacts with Negro men” that justified all the violence against blacks and made all accusations of rape secure from any further investigations<sup>61</sup>. This explains why all of Maycomb immediately joins in accusation of Tom, and eventually murders him.

While the Mayella-Tom story exposes the South’s prejudiced fear from blacks and the extent to which their unfounded opposition to miscegenation can lead to senseless violence, there are two main issues with Lee’s presentation of the incident. First, although Mayella’s assault and her lying in court leads Tom to fatal outcomes, Lee encourages the reader to

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<sup>60</sup> Cabarrus Jr., Henry W. *Many Broken Promises and Yet I Stand!!: My Autobiographical Memoirs*. FriesenPress. 2013. Page 3.

<sup>61</sup> Myrdal, Gunnar. *An American dilemma; the Negro problem and modern democracy. (2 vols.)*. (1944). Pages 561-562.

sympathize with her and, in a certain way, justifies her conduct. Also, in her denunciation of anti-miscegenation practices, Lee further deters black men from entertaining relationships with white women by outlining the horrific outcomes they are bound to face. Tom's relatively happy and secure life is abruptly destroyed not "the minute Mayella Ewell opened her mouth and screamed" (Page 266) as Scout puts it, but the minute she decided to seduce him. Despite her direct involvement in turning Tom's life and his family's into a nightmare, however, the reader still manages to sympathize with her due to the manner in which the author presents her story.

Mayella Ewells is presented as a poor, uneducated and friendless girl. Her belonging to the Ewell family is enough condemnation to be shunned by society. She has an alcoholic, abusive father, and it falls on her to take care of her family, with all the hard labor and strains of poverty, leaving her utterly friendless. Despite her attempts to keep clean and efforts to take care of the garden, she is still considered as poor white trash. Scout pities her for being "the loneliest person in the world" (Page 211), and even Tom Robinson feels sorry for her after all she did to him.

By highlighting Mayella's helplessness and victimizing her role in a case where the real victim is Tom Robinson, Harper Lee does absolutely nothing to denounce social stereotypes on racial sexuality. Comparing "**To Kill a Mockingbird**" to William Faulkner's "**Light in August**" (1932) and Richard Wright's "**Native Son**" Kristen Fink notes, "These major works, in an attempt to expose and condemn the injustices and hypocrisies of a white society, repeatedly reinforce a discourse on sexuality grounded in

stereotypes. The white women characters are offered up as either victims of, or agents for, a white society. The women's sexual desires are either desperate or primitive while the black males remain trapped within a historical discourse on sexuality that leaves them impotent, violent, or both.”<sup>62</sup> In this case, Tom is both impotent and violent. He is deprived of sexuality because he resists her seduction attempts, and all of Maycomb sees him as a violent rapist who caused bruises to the poor white girl.

Another factor that makes the novel stereotypical is the tragic ending that befalls Tom Robinson. Just like most blacks accused of rape, and even though he miraculously survives lynching, he eventually gets brutally murdered in what Mr. Underwood calls, “a senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters” (Page 265). The presentation of a disastrously violent ending implies the inevitability of meeting a similar fate if one were to defy society’s strongest restriction.

Unsurprisingly though significantly enough, a white man that transgresses these limits is an entirely different story. As shown through the character of Dolphus Raymond who refuses to comply with social conventions, and chooses to live with a black woman and have mixed-blood children. Unlike Maycomb’s violent and judgmental reaction towards the Mayella-Tom relationship, Raymond’s long-lasting relationship with a black woman does not stir any type of violence against the couple. Probably understanding society well enough, Raymond pretends to be drunk all the time to give people something to blame for

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<sup>62</sup> Fink, Kristen, *Black penis and the demoralization of the Western World| Sexual relationships between black men and white women in the works of Chester Himes and Dany Laferriere* (2000). Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers. Paper 1683. Page 12.

his unorthodox conduct living with black people. Society, therefore, does not bother him much, though he is shunned and considered as an outcast and evil. Scout's first reaction when she is approached by Mr. Raymond reflects the reputation he has in town, "As Mr. Dolphus Raymond was an evil man I accepted his invitation reluctantly, but I followed Dill. Somehow, I didn't think Atticus would like it if we became friendly with Mr. Raymond, and I knew Aunt Alexandra wouldn't" (Page 177).

Nevertheless, Mr. Raymond does not seem to be affected by the community shunning him down. In fact, because he prefers the company of blacks, it is actually his aim to be left alone, and he achieves it through faking the drinking habit. The issue, though, is that the reader has absolutely no idea about the impact of miscegenation on Raymond's black woman, whose name is not even presented to the reader. Also, while Jem tells Scout about how sad mixed children are, belonging neither with whites nor with blacks, he can't determine how to identify mixed children. Besides, Raymond cuts quite a negative figure as a drunk and social outcast, further proving that Lee presents the stories from a white Southerner's perspective while ignoring their impact on blacks. Another instance of Lee's focus on whites over blacks, and dealing with racial issues as a white man's problem is the issue of lynching.

### **3.2. Lynching: A White Man's Issue**

In her social critique of the American South, Harper Lee manages to tackle lynching as a form of punishment as she portrays Maycomb residents' attempt to lynch Tom Robinson. While there are two other references to angry mobs, the lynching mob's arrival to

Maycomb's jail is the most significant racial violence scene in the novel (Page 167). A group of poor white farmers arrive in frightful force at the jail with the aim of murdering Tom Robinson, and find Atticus sitting there as a guard on Tom. The mob is even willing to hurt Atticus in order to reach Tom. The situation is just about to escalate when the children, Jem, Scout and Dill, interrupt it. Entirely oblivious of the level of danger around her, Scout embarks in a perfectly regular and respectful conversation with the leader of the mob, Mr. Cunningham, chatting about his lands and son who happens to be her classmate. Miraculously, the appearance of the children and Scout's conversation manage to reach through their physically powerful appearance into their humane hearts, so they abandon the lynching and disperse full of shame. This end confirms Harper Lee centers the lynching attempt entirely around white people, highlighting their attitudes and opinions towards this practice and failing to capture its impact on blacks.

The Old Sarum mob in the novel is not dispersed by force. Instead, they are dispersed thanks to Scout's appeal to their human emotions. "The lynch mob is defeated not by brute force- which they embody- but by language and education: by Scout's words and Atticus's legal knowledge," writes Pryal.<sup>63</sup> In fact, in her depiction of the mob scene, Harper Lee turns it into a clash of ideals between two white social groups. As she highlights the danger of the conflict on the Finches, however, she utterly ignores its impact on the one person whose life is really at stake: Tom Robinson.

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<sup>63</sup> Pryal, Katie Rose Guest. "Walking in another's skin: Failure of empathy in *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird: New Essays* 174-189 (Michael J. Meyer, ed., Scarecrow Press, 2010). Page 182.

While Scout manages to ignite a feeling of interconnectedness among the lynchers, which ultimately makes Mr. Cunningham recognize the threat on the lives of the Finches, this bond that is created, although helps save the Finches and Tom, is merely between Cunningham and Atticus, and does not extend to Tom Robinson. In fact, throughout the entire scene, the focus is always on the impending danger threatening the Finches; never does the reader have a glimpse of Tom's fears and perception of the event. It is only after the mob is gone, that Tom's voice is heard. "This scene," comments Pryal, "ultimately treats Tom as a bone over which the white people fight rather than as a full-blown character."<sup>64</sup>

Additionally, Atticus's empathy with the angry mob and his failure to recognize racism as a real problem reinforce Pryal's view that Lee deals with the jail scene, as well as racism in general, as a white man's ethnical issue. The morning following the attempt to lynch Tom, Atticus defends the angry white men, and tries to explain that they are good men. "A mob's always made up of people, no matter what. Mr. Cunningham was part of a mob last night, but he was still a man." (Page 173). He goes on applying his judgment on every southern town, unable, or unwilling, to acknowledge the dreadful murders committed by these violent mobs and their enormous impact on the lives and families of their victims. Pryal believes that "Atticus's inability or unwillingness to see racism as a problem is yet another manifestation of his failure of empathy. He cannot see the connections between the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Page 180.

unsuccessful lynch mob in Maycomb and the horrific lynchings that took place in other parts of the South.”<sup>65</sup>

Lynching as a form of punishment was a trend that spread across the American South and, as Virginia Hamilton writes, had become a way of life<sup>66</sup>. Claudia Johnson defines it as “the murder of a person by a group of people who set themselves up as judge, jury, and executioner outside the legal system.”<sup>67</sup> Lynching characterized the time and space in which Lee writes her novel. “In Alabama alone,” Claudia Johnson notes, “between the years 1889 and 1930, there are 303 documented lynchings, almost entirely of black people.”<sup>68</sup> The number of lynchings per year, however, decreased from over a hundred annually in 1900 to less than a dozen in 1930 to rise again beginning in 1930 when depression and race issues started to cause high tensions in the community, reaching an average of almost twenty per year.<sup>69</sup>

Significantly, the farmers’ raid on Maycomb jail is part of a custom that was very common in the American South during the Jim Crow era. According to Historian Arthur Franklin Raper, between 1892 and 1932, the number of lynchings exceeded 3000.<sup>70</sup> In many of these incidents whites take justice into their hands as they murder black suspects, and are never held accountable for these crimes. This practice was very common in the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. Page 181.

<sup>66</sup> Summersell, Charles G., and Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton. *Alabama: A Bicentennial History*. (1978). Page 88.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, Claudia Durst. *Understanding To kill a mockingbird: a student casebook to issues, sources, and historic documents*. Vol. 1. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994. Page 16.

<sup>68</sup> Johnson, Claudia Durst. *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries*. No. 139. Twayne Pub, 1994. Page 05.

<sup>69</sup> Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979. Page 115.

