



Ignorance v. Innocence: *Go Set a Watchman's* Case against the Hegemony of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Abstract

This paper takes a cultural materialist approach in analyzing the hegemonic purpose of using Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* in American education. Ideas from critical race theory and Lee's second novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, are used to reveal obfuscated aspects of *Mockingbird's* narrative. These aspects have been repurposed to fit a Eurocentric palate, and have let the book achieve success under the guise of being a progressive and multiculturalist work. *Mockingbird's* narration, marked by childlike innocence, has been used to obfuscate Eurocentric ignorance of racial and economic inequality. The text has also been used to divert blame from those in power onto those oppressed by a hegemonic system. Racism is in *Mockingbird* inaccurately described as an individual moral issue, rather than a system of discrimination which is deeply ingrained in every aspect of U.S. society. The liberal moderate ideology which informs Atticus character has historically been ignored due to his unquestionable, near-mythical position as a moral role model. The paper finds that *Mockingbird* has been used as part of a greater Eurocentric narrative which positions the Civil Rights Movement as a white movement of moral improvement.

Key words

Cultural Materialism, Cultural Criticism, Critical Race Theory, Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Go Set a Watchman*, Eurocentrism

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view – [...] – until you climb into his skin and walk around in it” (33).

This oft-quoted line, by the character Atticus Finch, is one of the most well-known excerpts from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It perfectly encapsulates the popularly accepted moral intent of the book—of trying to understand the plight of people of different color, gender, class, or ability.

But the popular interpretation of *Mockingbird* ignores the white privileged perspective of the book, which this paper argues is the key to the book’s success. This perspective, which distorts many of the issues of 1930s America and perpetuates politically moderate discourse, enabled white readers at the time to enjoy *Mockingbird*’s contents from a place of comfort not extended to those oppressed by this dominant viewpoint. This same sort of comfort, if not a more intense kind, is enjoyed by its readers today, being situated even further away from the material context of *Mockingbird*’s original release. This paper takes a cultural materialist approach, seeking to dislodge *Mockingbird* from its hegemonic interpretation, and reattach the text to the material circumstances—the cultural, historical, economical, and political context—of its time of publication. The paper makes use of critical race theory and comparisons to *Go Set a Watchman* in order to highlight *Mockingbird*’s success in marketing the status quo in service of cultural hegemony.

Key ideas needed to interpret *Mockingbird* are the concepts of hegemony and material determinism. Cultural hegemony refers to a dominant perspective, which holds precedence over others. Peter Barry likens hegemony to “an internalised form of social control which makes certain views seem ‘natural’ or invisible so that they hardly seem like views at all, just ‘the way things are’ (158). People are conditioned in unassuming ways, such as through education and media, to think and behave in a certain manner that, covertly, benefits the dominant classes.

The concept of material determinism, or interest convergence, is explained by Lois Tyson as “[t]he desire to advance oneself in the *material* world” (355). In U.S. society, which is built on the economic and political discrimination of African Americans, the simple drive to advance oneself in society causes people to perform or perpetuate racism. Material determinism is often ignored since it is simpler to make out racism as a moral issue, rather than one permeated throughout every aspect of society.

Mockingbird is narrated by a young girl, Jean Louise Finch—referred to as Scout—and sees her growing up in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama during the early 1930s (1933-35 specifically) together with her brother, Jem, their stray friend, Dill. Having no mother, she is instead raised by her father, Atticus Finch, and their African-American housekeeper, Calpurnia. Dissatisfaction is at a high during the Great Depression, black people are relegated by the segregationist Jim Crow laws, and NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) advocates for African American rights. Scout recounts the story of Atticus, the defense lawyer who has the unenviable task of defending Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of raping a white woman. The text details the hardships that the Finch family faces in the time leading up to the climactic trial, and attempts to reveal the underlying racist sentiments of the American Deep South.

Mockingbird was published in 1960; written during the peak of the African-American civil rights movement, when several pivotal legislative victories were achieved. The novel was met with immediate success, quickly finding support within civil rights circles and selling four and a half million copies by 1962, according to Claudia Durst Johnson (7), and earning Lee the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. A movie adaptation was screened in cinemas in 1962, starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch—a performance which has gone on to inform the image of the character to this day. The book has continued enjoying success, never leaving print. Having cemented its place in American canon, it has gone on to be used in education as compulsory reading for the majority of American high-school students on racism and multiculturalism.