<sup>70</sup> Arthur F. Raper. *The Tragedy of Lynching*. New York: Dover, 1970.

early 1930s, especially after the high tension caused by the Scottsboro case. “In the wake of Scottsboro incident itself,” Claudia Johnson notes, “there were two notorious cases of white men taking the lives of black men accused of rape. In neither case were the killers arrested.” A similar incident occurred in Birmingham in 1931, when a black man was accused of a crime he was clearly incapable of committing due to his disability. The accuser’s brother shot the black man dead. Also, in 1933 a lynching mob shot three black men accused of rape without even bringing them to trial.<sup>71</sup> The list goes on and on.

Apart from resembling many lynching incidents, it is especially worth noting that the jail incident in “**To Kill a Mockingbird**” shares several common points with a similar scene that took place in 1931 in Scottsboro, Alabama. “Outside the jail in Scottsboro, Alabama, a real scene, on a somewhat larger scale, but very like the one in the novel, had occurred in 1931 after the arrest of accused black youths,” notes Claudia Johnson.<sup>72</sup> In his history of the trials, Dan T. Carter’s description of the mob indicates that they were, just like the Old Sarum mob, poor white farmers. “Farmers from the nearby hills,” he writes, “began gathering and by dusk a crowd of several hundred stood in front of the two-story jail.” Just like the Cunninghams, the angry Scottsboro mob was willing to use violence in order to get to the defendants and take them out of jail. But the Sheriff called the governor who sent National Guard to Scottsboro, and the lynching was prevented.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Johnson, Claudia Durst. *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries*. No. 139. Twayne Pub, 1994. Page 05.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979. Page 115.

## 4. Conclusion

While some critics might perceive Harper Lee's stereotypical treatment of blacks as rather negative, her choices can be justified as strategies to reach her ultimate goal of abrogating repression and invoking positive social reform, albeit reluctantly so. She discusses through them such delicate, conservative, social ailments that characterized racial segregation in the American South in the 1930s and prevented society from progressing such as miscegenation and lynching. Holly Blackford explains it very well when she states, "Lee depicts this persecution as the fall of the black family and home, calls upon us to restore Christian ethics and combat the sin of white law, equates evil with lower class characters who refuse domestic order and live beyond the boundaries of civilization."<sup>74</sup>

Nevertheless, one shortcoming of these strategies, despite their positive intentions, is a representation of African-Americans that does not accurately reflect the context of the novel or match the reality of the time. Lee's denial of blacks as agents of history and reliance on whites to be agents of change and fight against racism has been described as an ambivalent attitude that cannot be easily justified. Another major challenge is that although blacks suffer the most from these evils, the novel does not highlight their suffering. In fact, it neglects the impact of lynching and anti-miscegenation attitudes on the lives of black individuals and community. This chapter has also illustrated how Lee strives to control change through characters such as Lula and Raymond who defy social norms, but are soon silenced by mainstream society, indicating a reluctant admission of change and making it

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<sup>74</sup> Bloom, Harold. Bloom's *Modern Critical Interpretations: Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harold Bloom, ed. (Chelsea House 2013). Page 166.

all the more relevant to reevaluate the extent to which “**To Kill a Mockingbird**” is an anti-racism novel.

“Given this historical context,” Pryal concludes, “Mockingbird can be read as a means for white, middle-class people of the 1960s to engage emotionally- but peripherally- with America's racial injustice.”<sup>75</sup> Another form of injustice that the novel offers is class segregation which, just like race, is used to justify a social stratification that puts certain groups above others. Chapter Three delves into the dynamics of this form of segregation.

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<sup>75</sup> Pryal, Katie Rose Guest. "Walking in another's skin: Failure of empathy in to kill a mockingbird." *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird: New Essays* 174-189 (Michael J. Meyer, ed., Scarecrow Press, 2010). Page 179.

**CHAPTER THREE: CLASS SEGREGATION IN “TO KILL A  
MOCKINGBIRD”: AN EXCLUSIVELY WHITE MATTER**

## 1. Introduction

**“To Kill a Mockingbird”** explores how a small town community, haunted by conservative ideals and romanticist pride, uses class segregation to separate its people and set up standards to determine the superiority of a certain group over another. The white southern community, Lee perceives, has a long way to go in order to achieve social progress. Analyzing this novel begs the following question: to what extent can her book be dubbed a social critique? This chapter studies the author’s portrayal of class-based dynamics and the impact of social stratification on the lives of individuals, emphasizing pivotal elements that widen the gap between classes, such as the Great Depression and Southern Romanticism. Finally, it is important to look for the author’s solution to the social ailments presented in the novel, and to what extent is it a progressive solution. **“To Kill a Mockingbird”** has been dubbed as a coming-of-age novel and a bildungsroman<sup>76</sup>, and one of the major lessons that Scout learns after this experience is the importance of social standing in determining one’s power. This section both highlights the author’s critical view on a decaying old South that clings to old perceptions of class in a time where the depression threatens the entire social system, and her vision for a more progressive society, realized by her educated white male hero, Atticus, who defies old social norms without completely ousting his heritage.

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<sup>76</sup> A bildungsroman is a novel dealing with one person’s formative years or spiritual education. (oxforddictionaries.com)

## **2. A Social Critique of the American South**

### **2.1. Class Segregation: Striving for Gentility or Preserving It?**

To begin with, Social stratification haunts the characters on a daily basis and impacts the quotidian life of individuals. Jem's famous statement explicitly details how he perceives social hierarchy in Maycomb. After thinking about it, he tells Scout that he has figured everything out. He thinks that "[t]here's four kinds of folks in the world. There's the ordinary kind like us and the neighbors, there's the kind like the Cunninghams out in the woods, the kind like the Ewells down at the dump, and the Negroes" (Page 249). He also seems to understand that each of the four classes looks down and despises the one below them. Jem's awareness of class division indicates how deeply rooted it is in the community. He sees it around him, and feels its negative impact on the different classes.

Maycomb white society consists of three main classes all rising above the blacks. The upper middle class is populated with the Finches and their highborn neighbors, Ms. Dubbose, Miss Maudie, and the town's elite such as Judge Taylor. These are the richest people in town who do not seem to feel the heavy impact of the Depression Era. They occupy jobs that require education such as lawyers, judges, sheriffs and journalists. Only their children have access to education and, therefore, to these elite jobs in the future.

While their elite jobs spare them the worst of the Depression suffered by the lower classes, elite professionals such as lawyers and doctors are directly affected by the poverty of farmers who they constitute the largest population and most of their clientele. They are

people who take pleasure in leisure activities such as shooting, sewing, reading and gardening, mainly because they can afford hiring maids to do their household chores, and have enough spare time on their hands. Religion is important for these people, and so is gentility and a decent reputation. This is why Aunt Alexandra insists on having Atticus teach his kids that they are of “gentle-breeding,” and constantly reminds them to act like the social class they belong to. She also strives to limit their contact with lower classes in an attempt to preserve their gentility as well as the social order in general.

The middle class in Maycomb is represented by the Cunninghams, poor farmers living out in the woods. Erisman argues that the Cunninghams are actually the lower class, while the middle class, he notes, is represented by “the numerous faceless and often nameless individuals who flesh out Miss Lee’s story.”<sup>77</sup> However, as Scout explains, even though the crisis has hit this class the hardest and drowned them in extreme poverty, the Cunninghams still hold on to their dignity, and, as demonstrated through the school scene when Walter refuses to accept money from his teacher, everyone knows they do not take anything from anyone. Despite the difficulties, they desperately cling to their farmlands because it is the last thing that keeps them part of this class. As Scout puts it, “Mr. Cunningham was willing to go hungry to keep his land and vote as he pleased” (Page 23).

Scout’s statement echoes Crèvecoeur’s narrator, Farmer James, as he effuses, “The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of

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<sup>77</sup> Erisman, Fred. “The Romantic Regionalism of Harper Lee.” *Alabama Review* 26.2 (1973). Page 127.

independence exalt my mind.”<sup>78</sup> Climbing the social ladder may not be an option, but owning a land is a criterion for citizenship, and the Cunninghams are not willing to give it up. While Aunt Alexandra often belittles them and thinks they are “trash,” Atticus confesses that Mr. Cunningham “came from a set breed of men,” and he admires his sense of dignity. Pursuing Crèvecoeur’s optimistic ideas, Lee’s Cunninghams represent the “proper farmers” who move westward, introducing human bounds and civilization to the less decent frontier farmers embodied in **“To Kill a Mockingbird”** by none other than the Ewells.

The Ewells, whom Atticus himself describes as “the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations” represent the bottom class of white society in Maycomb. Atticus’ judgment conjures Crèvecoeur’s conclusion on the early settlers living on the frontier, “There, remote from the power of example and check of shame, many families exhibit the most hideous parts of our society.” The Ewells are people who are forever poor, despite the ups and downs of economy, because they never do “an honest day’s work” (Page 33). They embody the degenerate White man who does not abide by the law or conventions of society. They live on the periphery of town by the dump, despised by everyone.

Separating the blacks from the rest of Maycomb, the Ewells form a buttress for the whites against blacks’ mobility, both physical and social. They are the blacks’ worst nightmare, inflicting on them all kinds of verbal and physical abuse. Their reclusiveness

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<sup>78</sup> Westermann, Ingo. *St. John de Crevecoeurs" Letters from an American farmer, letter III: What is an American?* (2005).

from the white society also allows them to be drunken and vicious, indulging in what Crèvecoeur calls “the unlimited freedom of the woods.” Lee portrays them as dirty, racist and immoral human beings who “lived like animals” (Page 34). The Ewells are the lowest of Maycomb’s people, yet they are still “better” than the blacks. Despite all their issues, their whiteness guarantees advantages that blacks do not have, such as the epistemic advantage that is mentioned in the previous chapter. In fact, blacks are former slaves, and they do not even seem to form a class in this novel due to their depiction as inactive masses.

This distinction of social classes is deeply rooted in the Southern community, and social status is innate. As Fred Erisman describes it, “In presenting the interaction of these classes, [Lee] gives a textbook demonstration of the traditional social stratification of the American South.”<sup>79</sup> Regardless of their behavior, everyone is born into their own class, and is expected to behave accordingly. The Finches, for instance, are “old aristocracy” because they are descendants of a noble background, the product of generations of “gentle breeding.” Several members of this class feel superior over the rest of the community, and their behavior often reflects deeply engraved prejudices.