Atticus went on to become a national icon, especially aided by Peck's performance in the 1962 film, which focused more on his heroic stand in court. Shortly after, Martin Luther King Jr. praised his "moral courage" and nonviolent approach (38). More recently, Barack Obama quoted the same opening line as this paper in his farewell address in 2017 (Johnson 129). Atticus has obviously inspired many Americans for a long time, ingraining himself in their national identity and providing a moral ideal to aspire for.

The legion of praise that vouches for *Mockingbird's* integrity and righteousness does much to dissuade criticism of the novel. But *Mockingbird*, a literary work that is specifically known for advocating understanding of marginalized people, can still be said to oppress them. This paper aims to explain how a text, known for giving voice to the issues of gender, class,

and race, is in fact stifling discussion of those very issues in the service of hegemonic domination.

It is important to first look at the reasons why any work rises to the status of canonical. As with any such works, *Mockingbird* is held to a higher standard, argued to be timeless in its relevance. “Western [...] literary canon has been dominated by a *Eurocentric* definition of *universalism*” (Tyson 345); ideas and themes that reflect a white European experience are considered not only superior, but the only proper way to explain the human condition. This Eurocentric view is considered universal, applicable to all people throughout time. Texts lacking this perspective, such as African-American texts, have historically been ignored as irrelevant to humanity at large. Canonical works are texts that reflect a Eurocentric view, and racism is thus institutionalized through the body of Western Canon, and perpetuated through educational institutions.

Another such canonical body of work of high regard is that of Shakespeare. Dollimore and Sinfield are noted for questioning the canonicity of his works, and the dominant position Shakespeare studies enjoy in English academia. They hold that “culture does not (cannot) transcend the material forces and relations of production” (viii); the political and economic reality of the time and place where that culture is produced. By looking at the material circumstances of a canonical work, we are able to look beyond its supposed “transcendent significance” (vii), revealing the text’s past purpose, and what purpose its use serves today.

In contrast to the belief that works of “high culture” are timeless, Dollimore and Sinfield argued that “culture is made continuously,” and that texts—Shakespeare’s in their case—are throughout time “reconstructed, reappraised, reassigned,” constantly changing in meaning to suit the need of the times (viii). Shakespeare’s “timeless” themes, they found, were disentangled from their material contexts and used to teach the “timelessness” of contemporary ideological views; of what was virtuous or sinful; of the inherent nature of men and essential place of women. Similarly, *Mockingbird*’s use in American education has served the purpose of teaching certain ideals, obfuscated as relevant and contemporary issues.

According to thinkers that built upon the Marxist school of thought, such as Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, and Louis Althusser, one purpose of literature, indeed of all facets of society, is to perpetuate hegemonic ideology—the ideas and values of the dominant classes (Barry 158). Many popular works, under the guise of being “timeless” and

“transcendent” works of art, are used to teach ideas “sympathetic to the aims of the state and the political status quo” (Barry 158). The maintenance of the status quo—the preservation of the current political and socioeconomic power structure—is what Althusser refers to, in Marxist terms, as “the reproduction of the relations of production” (Althusser 22)—the way that state apparatuses, such as schools, act to reproduce the conditions which allows the current hegemony to continue its domination of the oppressed. Within popular literature and within institutions, of which education is the most potent, the ideas of the oppressed are suppressed and marginalized in favor of the hegemonic. In the past, the preservation of the status quo would have worked towards the oppression of African Americans, women, and lower class workers. Today, *Mockingbird* is mainly used for its Eurocentric narrative, which marginalizes voices of color in favor of white supremacy.

It can definitely be argued that there are ideas subversive to the status quo in *Mockingbird*; after all, the popular understanding of the book is that it is entirely subversive of the racist sentiments of the era in which its story is set. This may seem counter to this paper’s argument, but Dollimore unravels this paradoxical knot, explaining that “we discover not a straightforward opposition but a process much more complex” (11). Sentiments, and the ideologies which influence them, often intersect and intertwine, sometimes resulting in conflicting ideas. He goes on to explain that a text can seem to be subversive on the surface, but may also be contained and reproduced to suit the needs of the dominant order (11). This explanation, and this paper, do not deny *Mockingbird*’s subversive ability, but seeks to point out how even that aspect can be used to serve hegemonic purposes.

Also have in mind that the dominant ideology is not the only one; society is made up of “different, often competing elements” (Dollimore and Sinfield 12). The aim of this paper is not to make a complete denouncement of every aspect of *Mockingbird*, or Lee’s intent in writing it, but to explain its massive and continuing success found within a hegemonic system. *Mockingbird* has doubtlessly had positive effects throughout the years, but that does not change the potential harm it causes as compulsory reading in American education, or as a canonical work.

To scrutinize canonical works is extremely important. Because of their status they are often excused from any substantial criticism and are free to perpetuate the ideology of those who would benefit the most from public ignorance and oppression. The importance of

viewing *Mockingbird* in this way is not only to encourage critical readings of it, but to call to attention that its canonical aegis actively discourages people to do so. Before they have even read the book, readers will have heard it promoted as a beacon of moral righteousness from which all good deeds spring; they are told how to interpret the story before they even have a chance to form their own interpretation. *Mockingbird*'s good reputation, as well as its story, makes it easy for readers to neglect its harmful aspects.

As with any popular and influential work, *Mockingbird* has received its share of criticism. Throughout its time in print, the novel has been critiqued for its use of crass language, mentions of rape, and allusions to incest. Later, as African Americans had more to say on the matter, it was criticized for its liberal use of the "n-word". What was not initially criticized was the popular interpretation of the book's core themes and messages, or the idolization of Atticus Finch.

Claudia Durst Johnson explains that this began to change around the early 1990s, when previous ideas about ethics and heroism began to be reexamined (125). Some of the first, well-known critiques of Atticus Finch came from law professor Monroe Freedman, who disagreed with the way that "Finch's adulators inaccurately represent him as a paragon of social activism" (480). Atticus has become a symbol of the Civil Rights Movement, yet his influence only grew as the movement's waned, hinting towards him serving another purpose. Atticus and *Mockingbird* are American symbols, part of what informs the U.S. national identity, and they are used to tell a Eurocentric narrative about a white Civil Rights Movement, driven primarily by white people.

Andrew Sargent, writing in an article for the African American Review, summarized a lot critics' pre-*Watchman* criticism as "question[ing] the novel's ennobling of a paternalistic white moderate; its sentimentalized depiction of a helpless black man who depends on a white savior; and its reliance on a young white girl to narrate, and soften, a tale of racial injustice" (37). These summarizations are very pointed, aimed directly at three of *Mockingbird*'s most praised elements; the heroism of Atticus Finch; the book's theme of empathy with the marginalized; and Scout's widely adored innocence, which informs the narration.

As if to add its voice to these increasing concerns, Lee's only other novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, was surprisingly published in 2015. At first thought to be a sequel to *Mockingbird*, it has later come to be accepted as a prior rejected draft. It is not difficult to see

why it was rejected in the first place, as it certainly reads like an early draft; but the criticism against its quality of writing has overshadowed the potential impact the text has on our understanding of *Mockingbird*.

James B. Kelley, in an article written in response to the release of the book and its critical response, raises the argument that *Watchman* should not be ignored as simply being a failed sequel or rejected first draft of *Mockingbird*, but read as a palimpsest—something that reveals an additional level of meaning to the work (238). He argues that *Watchman* further reveals the underlying themes of *Mockingbird* that were previously largely obfuscated or ignored. This paper will take this idea to heart in its approach.

Watchman is set in 1957, more than 20 years after the similar, though slightly different, events of *Mockingbird*. The civil rights movement is in full swing and the grown-up Jean Louise Finch, now a resident New Yorker, is on a return visit to Maycomb and her father. She still butts heads with her high society aunt, Alexandra, on how a lady ought to behave. Her uncle, Dr. Jack Finch, plays a bigger role in the story as her guide and counselor. Atticus is old and arthritic, and Calpurnia has retired. A new addition to the cast is Jean Louise's childhood friend and love interest, Henry "Hank" Clinton, and much of the novel is dedicated to their relationship and his attempts at convincing her to settle down with him.

What *Watchman* adds to the discussion is the fact that it turns a lot of the charming themes of *Mockingbird* on their heads; it reveals a racist society lashing back against the civil rights movement and the grown-up Jean-Louise's disillusionment with her childhood, her home, and her father. Through a series of events, she finds out that Henry and Atticus have seats in Maycomb's Citizens' Council. White Citizens' Councils were formed in response to the 1954 *Brown v. The Board of Education* decision and were "considered a more civilized, 'respectable' version of the Klan" (Johnson 35). The Citizens' Councils advocated segregation and tried to counter the NAACP's legislative efforts with their own. The reveal of Atticus as a segregationist was decried by fans as the most surprising and egregious element of *Watchman*, but it was just the one—the book is a surprising antithesis to many of *Mockingbird's* themes. Many chose to swear off the book because of its contrary elements, as well as its overall lack of polish.