Harper Lee puts class-based prejudice under scrutiny in her caricaturist portrayal of the hypocrite jingoism and pride in false democracy when the teacher writes down the word democracy on the board, and makes students “say it all together, ‘we are a democracy.’” Scout is able to define Democracy as “equal rights for all, special privileges for none.” And ironically Miss Gates, who approves of this definition, contrasts American democracy

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<sup>79</sup> Erisman, Fred. “The Romantic Regionalism of Harper Lee.” *Alabama Review* 26.2 (1973). Page 126.

against German dictatorship. The author's sarcasm is clear through the teacher's emphasis on the notion of democracy as she says, "Over here we don't believe in persecuting anybody. Persecution comes from people who are prejudiced." She drags this parade a little longer as Scout reports the teacher's attention to pronunciation. "'Pre-ju-dice' she enunciated carefully" (Page 270). The teacher's utopic image of the American Southern society is clearly different from the reality that Scout sees around her, where class segregation dominates the lives of individuals and the social system resists all attempts for progression.

## 2.2. A Frozen Class System and a Source of Social Exclusion

Maycomb's hierarchical system is one that is eternally static, and while people's behavior is expected to reflect their standing, there is nothing they can do to climb up the social ladder, or climb down for that matter. "Social status in *Mockingbird* is a lifelong classification," Bloom notes<sup>80</sup>. For instance, while everyone seems to despise the Ewells, it goes without saying that the justice system cannot favor a black man, honest that he may be, over them. Scout says this clearly when she notes that all Bob "had that made him any better than his nearest neighbors was, that if scrubbed with lye soap in very hot water, his skin was white" (Page 189). Despite all his flaws, Bob, as Erisman puts it, "still possesses the redeeming grace of a white skin."<sup>81</sup> He still belongs to a social class, which is more than can be said about Tom who just belongs to a mass of people.

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<sup>80</sup> Bloom, Harold. "Social Implications: Race, Class and Gender." *Bloom's Guide: Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird* (2010). Page 41.

<sup>81</sup> Erisman, Fred. "The Romantic Regionalism of Harper Lee." *Alabama Review* 26.2 (1973). Page 127.

Social Standing is of extreme importance because it entails power and stability. It is also social status that gives Atticus and Sheriff Tate the power to take justice into their hands when they decide to cover up Boo Radley's murder. Despite their good intentions to protect Boo from the consequences of a justifiable homicide, they have no right to do it outside the framework of the legal system.

Assuredly, this social hierarchy is no different from the capitalist system where a small minority reaps the fruits of a large majority's hard work. In Maycomb, the lower classes constantly work very hard, but live in poverty while the professional elite gentility work leisurely and collect the product of the lower class. The Cunninghams, for instance, work their land and pay for the elite's services (doctor, lawyer) by using crops instead of money. Mr. Cunningham, for instance, pays for Atticus's legal counsel services by loads of wood, nuts and turnip greens (Page 22). Similarly, the blacks bury Atticus's kitchen in food presents when he defends Tom Robinson though they are living through difficult times.

It is because of all these advantages that the South, especially the nobility, does its best to conserve and protect the social hierarchy. People like Alexandra are very uncomfortable when the social order and segregation are in danger. Their gentility entails acting as benevolent hosts, which is why Alexandra enjoys entertaining guests at home. Also, it is acceptable when Scout has Walter Cunningham over for lunch, but Alexandra is not happy to hear that Cal took the kids to her black Church. "Cal has tipped the social balance by

playing the hostess.”<sup>82</sup> And Alexandra is determined to restore it by preventing Scout from visiting Cal at home.

Similarly, Mrs. Dubbose’s constant criticism of Scout’s tomboyish behavior and attire indicates her uncomfortableness with a genteel class girl not upholding the Southern Belle manners she is expected to. Like Alexandra, Mrs. Dubose looks down on the lower working class. Her warning that Scout “will grow up waiting on tables” (Page 112) reflects her class’s prejudice against uneducated laborers and their conscious endeavors to preserve the social system where they are the only group favored with privileges over others.

### **2.3. Elite Education as a Source of Segregation**

Gentility strives to hold their status, and one way they do this is through education. The correlation between education and social standing is clearly tangible in the novel. The Finch kids, members of the upper class, go to school all year long and, just like their father and uncle did before, they are very likely to pursue a university degree and, hence, have good job prospects. On the other hand, Walter Cunningham, representative of the middle class, strives to receive education, but his working conditions prevent him from succeeding in doing so. He goes to school, but never passes because he always has to stay at home and help his father on the farm during the spring. Cunninghams are then unable to improve their social status through education. The Ewells are a different case. They do not see the importance of education, condemning themselves with perpetual poverty. They always

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<sup>82</sup> Bloom, Harold. “Social Implications: Race, Class and Gender.” *Bloom’s Guide: Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird* (2010). Page 41.

attend first day of class only because the Sheriff obliges them to, but never show up again. Just like they refuse to abide to any other law, they deny education, and, therefore, refuse to progress. The blacks, on the other hand, are denied the right to education, and, hence, have no chance of changing their social standing.

## 2.4. Natural Gentility Downtrodden: A Portrayal of the Old Democratic South

Another source of social superiority in “**To Kill a Mockingbird**” is natural gentility. Harold Bloom points out a different type of gentility: “natural gentility.” In his article, he illustrates the case of Little Chuck Little, a boy from school whom, despite his impoverished state, Scout describes as “a born gentleman.” His personality has authority over his classmates and teacher, and his behavior inspires the respect of even Burris Ewell. “Similarly,” Bloom further notes, “Calpurnia is a lady, and Tom Robinson’s manners are ‘as good as Atticus.’”<sup>83</sup> This focus on other criteria than birth and wealth reiterates Thomas Jefferson’s emphasis on virtue and talent as a ground for distinction between natural and artificial aristocracy. “The natural aristocracy,” Jefferson writes in his correspondence with John Adams, “I consider as the most precious gift of nature for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society.”<sup>84</sup>

Nevertheless, natural gentility becomes a forgotten heritage in Lee’s South at a time where Maycomb betrays these old Southern ideals clearly stated by Jefferson. While it is acknowledged, natural gentility in “**To Kill a Mockingbird**” does not even facilitate social

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. "Letter to John Adams, October 28, 1813." *The Portable Thomas Jefferson* (1813): 534-7.

mobility, much less social governing. While it may inspire a certain extent of respect, this moral classification still does not raise anyone in the social ladder. The Cunninghams are admired for their sense of dignity and citizenship, but they are still considered as “trash,” and Aunt Alexandra does not think they are fit for Finch company.

To sum up, in a Southern small town community which is characterized by a frozen class system, social standing, just like color, is inherited, and then strongly preserved in order to secure power. While people’s behavior and attitude may inspire respect out of tribute to the past, they are never allowed to change their status; because to shift the social balance is to jeopardize the power and stability of the upper class. While Lee presents education as one of the keys to maintaining or improving one’s social standing, by portraying this socially divided community striving to cling to old beliefs, she recognizes the influence of the Old South and its decaying romanticism.

### **3. The Decaying Old South between Prejudice and the Hope for Salvation**

#### **3.1. The Great Depression and Social Segregation**

The 1929 Great Depression that landed as a calamity on Americans and the rest of the world is felt from the very beginning of the novel, and puts the class hierarchy at test. In her first description of Maycomb County and its people, Lee sets a mood of very slow activity and aimlessness as a direct result of the Great Depression. “People moved slowly then,” Scout starts out. “They ambled across the square, shuffled in and out of the stores around it, took their time about everything. A day was twenty-four hours long but seemed

longer. There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb County” (Page 5). The passage reflects the lack of jobs in the 1930s and, hence, the poverty that haunted the lives of Maycomb residents and is mostly clear through the life led by the Ewells. This very passage also includes a direct reference to Franklin Roosevelt’s First Inaugural Speech, an indication that the said economic situation is the 1929 Great Depression and the narration setting is 1933: “But it was a time of vague optimism for some of the people: Maycomb County had recently been told that it had nothing to fear but fear itself” (Page 5).

Set in a two-year period starting from 1933, “**To Kill a Mockingbird**” highlights the impact of the depression on the daily lives of people. For instance, in her description of the main events around her, Scout notes, “there were sit-down strikes in Birmingham; bread lines in the cities grew longer, people in the country grew poorer” (Page 128). In these times of unemployment and severe poverty, many people depend on the government supplies to survive. The government also supports the poor and unemployed through relief programs, as shown through the monthly relief checks that Bob Ewells benefits from, and there is also a mention of the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal agency that employed millions of jobless people, mostly unskilled men, to implement public works projects throughout and even after the Depression Era<sup>85</sup> (Page 23).

While all these references set a clear context of the novel and place it in an epoch that most readers are familiar with, they further lay the foundation for a high-tension

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<sup>85</sup> Arnesen, Eric. *Encyclopedia of US labor and working-class history*. Vol. 1. Taylor & Francis, 2007. Page 1540.

environment and underline the class boundaries in a socially segregated community. The impact of the crisis is felt not only in the lives of people, but especially on the relationship between individuals and groups. The lower class farmers seem to be more indebted to the upper class elite whose services they cannot pay for in cash, but rather in kind as illustrated when the black community floods Atticus's kitchen with food presents as a reward for defending Tom Robinson.

In times of depression, class consciousness wears down on the poor, who, nevertheless, strive to hold on to their pride and avoid falling in restricting debts to upper classes. An example of people suffering extreme poverty is Walter Jr. Cunningham, Scout's classmate, who comes barefooted to class on the first day of school. In fact, he does not own any shoes, which is the reason why he caught hookworms. He also comes to class without a lunch, which puts him in a very uncomfortable situation with the teacher. Unlike the rest of the class, Miss Caroline is completely oblivious of Walter's financial situation, and offers to lend him a quarter to buy lunch, which he respectfully refuses to take, because he won't have money to pay it back. Just like his father, Walter won't be indebted to anyone for anything. Scout explains to her new teacher the Cunningham's trait of self-sufficiency as she says, "The Cunninghams never took anything they can't pay back—no church baskets and no scrip stamps. They never took anything off of anybody, they get along on what they have. They don't have much, but they get along on it." (Page 21).

The Cunninghams see in debt a restriction of freedom and downgrade of social standing. Unlike the Ewells who receive the town's "Christmas baskets, welfare money,

and the back of its hand” (Page 195), the Cunningham’s sense of dignity is appreciated by at least some Maycomb residents. For Jeffrey B. Wood, the Cunninghams “represent Everyman, individuals struggling to maintain their independence and common decency in the midst of the Great Depression.”<sup>86</sup> This is the Cunninghams’ stoic way of fighting against social segregation in times of severe poverty.

The impact of the crisis, intertwined with that of social segregation, goes even deeper and triggers more aggressive attitudes. People like the Ewells who were brought down by the crisis to a similar economic situation and social prejudice as the blacks feel more threatened by them and, therefore, act more violently towards them. In the novel, while most Maycomb residents of all classes harbor different levels of prejudice and racism, it is the lower class farmers that lead the directly aggressive behaviors towards blacks. Bob Ewell is the main racist evil in the novel, and the attempted lynching against Tom Robinson is led by the Cunninghams, both lower class farmers. In this regard, Claudia Johnson notes, “The desperate unpredictability of the economic situation, competition for jobs, and long standing racial fear reinforced bigotry.”<sup>87</sup>

In short, Harper Lee manages to capture the reality of the Great Depression and its different effects on a small Southern town in America. The impact of the crisis appears not only through the quotidian life of individuals, but especially through their attitudes and the interaction between the different social groups. The economic repercussions of the

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<sup>86</sup> Wood, Jeffrey B. "Bending the law: The search for justice and moral purpose." *Harper Lee's to kill a mockingbird: New essays* (2010): 81-99. Page 85.

<sup>87</sup> Johnson, Claudia Durst. *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries*. No. 139. Twayne Pub, 1994. Page 4.

Depression widened the gap between social classes and reinforced segregation. By doing so, Lee is observantly documenting the impact of history on society as she witnessed it in her childhood, a history that many people can easily identify with. However, Great Depression is not the only historical event that effects people's lives. Lee also captures the impact of the past on the people of a Southern town.

### **3.2. The Impact of War and Romanticism: Class Segregation as Tribute to the Past**

The author represents Maycomb as a microcosmic reflection of the American South, characterized by a strong determination to keep old traditions and physical division of its social groups. The description of Maycomb's courthouse, a microcosmic reflection of Maycomb itself, emphasizes the people's constant subjugation to the past. As shown in the passage below, Lee views the courthouse as a physical evidence of the haunting Southern tradition.

“The Maycomb County courthouse was faintly reminiscent of Arlington in one respect: the concrete pillars supporting its south roof were too heavy for their light burden. The pillars were all that remained standing when the original courthouse burned in 1856. Another courthouse was build round them. It is better to say, built in spite of them. But for the south porch, the Maycomb County courthouse was early Victorian, presenting an unoffensive vista when seen from the north. From the other side, however, Greek revival columns clashed with a big nineteenth-century clock

tower housing a rusty unreliable instrument, a view indicating a people determined to preserve every physical scrap of the past.” (Page 179).

The burning of the courthouse is most likely a direct reference to “The Sacking of Lawrence” that took place in 1856. Lawrence, a Kansas town established by anti-slavery settlers in 1854, was burned down by pro-slavery activists, marking a victory for the slave state and launching a series of violent acts long before the Civil War. In the 1930s free state of Alabama, decades after the abolition of slavery, remnants from the distant antebellum era still cling to the present. One can feel it through people’s reluctance to let go of old prejudices just like they can see it through the courthouse building, whose graphic description emphasizes the contrast between the ancient “Greek” columns from the South, reflecting the Southerners’ refusal to let go of an archaic past, against the more modern “Victorian” vista from the North that projects the Northerners’ progressive present.

Maycomb is a microcosmic version of the South with its deeply rooted caste system and the various class divides that make up the structure of its community. It is worth noting that Mark Twain blames these characteristics on Sir Walter Scott who, he claims, “had so large a hand in making Southern character.” In his outrageous attack against Scott, Twain explains, “it was he who created rank and caste down there, and also reverence for rank and caste, and pride and pleasure in them.”<sup>88</sup> Heavily impacted by Sir Scott’s novels of heroism and medieval chivalry, the Old South in “**To Kill a Mockingbird**” is inspired by

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<sup>88</sup> Twain, Mark. *Life on the Mississippi*. Penguin, 1985. Page 242.

what Twain dubs as “jejune romanticism of an absurd past that is dead.”<sup>89</sup> Harper Lee’s awareness of traditional Southern romanticism and its negative influence in the South is clearly felt through her different depictions of the physical town of Maycomb, the community’s various boundaries and people’s clinging to the past, old beliefs and traditional ways.

Indeed, one of the characters in the novel who take special pride in conserving the caste system and class segregation is Mrs. Dubose. As explained earlier, her traditional view regarding race, gender and class is typically Southern, and her character embodies the ugliness of the Old South. It is worth noting that when she makes Jem read for her, she chooses Sir Walter Scott’s “Ivanhoe”, a historical novel singing the chivalry and nobility of medieval times. Mrs. Dubose’s choice emphasizes Lee’s awareness of the link between Sir Scott and Southern romanticism, and indicates her critical view concerning the Old South.

The dynamics of the socially stratified system represented in “To Kill a Mockingbird” and the strong hold of conventional ways over community traditions both signify the influence of Southern Romanticism on quotidian lives of individuals and its impact on the mindset of society reinforcing all types of social stratification. Indeed, the novel depicts several instances that elaborate the powerful presence of Southern Romanticism in Alabama life, and she joins Mark Twain in his criticism of the harmful effects caused by Sir Walter Scott’s romantic novels. Lee’s way of dealing with tradition also resembles that

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

of William Faulkner who, through his “Absalom Absalom” character, Quentin Compson, “most forcibly expressed both the sense of the past in the present in the South and the oppressive weight of that past.”<sup>90</sup> Her attitude, however, is more optimistic. Instead of an utterly radical ousting of the old ways, she sees glimpses of hope for a change in certain individuals who have it in them to create a more progressive South.

In his commentator, “*The Romantic Regionalism of Harper Lee*,” Erisman summarizes the link between the intersection of social bigotries and Maycomb’s southernness as he notes, “The existence of a caste system separating black from white, or of a well-developed regard for kin-group relations, or of a system of class stratification is, of course, not unique. But, from the simultaneous existence of these three systems, and from the way in which they dominate Maycomb attitudes, emerges the significance of Maycomb’s antiquity. It is a representation of the Old South, still clinging as its courthouse, to every scrap of the past.”<sup>91</sup>

Like Twain, Harper Lee blames this reluctance to let go of the old ways for the stagnated status in the South. However, her attitude is less pessimistic, and her novel does not solely provide a critical view of the Old South. Instead, she explores the hopes for its salvation, and solutions for it to progress. Lee’s vision for a progressive New South is like Emerson’s for it believes in the potential of its individuals to bring about positive change, all the while recognizing their imperfection. Lee pictures a society that is plagued with

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<sup>90</sup> Gray, Richard, and Owen Robinson. *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Vol. 44. John Wiley & Sons, 2008. Page 105.

<sup>91</sup> Erisman, Fred. “The Romantic Regionalism of Harper Lee.” *Alabama Review* 26.2 (1973). Page 127.

racial, gender, class and religious bigotries, social ailments that cause most individuals to suffer and create a long spiral of hostile animosity between groups. Her vision, however, suggests that, if guided by higher principles and values, the southerners have it in them to save their community.

### **3.3. The Hope for a Redeeming, Progressive South**

Lee's hope for a progressive south is embodied through several characters, especially Atticus. The uniqueness of Atticus is that he recognizes the pervasive influence of the imported past on his current community, but he does not make himself an enemy of the past. On the contrary, as shown through his relationship with Mrs. Dubose, Atticus appreciates the value of tradition. While he tells his kids not to be affected by her criticism, of him defending a black man, implying his ability to protect himself from the influence of the Old South, he insists on sending Jem to read for her because he wants him to learn from her wisdom. His statement to Jem, "I wanted you to see what real courage is" (Page 124), indicates the importance of the past in Lee's vision for the New South.

Additionally, Atticus's potential in making change springs out of his ability to follow higher principles over personal interests, which Erisman likens to Emerson's ideal man. Despite all the community's criticism against him, and despite the danger it puts him and his family in, at no point does Atticus hesitate to listen to his conscience or question his moral obligation to defend Tom Robinson. "Before I can live with other folks I got to live with myself," he explains to Scout. "The one thing that does not abide to majority rule is a person's conscience" (Page 116). Erisman comments on this scene, dubbing Atticus to be

“singularly Emersonian” and declaring his statement to be a resonance of Emerson’s lines from “Self-Reliance”: ‘Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.’”<sup>92</sup> Just like Emerson, Harper Lee emphasizes the vitality of heeding to a superior law instead of outdated conventions in dictating people’s behavior and attitudes.

The author adopts Emerson’s vision of a New South where people see through the constraints of tradition and are guided by principle to achieve an egalitarian and progressive society. Atticus’s stand against society follows the path recommended by Emerson who argues that “the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men, but what they thought.” Like Atticus, he urges, “Trust thyself!--every heart vibrates to that iron string.”<sup>93</sup> Erisman concludes that Harper Lee “argues that the South has within itself the potential for progressive change, simulated by the incorporation of the New England romanticism of Emerson, and characterized by the pragmatism, principles and wisdom of Atticus Finch.”<sup>94</sup>

This dependence on an elite white male nobility to bring about positive change is, nevertheless, controversial, because it denies the poor, women and blacks their role as active agents of change. It is Atticus who leads an open resistance by defending Tom Robinson against community disapproval. As discussed in the previous chapter, one cannot help noticing the author’s choice of a white upper class savior all the while denying the

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<sup>92</sup> Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Houghton Mifflin College Div, 1957.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Erisman, Fred. "The Romantic Regionalism of Harper Lee." *Alabama Review* 26.2 (1973). Page 127.

roles of blacks as agents of change in the community. It is this choice that raises questions concerning the extent of Harper Lee's ambivalent attitude as it relates to race as well class division. It is clear that even in her liberal thinking, she still clings to honor and valor as traits associated with white middle class male privilege.