The first and most potent element of scrutiny is Scout's narration, which is permeated by her childlike, innocent perspective which is widely agreed to be "central to *Mockingbird's*

appeal” (Sargent 46). This innocence allows Lee to subvert and reveal the hypocrisies of the adult world, and gives the narration its often humorous tone. Child characters can often be unreliable narrators, but Scout’s honest innocence leaves readers no reason, or want, to doubt her. Her innocent narration “allows Lee to mythicize Atticus” and “lets readers share in Scout’s blamelessness” (Sargent 46). The widely shared understanding of childhood innocence allows many readers to easily empathize with and vicariously live through Scout, allowing them to see evil in simple terms and fully appreciate Atticus’ stand against it.

In *Watchman*, however, Jean Louise decries her childhood innocence as ignorance: “Had she insight, could she have pierced the barriers of her highly selective, insular world, she may have discovered that all her life she had been with a visual defect which had gone unnoticed and neglected by herself and those closest to her: she was born color blind” (122). After coming back to Maycomb and finding those she loved and looked up to lashing back against the Civil Rights Movement, the now grown-up Jean Louise has gained “an awareness [...] that her own childhood memories are distorted and unreliable (Kelley 237). She realizes that the racist sentiments of those around her has always been there, unnoticed by her, even in her youth. Racism, she finds, is not something far away from her, but an inherent part of life in the South. She experiences a crisis of faith as she realizes that her morals differ from the person she thought they were inherited from—her father, Atticus.

She questions the morals that she was taught in her youth, the same lessons of respect and empathy that readers of *Mockingbird* have been taught. She realizes “that whatever was decent and of good report in her character was put there by her father; she did not know that she worshipped him” (117-118). She realizes that her worship of Atticus has blinded her to his less agreeable sides. It is of course extremely fitting that Atticus actually became an idol in the real world, and that readers’ thus are able to react in the same manner as Jean Louise.

As she wracks her brain, trying to make sense of everything, she explains a desire to go back to her youth of ignorance: “She had been half willing to sponge out what she had seen and heard, creep back to New York, and make him a memory. A memory of the three of them, Atticus, Jem, and her, when things were uncomplicated and people did not lie” (241). Kelley points out this element as laying the foundation for *Mockingbird*’s narrative—a narrative which is purposefully crafted to avoid the awareness of racism which Jean Louise experiences as an adult (238). With *Watchman* written first, Lee must have had this idea in

mind throughout writing *Mockingbird*, purposefully crafting a Eurocentric perspective that is blind to the bigotry in those closest to the narrator.

Scout's innocence also serves as a foil for the evil elements of the grown world, as she unwittingly confronts a lynching mob coming for the imprisoned Tom Robinson. The sheer force of her purity and childlike amiability shames them into leaving. Sargent argues that the emphasis put on child innocence in *Mockingbird* is Eurocentric in nature, and therefore racially biased. (46) The innocence that *Mockingbird* portrays as universal for children is in fact a white privilege; a colored child could not have stopped this mob, and if they tried they would be likely to suffer more, both physically and mentally (Sargent 46). Scout, Jem, and Dill, though distraught from the experience, are shielded from its full consequences. For a white person, a lynching is just a tragedy; for a black person, it is a lasting reminder that their life is somehow worth less and can be taken away at any time. From a Eurocentric perspective, all children are marked by a specific idea of purity that is held to be universal; but this obfuscates the fact that innocence, or ignorance, is often a racial privilege that is not extended to all children equally.

Scout's encounter with the mob also points to more than just a racial privilege; there is also the issue of class. The mob is made up of poor farmers, and the Finches are a known, well-respected, upper class family—and at least one person in the group is indebted to Atticus. Atticus' explanation of how “it took an eight-year-old child to bring ‘em to their senses” (173) does not acknowledge these compounded privileges, and the mob's dispersal is instead attributed to her innocence.

Scout is not only ignorant of racial issues, but of class issues as well. She is blind to the fact that these issues are also inextricably linked. The hegemonic power structure required individuals to conform to racist social norms in order to advance in society. This is a theme that *Watchman* dealt with through the use of Henry “Hank” Clinton's character. Henry, being lower-class, has to conform to the will of the status quo in order to have any hope of financial success, or of marrying Jean Louise.