It is true, nonetheless, that other characters such as Miss Maudie also fight against conservative beliefs, but while she does so to negotiate her own gender roles, her attitude toward race issues is more of a passive nature, despite her silent support for Atticus. As the next chapter illustrates, women in "**To Kill a Mockingbird**" have their own battle to fight.

**CHAPTER FOUR: GENDER SEGREGATION IN HARPER  
LEE'S "TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD"**

## 1. Introduction

Just like race and class, gender is a strong basis for social prejudices and alienation in **“To Kill a Mockingbird,”** creating segregated boundaries that limit the rights of Maycomb’s women in the community. In her commentary, Michelle S. Ware underlines that “[t]he setting of the novel, a small town in Alabama during the 1930’s, and the central conflict, the trial of a black man accused of raping a white woman, create an intersection of the issues of race, class and gender as Lee explores the themes of racial prejudice, Depression-era poverty, and genteel Southern womanhood.”<sup>95</sup> As several male and female characters around her demonstrate, gender, in a society that relives its past, is also attributed to power, and Scout keeps refusing to submit to her assigned role or give up an authority that is granted to her brother over her.

This Chapter studies how women, of all groups, suffer the consequences of a social standstill in the American South, highlighting the intersection of gender segregation with race, class and religion and underlining the role of women in negotiating their roles in an oppressively prejudiced society. But first, the Chapter will delve into how society’s clinging to a vain past has formed a severely paralyzed society where old virtues such as gentility dictate people’s opinions and behaviors and create segregated boundaries, directly impacting the status of women who, themselves, work to uphold these restraining old traditions.

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<sup>95</sup> Michelle S. Ware “Just a Lady.” *Women in literature: reading through the lens of gender*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003.

## 2. The Heavy Weight of the Past: Women & Patriarchal Tradition

Various allusions to historical events such as the Civil War not only contribute to the realism of the novel and its characters by providing context. They also demonstrate the strong grip of the past and its undeniable effect on the present life of individuals, particularly women. As Claudia Johnson notes, “The continuing influence of the plantation system and the war reveal themselves most decidedly in the attitudes toward race, the glorification of the past, the community's suspicion of outsiders, the lingering paternalism of some members of the more privileged class, and its tradition (on the surface) of polite and gentle manners.”<sup>96</sup> The ideological structure of the antebellum society was based on old virtues such as gentility, which was an important means of rationalizing the patriarchal relationships between men and women and justifying men’s power and privileges. For a very long time, the antebellum society did its best to preserve this order and fight off any foreign influence that could jeopardize it.

This struggle to uphold the old social order was even more tense after the Civil War. As shown through different characters in “**To Kill a Mockingbird**,” while the Civil War did succeed to force the Confederate States back into the Union, the communities developed a strong sense of reclusiveness and a defensive attitude that is apparent through the characters’ resistance to change and suspicious attitudes towards outsiders, particularly women.

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<sup>96</sup> Johnson, Claudia Durst. *Understanding To kill a mockingbird: a student casebook to issues, sources, and historic documents*. Vol. 1. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994. Page 6.

In a society that strives to hold on to an old social order, women play a vital role in preserving traditions. As Gerda Lerner notes, women have often collaborated in their subordination as well as the creation of and upholding oppressive social orders. “They have internalized the values that subordinate them to such an extent that they voluntarily pass them on to their children,” Lerner explains in her book, “**The Creation of Patriarchy**.”<sup>97</sup> This is especially true in post-Civil war American South where women were in complete charge of the household, church and school, three key spaces that have a direct influence on the public opinion and shaping future generations.

In “**To Kill a Mockingbird**,” Harper Lee creates several female characters that are almost obsessed with the past, and take special pride in it. These characters, including women, strive to uphold traditions as guidelines of their daily life, thus sustaining an oppressive social system that denies women their rights. Aunt Alexandra’s definition of a good family, for instance, is old family. Unlike her brothers who leave Finch Landing, their ancestral farm, to pursue a formal education, Aunt Alexandra is the only Finch who stays at Finch Landing. Scout’s description of her house emphasizes many indications of her obsession with the past. “[I]n the back yard was a rusty bell on a pole, used to summon field hands or as a distress signal; a widow’s walk was on the roof, but no widows walked there—from it, Simon oversaw his overseer, watched the river-boats, and gazed into the lives of surrounding landholders” (Page 89).

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<sup>97</sup> Lerner, Gerda. *The creation of patriarchy*. Vol. 1. Oxford Paperbacks, 1986. Page 234.

The rusty bell and the widow's walk, monuments from a pre-war slavery era, symbolize Aunt Alexandra's delusional pride in a past that she won't let go of. In fact, when Aunt Alexandra does leave Finch Landing, it is only in her attempt to play her traditional role as a housewife and restore the old order in Atticus' household, all the while attempting to make a Southern Belle out of Scout.

### **3. A Ray of Sunshine: The Southern Belle as a Technique of Control**

Ever since she arrives, Scout notices how Aunt Alexandra takes immediate responsibility of what everyone should and should not do, in alignment with traditional practices and conventions. She does her best to make a Southern Belle out of her by changing her dressing habits, criticizing her "tomboyish" behavior, preventing her from visiting Cal's house and being friends with Walter Cunningham all the while prompting Jem to take a more masculine role as a man of the house. The following excerpt, told from Scout's point of view, best illustrates Aunt Alexandra's idea of gender roles, and her attempt to pass it on to Scout:

"Aunt Alexandra was fanatical on the subject of my attire. I could not possibly hope to be a lady if I wore breeches; when I said I could do nothing in a dress, she said I wasn't supposed to be doing things that required pants. Aunt Alexandra's vision of my deportment involved playing with small stoves, tea sets, and wearing the Add-A-Pearl necklace she gave me when I was born; furthermore, I should be a ray of sunshine in my father's lonely life. I suggested that one could be a ray of sunshine in pants just as well, but Auntie said that one had to behave like a sunbeam, that I was born good but had grown progressively worse every year" (Page 90).

The way Aunt Alexandria's old beliefs create strict boundaries for Scout, Maycomb's social standstill restrict the role of women in society and limit their power and freedoms. Scout soon learns that being a woman is directly associated with superficiality and appearance, constituents of which was commonly known as the Southern Belle, an antebellum era archetype for a white woman of the American Deep South's upper class.

Inspired by Bel Tracy in John Pendleton Kennedy's 1832 novel, "**Swallow Barn**," the Southern Belle figure soon developed to become "an enduring image, encompassing visions of delicacy gentility, and hospitality within the domestic sphere of the household." Brown further observes, "The private sphere of women embraced femininity, beauty, simplicity, and submissiveness; the highest roles to which a southern woman could aspire were those of nurturing mother, dutiful wife, and social moral pillar."<sup>98</sup> While this fictional image developed since Bel Tracy, one constant was its representation of Southern ideals and virtues. The Belle came to symbolize the South itself and supremacy of the white race, which added on to the white gentleman's burden to protect her as well as dominate her. As Kathryn Lee Seidel argues, "She was the ultimate piece of property, whose possession confirmed a man's dominance, often ensured his future and assured the continuance of the male line."<sup>99</sup>

"**To Kill a Mockingbird**" portrays the Southern Belle as one form of segregation used to subdue women in Maycomb, and criticizes all efforts to continue the tradition of creating

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<sup>98</sup> Brown, Alexis Girardin. "The Women Left Behind: Transformation of the Southern Belle, 1840–1880." *Historian* 62.4 (2000): 759-778.

<sup>99</sup> Seidel, Kathryn Lee. *The southern belle in the American novel*. University Press of Florida, 1985. Page 137.

Belles. From the very beginning of the novel, Lee establishes that Southern ladies, in her view, were people who cared more about “[P]retty decorations” and “good manners” than they cared about real life problems facing their community such as racism and the corrupt justice system, and they wasted their time trying to live up to the Southern Belle notion. Maycomb ladies “bathed before noon, after their three o’clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frostings of sweat and sweet talcum” (Page 5). These women’s sole purpose in life seems to be bringing joy, “a ray of sunshine,” to the men around them as women of old past used to. They were beautiful objects possessed by their male relatives. Just like the South, women in Maycomb cling to a vain past that is preventing them from seeing reality as it is. This is best illustrated by Mrs. Dubbose who won’t let go of Sir Walter Scott’s novels of chivalry as explained in Chapter Two.

Also, for Aunt Alexandra, Scout “could not possibly hope to be a lady if [she] wore breeches” (Page 90). The Southern Belle was supposed to represent delicacy, and dressing like men broke that image of femininity. Just like beautiful decorations, Maycomb upholds good manners as integral garments for being a lady. Alexandra, therefore, had “river-boat, boarding-school manners” (Page 142). Scout’s words mock Aunt Alexandra’s Southern quintessence and the South’s allusions of ancient times.

Being a woman in this Southern community further involves weakness, fragility and the need for protection. For instance, when Scout is too scared to go with Jem and Dill to the Boo house, Jem declares that she is “gettin’ more like a girl everyday” (Page 57). His declaration clearly links femininity with fear and weakness. Similarly, while at the court,

Reverend Sykes suggests taking Scout home to protect her from hearing people talk about rape. Also, Mayella Ewells plays on the fragility of the Southern Belle when she tries to turn her case into an attack on Southern values of chivalry. When cornered by Atticus, her last resort is to shame the community for not protecting their women.

“That nigger yonder took advantage of me an’ if you fine fancy gentlemen don’t wanta do nothin’ about it then you’re all yellow stinkin’ cowards, stinkin’ cowards, the lot of you. Your fancy airs don’t come to nothin’—your ma’amin’ and Miss Mayellerin’ don’t come to nothin’” (Page 207).

But this chivalrous protection comes with a price. Masculinity, Scout perceives, allows a certain level of authority and power that females are not entitled to. Thus, Bob Ewell abuses his daughter, Mayella, and forces her to testify against Tom Robinson. In her book, **“Southern Belle in the American Novel,”** Kathryn Lee Seidel combines the patriarchal and class hierarchy as a source for dominance and power. She further notes, “The patriarchal South had made white men the dominant group. . . . Women and blacks, on the other hand, were deemed subordinate in status, role, and temperament; a woman’s status depended upon her father or husband.”<sup>100</sup> Just like blacks, women were deprived an active role in the economic and political life, remaining perpetually dependent on men and unable to progress.

In fact, gender segregation seems to be an issue that transcends class and race. Many characters in the novel, male and female, upper and lower class, black and white, have the

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid. Page 147.

same conventional view of gender relations. Lee's women face an intersection of boundaries that form a strong grip on their liberty and the choices they have in life.

#### **a. Combined Segregation Forces: Collapsing Boundaries**

In "**To Kill a Mockingbird**," Harper Lee explores how race, class, gender and religion sometimes intertwine to form multilayered ceilings against the lower groups. The intersection of these types of segregation creates a socially hectic dynamic where superiority is the concern of most people, and stratification impacts all groups in the community. "Prejudice is not limited to race," Harold Bloom comments. "Mockingbird addresses all types of bigotry—those engendered by class, sex and religion."<sup>101</sup> More often than not, women are the center of this intersection, suffering multiple layers of segregation and prejudice.

For instance, Mrs. Dubose's constant criticism of Scout's tomboyish behavior and attire reflects how gender and class intersect to create constraints against women. Mrs. Dubose's warning that Scout will "grow up waiting on tables if somebody does not change [her] ways" (Page 112), not only demonstrates the condescending manner in which society views working class, but she also suggests that Scout's lack of femininity reflects directly, and negatively, on her social status as "old aristocracy." In this regard, Laura Hakala notes, "As

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<sup>101</sup> Bloom, Harold. "Social Implications: Race, Class and Gender." *Bloom's Guide: Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird* (2010). Page 40.

Mrs. Dubose reinforces stereotypes, she also connects gender to class, intimating that unconventional behaviors will lower Scout to the working class.”<sup>102</sup>

Another example of the intersection of gender and class is Little Chuck Little’s patriarchal attitude towards his teacher Miss Caroline. The scene when she creates a panic situation about seeing a louse on Burris Ewell’s head illustrates how gender sometimes takes precedence over class and even seniority. Little Chuck Little, despite his impoverished lower class, acts like a “born gentleman.” Like the rest of the “male population” of the class, he feels the need to protect the fragile, gentle, female teacher. Also, as he discovers that she is only scared of a louse, he calms her down and patiently encourages her to resume the class. Though all of this comes from kind intentions, his sense of superiority is loud in the tone in which he addresses his teacher. “Now don’t you be afraid,” he says, “you just go back to your desk and teach us some more” (Page 28). His directive is very much like a dismissive instruction a father would give to his scared little daughter to keep her busy.

Similarly, gender sometimes intersects with religion to form such constraints or put women down. It is important to note that women, much more than man, take religion deep at heart, as illustrated through Aunt Alexandra’s missionary society. It is in the spirit of Christian charity that the group provides support and donations for people in Africa, all the while condemning non-practicing neighbors. Religion is important in the lives of these

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<sup>102</sup> Hakala, Laura, *Scouting for a Tomboy: Gender-Bending Behaviors in Harper Lee's To Kill A Mockingbird* (2010). Electronic Theses & Dissertations. Georgia Southern University. Paper 176. Page 53.

women and Christian conformity is an integral social practice in Maycomb. Sunday masses form a routine habit, and Mr. Arthur Radley is condemned by his neighbors for doing his prayer at home instead of going to church. In this context, Harold Bloom observes that “[t]he view is that everyone should be a practicing Christian and attend Church, for Christianity is as much a social practice as it is a sacred one.”<sup>103</sup>

In fact, Harper Lee’s fictional town, Maycomb, is nestled in the heart of the American Bible Belt, a region running across the American South that is characterized with socially conservative evangelical Protestantism, which has an enormous impact on social and political life. Scout, therefore, constantly sees around her people who are heavily prejudiced against others on the basis of not only race, class and gender but also religion. Indeed, religious hypocrisy clouds people’s judgments and inspires prejudiced treatment towards others.

Several characters in the novel hold on to conventionally prejudiced attitudes towards women on the basis of religion. White women are not exempted from this two-layered prejudice. Scout notes that white clergymen are occupied by the “Impurity of Women Doctrine” (Page 134), and as illustrated through Miss Maudie’s confrontations with the foot-washing Baptists, religion is also manipulated to deny women certain privileges. This is especially apparent when the group of foot-washing Baptists, an extreme sect of Christian Baptists, condemn Miss Maudie and her flowers to go to hell because she “spent

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<sup>103</sup> Bloom, Harold. “Social Implications: Race, Class and Gender.” *Bloom’s Guide: Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird* (2010). Page 39.

too much time in God's outdoors" tending to her gardens instead of staying inside her home reading the Bible (Page 49). It is obvious that the author, through Miss Maudie, strongly denounces this extremist Calvinistic interpretation of the Bible that condemns any human pleasure to be a sin. She also puts in question people's use of religion to judge others and treat them as inferior people just because they uphold different beliefs or practices. However, even Miss Maudie, a victim of religious bigotry herself, feels religiously superior to foot-washing Baptists. Despite her respect for everyone, she blames Old Mr. Radley's sad and troubling life on his foot-washing Baptist practices.

Ironically, other white women in the novel who suffer from gender segregations are also social agents who impose similar bigotries on black women. In addition to gender, black women also suffer the double impact of racial and religious prejudice when facing their white employers who also use religion as a justification to sustain their superiority over blacks. The ladies of Alexandra's Missionary Society feel a Christian supremacy over black women. Mrs. Merriweather gives herself the right to judge her maid because she is unhappy about the jury's conviction of Tom Robinson. "You're simply not being a Christian today," she reports telling her maid. "Jesus Christ never went around grumbling and complaining." Mrs. Merriweather believes her lecture worked efficiently, and stresses the role of white ladies to never "let an opportunity to witness for the Lord" (Page 256). In the same scene, Mrs. Farrow, another religious lady in Aunt Alexandra's missionary society, as she sadly expresses her loss of hope in black's ability to be good Christians. "We can educate 'em till we are blue in the face," she says with grave concern, "we can

try till we drop to make Christians out of 'em, but there is no lady safe in her bed these nights" (Page 256). It is clear in this statement how the Southern community not only feels the burden to enlighten the souls of blacks, but also judges them on the pretext of religion, allowing the whites privileges that, in addition to the caste system, does not leave much room for blacks to navigate their freedom. This scene illustrates how women are perpetually faced with a reality where religion and race are means to ensure their submission and stifle resistance.

Black women's situation is not improved by their male counterparts. On the contrary, the African-American community is just as sexist and patriarchal as the white society. When Scout goes to the black church, she hears Reverend Sykes preach against the impurity of women, and condemning them to be social evils. He even waves up the image of the sin-ridden "Daughter of Eve" as he considers women to be a worse evil than bootleggers. Black women, therefore, face racial prejudice on a daily basis, and to add salt to injury, they have to deal with other black men, including clergy, who look down on them, only worsening the impact of bigotry and preventing them from progressing.

In short, Lee portrays a Southern community where women are faced with different forms of segregation and bigotry. However, she also presents models of resistance and ways for women to manoeuvre their way through a patriarchal social system through characters that strive to flex gender taboos. A lot of this resistance comes from outsider liberal females.

#### 4. The Progressive Stranger: An Outsider Influence

Maycomb appreciates a woman like Aunt Alexandra as she is a keeper of traditions, but is almost aggressive against female outsiders who endanger society's social order. George Rable provides an explanation in his book, **"Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism,"** as he notes, "Women who had grown up in a society that exalted their reproductive functions naturally found much to praise in the Southern attempts to protect the sacred roles of wife and mother from the infectious isms that seemed to have had such a destructive effect on Northern states."<sup>104</sup> In **"To Kill a Mockingbird,"** this danger comes in the form of two women: Miss Caroline and Mrs. Roosevelt.

Miss Caroline Fisher, Scout's teacher, is the embodiment of change that Maycomb is afraid of. She raises serious doubts even amongst her class of young children when she writes that she is from Winston, a county north of Alabama that is known for its opposition to the Confederacy and secession from Alabama when Alabama receded from the Union during the Civil War. "The class murmured apprehensively," Scout reports about the class's reaction when they learn that Miss Caroline is from Winston, "should she prove to harbor her share of the peculiarities indigenous to that region" (Page 18). Children born decades after the war still feel a certain level of mistrust towards a woman from Winston and soon retrieve certain peculiarities attributed to its people such as Liquor interests and

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<sup>104</sup> Rable, George C. *Civil Wars: Women and the Crisis of Southern Nationalism*. Vol. 100. University of Illinois Press, 1991. Harvard

Republicans. Considering how Southern states were mostly democrats up until the 1960's, Miss Caroline symbolizes the political change that is inevitably coming to the South.

Miss Caroline's threat to social order is rendered even bigger by the fact that she is a teacher who has control of educating the children of Maycomb. In a conservative Southern society, teaching was the only job that women were allowed to have since it was considered to be a second household, another space where the upbringing of children happened. Miss Caroline, however, comes with a determination to instill a radical change through education. "Our teacher says Miss Caroline's introducing a new way of teaching," Jem tells Scout. "She learned about it in college. It'll be in all the grades soon" (Page 20). This change from the North is what the Southern women are trying to fight off, and that's what drives them to be suspicious of outsiders, particularly women that have a hand in shaping opinions.