Most of the characters from *Watchman* are represented in *Mockingbird* as younger incarnations of themselves. Even characters that are mostly just mentioned in passing, such as Jem, Dill, and Judge Taylor, become fully-fleshed out, only making Henry's omission that much more glaring. Like society's implication in the propagation of racism, Henry's character

points to a deeper, more unpopular issue—the fact that American society is built from the ground up as a system driven by material determinism, wherein individuals are encouraged, if not forced, to discriminate for material gain. Racism is not expressed only through sensational hate crimes, but through the very customs and values on which society is built. The blame put on racists and white supremacists is often displaced from a Western national identity that is in actuality built around those very concepts.

Henry desperately tries to explain to Jean Louise why he, and the rest of Maycomb, fights for segregation: “I would like to live here, and I like the things other men like. I want to keep the respect of this town, I want to serve it, I want to make a name for myself as a lawyer, I want to make money, I want to marry and have a family” (232). Henry explains his material interest in serving the status quo; he does not harbor ill will towards African Americans, but the only way for him to attain success is to serve the system which happens to oppress them. Just trying to get by in a society like this perpetuates racist discrimination. *Mockingbird*'s omission of this aspect conflicts with critical race theory, which holds that material determinism is *the* driving factor of racism. (Tyson 352)

Henry is also used to show that Jean Louise's ignorance extends to class as well. When he desperately tries to explain why she cannot fully understand him, she asks, “And why am I such a privileged character,” to which he simply answers, “You're a Finch” (231). Henry explains that it is because of Jean Louise's many privileges that she has been able to remain ignorant for so long. To everyone but Jean Louise, the meaning of being a Finch is clear. She comes from a family with history, and history is everything to the families in the South. Her transgressions and eccentricities are excused because of her family name. This privilege is not extended to lower-class people like Henry, who risk become ostracized when deviating from the status quo. Since *Mockingbird* lacks Henry's voice, its commentary on class disregards her privilege as both white and upper-class.

Another voice that is missing from *Mockingbird*'s narrative is that of the African-American population. While *Mockingbird* is known for advocating the value and rights of African Americans, Whitlock and Bronski cites their “degrading portrayals” (117) as one of the most common and major complaints levied at the book. This refers to Maycomb's black population, especially Tom, being likened to the titular mockingbirds that “don't do one thing but sing their hearts out” (100). The black community weeps and mourns Tom's death,

showing no sign of animosity or resistance. They are reduced to harmless, innocent beings defined only by their virtuous and agreeable traits—they are depicted as unable to do anything that could disrupt the white status quo, and are therefore worthy of white sympathy.

This depiction clashes with much of African-American literature. A key aspect of African-American literature, and of many political activist movements, is the discourse of resistance—of subverting the oppressive status quo. Yet, the black community in *Mockingbird* lack this voice of resistance and are content to rely on Atticus as their champion. *Mockingbird* is lauded as a multicultural work, speaking for the hopes and needs of African Americans, but in fact robs them of their voice.

In *Watchman*, the housekeeper, Calpurnia, is there defined by her bitterness and spite towards white people, possibly even Jean Louise. After noticing the widespread racist sentiments of those around her, Jean Louise seeks the guidance of Calpurnia, whom she sees as a surrogate mother. After Calpurnia greets her without affection, Jean Louise desperately asks what she is doing. Calpurnia bitterly asks in turn, “[w]hat are you all doing to us?” (160) Her appearance is brief, but she is the only African-American character of any note in the book, and is solely defined by resistance. In the transition to *Mockingbird*, this already miniscule voice of resistance is removed, and any pain Calpurnia experiences is ignored by Scout’s Eurocentric narration.

While Scout is the key to *Mockingbird*’s successful narration, Atticus is the key to its successful marketing. Scout informs the text, and Atticus’ ideology informs her character. He is the moral compass of *Mockingbird*; to Scout and countless readers he is a teacher of what is good and just. His boundless calm and respectful mannerisms has won over the hearts of people around the world. Jean Louise boils his character down to “[i]ntegrity, humor, and patience” (114), an apt description for the Atticus of her youth. *Mockingbird* is filled to the brim with accounts from Maycomb citizens that attest to his greatness.

Like Scout, readers are made to mythicize Atticus, who in turn becomes unquestionable in his words and deeds. Jean Louise realizes that this glorified perception of Atticus has blinded her to the ideology which actually drives him. *Watchman* can be used to understand Atticus’ character, and the material circumstances which shaped him, as it no longer portrays him through Scout’s obfuscating narrative.