There is also a similar, even more aggressive, distrust against the First Lady, Mrs. Roosevelt, when she visits Birmingham and sits down with blacks. The First Lady's insistence to sit with blacks threatens the social order that has been strictly guarded for decades, and Southerners do not hesitate to show their contempt for this outsider's behavior. "I think that woman, that Mrs. Roosevelt's lost her mind," says Mrs. Merriweather during a Missionary Society meeting, "just plain lost her mind coming down to Birmingham and tryin' to sit with 'em" (Page 258). Eleanor Roosevelt's threat comes from the fact that she is a well-known figure whose actions might influence the public opinion by introducing ideas from the more progressive North. Her political stance is even

more out of place considering that she is a woman, and women in Maycomb are not accustomed to participating in the political life, hence their aggressive attitude towards her. These female outsiders, however, are not the only threat to Maycomb's social order. Resistance against gender segregation also comes from within.

### **5. Resistance in Pants: Negotiating a Progressive Female Identity**

All throughout the novel, Scout continuously refuses to be a lady or to meet the social expectations from her. Michelle S. Ware argues, "According to Scout, power and authority are masculine attributes; to be a girl is to be marginalized and excluded." Scout, therefore, defies people like Jem and Aunt Alexandra who ask her to act like a girl. She threatens to break the link between femininity and social stability. Indeed, when Aunt Alexandra insists on her wearing a dress so she can be a lady and ray of sunshine in her father's life, Scout responds that "one could be a ray of sunshine in pants just as well." Scout prefers playing outside with boys and climbing trees over tea sets, and while she feels constrained by the "starched walls of pink cotton penitentiary closing in on [her]" (Page 136), she feels more comfortable in boyish overalls. For Scout, dress code represents a boundary between what she can and she can't do. Wearing a dress not only hinders her from playing outside freely with boys, but it would also imprison her at home where she has to be a gentle female entertaining the men around her with beautiful looks and merry sounds. Scout is not ready to give up the privileges that wearing overall entails. These reactions to people around her,

Ware comments, “reflect her growing knowledge of where power resides in her community.”<sup>105</sup>

Harper Lee’s views are evidently progressive for the time and place setting in which the novel was written, let alone the 1930’s, the context in which it is set. Her views can be perceived through several characters who have less conservative understandings of gender roles. Indeed, from Scout’s point of view, not all characters pressure her to be a lady. Atticus, for instance, does not mind her tomboyish tendencies. When she reports her argument with Aunt Alexandra about the relation between ladyship and “a ray of sunshine,” he dismisses her saying that “there were enough sunbeams in the family” (Page 90). His attitude barely comes as a surprise considering his passively rebellious character, and tendency to bend the conventions that he considers to be wrong. Just as he chooses to defend a black man despite the fierce criticism of his society, which is a highly progressive attitude in a 1930’s Southern society, he does not pressure Scout to behave like a Southern Belle. For him, education and human values rise above these old conventions. As Laura Hakala notes, “He teaches Scout that some issues, such as the right to an education, transcend above the law. Disregarding the stereotype of an obedient female, he encourages a girl—not a boy—to revolt against these rules.”<sup>106</sup>

While access to education might seem as a far cry from the rights today’s feminists are fighting for, it is undeniable that this was a huge step forward back in the time when the

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<sup>105</sup> Ware, Michelle S. “Just a Lady.” *Women in literature: reading through the lens of gender*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003. Pages 286 & 287.

<sup>106</sup> Hakala, Laura, *Scouting for a Tomboy: Gender-Bending Behaviors in Harper Lee’S To Kill A Mockingbird* (2010). Electronic Theses & Dissertations. Georgia Southern University. Paper 176. Page 31.

only expectations from women were docility and domesticity. These traces of a progressive Northern society find their way stealthily into Maycomb from the North through education, as is the case with Atticus, or through female strangers such as Miss Caroline (as discussed earlier in the chapter).

Another character that relays Lee's progressive views is Miss Maudie. Unlike Mrs. Dubose, Miss Maudie is not offended by Scout's tomboyism. Indeed, Miss Maudie plays an important part in the novel negotiating gender roles and attitudes. Of all the female role models around Scout, she is the most moderate character who carves her own understanding of her role as a woman. While she does not exactly make an enemy of society and its conservative beliefs regarding gender, she does not submit entirely to people's expectations of her as a female. While she is a great cook, and participates in the traditional parades of good manners and ladylike behavior, Miss Maudie is not one to submit to such religious pressures that aim to prevent her from taking care of her garden (which the foot-washers thought was a sin) in men's attire. When someone shouts at her a verse from the Bible, "He that cometh in Vanity departeth in darkness," she swiftly refutes it with another verse from the Scripture, "A Merry heart maketh a cheerful countenance." Miss Maudie cleverly uses religion as a weapon to negotiate the limited roles that society makes available to her as a woman based on faith. She allows herself to enjoy femininity without denying herself pleasures that are traditionally linked with masculinity.

In fact, by defying social norms, Miss Maudie has to face gender segregation on a regular basis to the extent that she has developed an outstanding ability to manoeuvre

gender roles to her own benefit without necessarily disturbing the social system. Scout's description of Miss Maudie as a "chameleon lady who worked in her flower beds in an old straw hat and men's overalls, but after her five o'clock bath, she would appear on the porch and reign over the street with magisterial beauty" (Page 47) indicates her admiration of Maudie's skills. Miss Maudie, Ware argues, "successfully balances an independent spirit with traditional gender role and therefore becomes a strong potential role model for Scout."<sup>107</sup> Gary Richards joins in agreement as he notes, "Unlike Alexandra, Miss Maudie is not overtly distraught about the transgressive performances of gender and indeed has constructed a public identity contingent upon adroit manipulations of such performances."<sup>108</sup>

Miss Maudie has developed two identities that she juggles with according to the situation, offering a potential solution for Scout. Evidently, while Scout constantly quarrels with the conventional female "role models" around her like Calpurnia and Alexandra, she likes Miss Maudie the most. As gender consciousness widens the separation gap between her and Jem, she resorts to Miss Maudie as a companion, and she watches her expertly manoeuver gender roles.

She also learns from her wisdom and seems to accept her role as a female better from her. This is especially apparent by the end of the novel as Scout improves her relationship with Cal, reduces the quarrels with Aunt Alexandra, and, to a certain extent, begins to

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<sup>107</sup> Ware, Michelle S. "Just a Lady." *Women in literature: reading through the lens of gender*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003. Pages 286 & 287.

<sup>108</sup> Richards, Gary. "Harper Lee and the Destabilization of Heterosexuality." *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP.

embrace her femininity. Towards the end of the book, Scout dresses up for Alexandra's missionary society's meeting, and she suddenly tries to act like a "proper lady" by serving the guests in the best-mannered fashion, making her aunt very proud of the transformational achievement. "I carefully picked up the tray," Scout reports, "and watched myself walk to Mrs. Merriweather. With my best company manners, I asked if she would have some [cookies]." Also, this happens when Scout, just like Aunt Alexandra and Miss Maudie, are hiding the news about Tom Robinson's death from everyone. Just like good manners, Scout links supporting family in times of crisis with being a lady. "After all," Scout concludes, "if Aunty could be a lady at times like this, so could I" (Page 237).

This scene inspires Jennifer Murray to raise intriguing questions about what Lee's message behind this sudden shift of attitude in Scout might be. She wonders if this means that "discourses of southern hospitality automatically take precedence over personal feelings... [or is] this what 'coming of age' as a 'southern lady' means?"<sup>109</sup> The answer lies in the passage, a few pages later, when one of the ladies asks if Scout wants to grow up to be a lawyer, she responds, "Nome. Just a lady." Scout's response, at a first glance, may indicate that she has eventually given up her fight against tradition, and has submissively accepted her assigned role as a Southern Belle, a rather unexpected turn of events for both Scout and Harper Lee.

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<sup>109</sup> Murray, Jennifer. "More than one way to (Mis) read a mockingbird." *The Southern Literary Journal* 43.1 (2010): 75-91. Page 80.

However, in her paper, “*Scouting for a Tomboy: Bending Gender Behaviors in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird*,” Laura Hakala provides a completely different explanation. Basing her study on Judith Butler’s theory about the separation of gender identity and gender performance, Hakala argues that, “in order to appease the Missionary Society, Scout creates the ‘illusion’ that her ‘gender core’ is feminine. Butler identifies three distinct elements of an individual that do not necessarily have to be all in alignment with one another: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. She adds that “If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance.”<sup>110</sup>

In the case of Scout, her anatomical sex is female, her gender identity is male, and her gender performance is usually male, too, except when she creates an illusion in an attempt to deceive her aunt and the Missionary Society. According to Butler, this illusion is ‘a strategy of survival’ (139). Since strategies are premeditated plans with an expected outcome, Scout knowingly wears the dress to survive her aunt’s party. “Like Calpurnia, she leads a ‘double life,’ appealing to the audience before which she appears.” Hakala suggests that Scout tells the ladies exactly what they want to hear with a smirk on her face

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<sup>110</sup> Card, Claudia. "Judith Butler. Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity." *Canadian Philosophical Reviews* 10 (1990): 127-130.

just to avoid conflicts. "Scout does not accept southern femininity," she insists. Just like Miss Maudie, "she learns to tolerate it."<sup>111</sup>

While this compromise may not be satisfying for all modern day feminists, it is this growth of understanding that drives Ware to describe the novel as a "feminist bildungsroman"<sup>112</sup>. She explains:

"Scout emerges from her childhood experiences with a clear sense of her place in her community and an awareness of her potential power as the woman she will one day be. Admittedly her power is limited, and her authority is circumscribed by the historical/cultural context of the novel; Lee's portrayal of Scout ends not in defeat, but in triumphant expansion of her knowledge, understanding and sympathy."<sup>113</sup>

These traits allow Scout to follow the progressive steps of her father and Miss Maudie as she learns to manoeuvre social norms and negotiate gender roles without necessarily confronting the social system head-on. Her statement that she wants to grow up to be just a lady is an example of her disguise, and it results in the great admiration of Aunt Alexandra

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<sup>111</sup> Hakala, Laura, *Scouting for a Tomboy: Gender-Bending Behaviors in Harper Lee's To Kill A Mockingbird* (2010). Electronic Theses & Dissertations. Georgia Southern University. Paper 176. Page 53.

<sup>112</sup> According to the Free Dictionary, a bildungsroman novel is a "[a] novel whose principal subject is the moral, psychological, and intellectual development of a usually youthful main character." Brändström, Camilla. "Gender and Genre": *A Feminist Exploration of the Bildungsroman in A Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man and Martha Quest* (2009) defines it very well as she notes, "Novels that are characteristic of the Bildungsroman genre describe a young protagonist's developmental trajectory, or overall development, from childhood to maturity." A *feminist bildungsroman* novel is distinguished by further particularities as it "narrates a story of development toward coherent selfhood through a process of moving into a wider community" Felski, Rita. *Beyond feminist aesthetics: Feminist literature and social change*. Harvard University Press, 1989. Page 140.

<sup>113</sup> Ware, Michelle S. "Just a Lady." *Women in literature: reading through the lens of gender*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003. Page 288.

and her conservative friends. But it is also a middle ground, and hope for women to achieve progress.

To conclude, Harper Lee's "**To Kill a Mockingbird**" is not only a story about race or caste system. It is also about gender barriers. Women in the antebellum society were both guardians of the very traditions that limited their own freedom and a source of change. The Southern Belle image thus became an representative of Southern gentility, but also a tool to maintain control over women. Combined with race, class and/or race, gender became yet another form of segregation that weighed down on these women, but Lee also manages to highlight traces of progressive hope coming both from liberal female outsiders as well as Southern women themselves. Scout and Miss Maudie's daily struggle with gender segregation indicate a possibility for women, as for other oppressed groups, to break free of these strict boundaries. Lee clearly has a progressive view when it comes to gender, but to what extent does that make "**To Kill a Mockingbird**" a progressive novel? Putting race, class and gender together might get us closer to answering that question.

## **GENERAL CONCLUSION**

This dissertation has explored to what extent “**To Kill a Mockingbird**” is an anti-segregation novel, and to what extent we can say the author’s solutions are progressive. In doing so, we first studied the narration techniques used by the author in order to achieve reality-like complexity characters. We found that while she manages to highlight the emotional and ideological development of her white characters by contrasting positive and negative qualities, employing mental disorder and putting individuals through challenging situations, none of the blacks receives this level of character complexity. Unlike whites, blacks are deprived a richness of character that people can identify with. We also underlined that while Lee’s complex white characters provide enough materials to construct an informed social criticism of the American South, the flat, unchanging and simple personalities of her black characters reflect neither the time of the novel (1930s) nor its period of production (late 1950s). However, the reader still manages to capture instances of racial segregation.

Furthermore, by focusing on Harper Lee’s portrayal of her black characters, we came to the conclusion that it is heavily influenced by the century-old stereotypical figures of Mammy and Tom as well the original images of Aunt Chloe and Uncle Tom from Stowe’s novel, “**Uncle Tom’s Cabin**.” While this depiction of blacks has been perceived as rather negative, it might be justified as a strategy deployed by the author to achieve her ultimate goal of revoking repression and welcoming positive social reform. Lee’s depiction of the blacks might be a way to call upon readers to restore human values and contest the sin of white law. Nevertheless, even if this strategy stems out of positive intentions, it results in

a representation of African-Americans that does not accurately reflect the context of the novel or match the reality of the time. In fact, the reader might even sense an ambivalence towards civil rights.

Lee's utter dependence on whites to be agents of change and to fight against racism, while denying blacks their role as agents of history, is what makes it difficult to justify her ambivalent attitude. Another major shortcoming is that although blacks suffer the most from a racially prejudiced society, the novel barely stresses their suffering. In fact, it neglects the impact of lynching and anti-miscegenation attitudes on the lives of black individuals and community, making it all the more relevant to reevaluate the extent to which "**To Kill a Mockingbird**" is an anti-racism novel. Pryala concludes that Lee's novel is a tool for white, middle-class people to interact with the issue of race, but only on the periphery.<sup>114</sup>

Another aspect of segregation that Lee denounces is class exclusion. In a frozen class system of a Southern small town community, power is passed down by inheritance based on social standing. Lee follows the steps of Mark Twain in blaming the stagnation of this socially divided community on outdated beliefs from the Old South and its decaying romanticism. Furthermore, Lee illustrates how historical elements such as the Civil War and the Great Depression deepen the gap between classes and reinforce segregation between groups. Because of the Civil War, Southerners have become very reclusive, and

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<sup>114</sup> Pryal, Katie Rose Guest. "Walking in another's skin: Failure of empathy in to kill a mockingbird." *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird: New Essays* 174-189 (Michael J. Meyer, ed., Scarecrow Press, 2010). Page 179.

highly suspicious of any change that might come from the North, and because of Great Depression, whites feel that their jobs are threatened by blacks, hence heightening the tension in the community. In doing so, she manages to create through Maycomb a microcosmic reflection of the American South, characterized by a strong determination to keep old traditions and physical division of its social groups.

However, Lee doesn't only state the problem, but rather goes on to suggest the solution. Like Emerson, her hope for a progressive New South is solidly based on her belief in the potential of individual agents who, if freed from traditional constraints and guided by higher principles and values, have the power to bring about positive change. One shortcoming of this vision, though, is that it is embodied by the wise and almost-perfect Atticus, who also happens to belong to the white elite male nobility. In "**To Kill a Mockingbird**," change is not created by blacks, and Lee's New South is not initiated by women, either.

In fact, Lee also explores gender segregation as another form of social stratification. In addition, gender often intersects with race and class to form stricter boundaries that limit the role of women, and deny them privileges that are otherwise allowed to men. Even religion is used as a tool to limit the role of women in society. But Lee also presents models of resistance and ways for women to flex gender taboos in a patriarchal social system through characters that strive to negotiate female roles without completely disrupting the whole social system. Through Miss Maudie, Lee presents a model who rather intelligently manoeuvres a path for her to do what she enjoys without offending the people around her

or entirely submitting to social norms. Scout follows suit as Atticus encourages her to focus more on education and human values.

Human values, Lee tells us, transcend beyond social conventions. Human values are the solution.

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## التمييز في "أن تقتل طائرا محاكيا" لهاربر لي: دراسة العنصرية، الطبقة و المساواة بين الجنسين

### ملخص

تقدم هذه الأطروحة قراءة شاملة لمواضيع العرق، الطبقة و قضايا المساواة بين الجنسين كما جسدت من خلال رواية هاربر لي "أن تقتل طائرا محاكيا" الصادرة عام 1960، كما أنها تسعى إلى الفصل بين هذه الأشكال من التمييز بهدف فهم أفضل للتفاعل الحاصل بينها. ويهدف هذا العمل إلى تحري إلى أي مدى يمكن اعتبار "أن تقتل طائرا محاكيا" رواية مناهضة للعنصرية. بينما يكمن التمييز العنصري في قلب الرواية، فإن لي تسعى لإدانة أشكال مختلفة من التعصب مثل الطبقة و التمييز الجنسي. تبحث هذه الأطروحة أيضا إمكانية اعتبار مؤلف هاربر لي رواية تحريرية و ذلك بتحليل استخدامها لتقنيات السرد وتقييم الحلول التي تقترحها للأمراض الاجتماعية. سؤال يطرح غالبا هو: ما مقدار إجابة مؤلف أبيض كتابة قصص عن السود؟

اعتمدت الرسالة نظريتين أدبيتين رئيسيتين للوصول للأهداف المذكورة آنفا. فأما الأولى فهي التاريخية الجديدة لستيفن غرينبلات، وهي نظرية تفسر العمل الأدبي بإعادة ربطه بزمان إنتاجه و تحده من خلال المذاهب الثقافية والسياسية السائدة في تلك الحقبة. و أما المقاربة الثانية فهي النقدية الاجتماعية لكينيث بورك التي تهدف إلى وضع الأدب في سياقه الاقتصادي والسياسي، وخاصة الاجتماعي. علاوة على أن هذه المقاربة تسعى لكشف الاختلالات الاجتماعية من خلال النظر في بنية المجتمع.

تبعاً للإرشادات التي تسطرها هاتين النظريتين، يدور هذا العمل حول أربعة محاور رئيسية. يقارن الفصل الأول بين تمثيل الشخصيات البيض السود في الرواية. في غالب الأحيان، تتعامل لي مع السود في صيغة الجماهير مع القليل من التركيز على الفاعلين الفرديين، فيما تحظى الشخصيات البيضاء بوصف أكثر تعقيدا، و هو ما يثير التساؤلات بشأن موقفها المتحيز حيال موضوع العرق. و يسعى الفصل الثاني إلى تحديد درجة توفيق المؤلفة في إبراز الفردية لدى الشخصيات السود و دورهم كعناصر فردية للتغيير. ثالثا، تبرز الأطروحة وجهة نظر المؤلفة عن الجنوب الأمريكي القديم، الفاسد و الذي يتمسك بالمفاهيم القديمة للطبقة كما أنها تسلط الضوء على نظرة المؤلفة لمجتمع أكثر تقدما.

ينظر القسم الرابع والأخير من هذه الأطروحة إلى الجنس كأساس آخر للتمييز، و يشدد على تقاطع الجنس مع العرق، الطبقة و كذا الدين و دور المرأة في مفاوضة دورها في مجتمع جائر و متعصب من ناحية، تحاكي المؤلفة مارك توين و إيمرسون في آرائهما التقدمية التي توحى بأن خلاص الجنوب القديم يقع على عاتق الأفراد الذين لديهم القدرة على التخلي عن التقاليد القديمة و اتباع المثل والمبادئ الإنسانية لإحداث التغيير الإيجابي. لكن من ناحية أخرى، يحدث و أن ينتمي هؤلاء الأفراد الذين تتحدث عنهم هاربر لي إلى النخبة القوقازية الذكورية.