Returning to Freedman’s critique of Atticus, the problem with framing Atticus as a

symbol of the Civil Rights Movement is that this also frames the movement as being driven by a singular ideology. In reality, the movement was driven by multiple different views, in a case of interest convergence. The activists who truly wanted change had to rely on the support of white liberal moderates to keep the movement going. Atticus depiction in *Watchman* frames him as a fallen idol; a segregationist that has been in the Ku Klux Klan and sits on Maycomb's Citizens' council. The stark contrast from Atticus' past self is explained, not as a change of heart in him, but a logical conclusion to his character that Jean Louise has been ignorant of. Liberal moderates did not realize they often argued for the same thing as segregationists. When the African Americans overstepped their bounds with the Brown decision, many previous moderates showed their true colors and attempted to return society to its moderate course of gradual moral improvement. The younger Atticus is a character emblematic of liberal moderate discourse in the Deep South, arguing for slow moral enlightenment rather than legislative action—for patience rather than direct action.

White liberal moderates claimed to support change, but not at the pace that many civil rights activists wanted. In 1963, eight clergymen from Alabama released a statement, calling the demonstration which Martin Luther King joined in Birmingham “untimely” (80). He responded with his now famous *Letter From Birmingham Jail*, explaining that “This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see [...] that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied’” (King 80-81). The discourse of patience that Atticus is known for is tied to the liberal moderate side of the Civil Rights Movement. His stand in *Mockingbird* is not an act indicative of Civil Rights activism, but an alternative to it. He believes and advocates the gradual, moral improvement of society.

In a controversial 2009 article published in *The New Yorker*, Malcolm Gladwell compared Atticus to 1950s Alabaman governor James Folsom and his “[o]ld-style liberalism—gradual and paternalistic.” Gladwell argues that Atticus’ patient “hearts-and-minds approach is about accommodation, not reform.” Atticus argues for the fair treatment of black people, which on its surface seems like a fine sentiment, but this sentiment fails to fully grasp how widely and deeply rooted racism is; individuals are not entities separate from the discriminating laws and norms which bind them, nor the institutions which enforce and perpetuate them. King complained that “[s]hallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.” (85) King’s

movement was hamstrung by moderates that muddled the issue of racism, and robbed the movement of the agency which kept it going. Outright racist resistance would have made it easier to garner support.

Martin Luther King pointed out the harmfulness of this moderate ideology, stating:

“I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice” (King 84)

It is extremely poetic that Atticus seems to have transformed along with King’s growing dissatisfaction, having been both a “Ku Klux Klanner” and a “White Citizen’s Counciler” in *Watchman*, before turning into his moderate iteration in *Mockingbird*. Atticus ideology has long been marketed as the ideology of the Civil Rights Movement, but his views do not speak for the movement as a whole. This is related to a tendency to talk about the movement through Eurocentric terms, framing it as a white movement for moral enlightenment, rather than a black movement for equal rights.

Some moderates believed that the undoing of overt discriminatory laws would spell the end of racism, and ended their support when that goal was in large achieved. Some, like Atticus, marketed discourse that seemed to speak for the Civil Rights Movement’s sentiments at large, but were in reality tailor-made to suit Eurocentric sensibilities; they simplified a much more complicated issue, making it an issue of morals which did not require legislative action—no tangible change in the status quo. Not enough people were willing to realize that long-running, widespread issues required long-running, widespread action. Complacency became the reasonable alternative to activism.

The whole idea that *Mockingbird* is a boon for political activism rests on the naïve notion that Atticus’ defense of Tom Robinson managed to sow the seeds of doubt in the minds of Maycomb’s citizens. To reinforce this idea, Atticus mentions the long deliberation of the court jury: “this may be the shadow of a beginning. That jury took a few hours” (245). He theorizes that Scout has managed to influence Cunningham for the better; that childhood innocence is so good and pure that it can purge racist hearts. But this is just a hopeful

explanation for the jury's lengthy discussion; the result is the same and no substantial change in Maycomb is shown in the book.

Many of the negative ideologies that permeated *Mockingbird* and its time period are noted, criticized, but ultimately condoned. The book, and the popular interpretation of it, purport that a critical issue has been tackled, when in fact it has only been acknowledged. The hero that is Atticus Finch leaves readers with a sense of comfort as they know that the world will eventually change for the better with people like him in it. Thus the position of the privileged are kept safely intact—white over black, and rich over poor. The values of the dominant classes are refashioned—through Atticus—so that they are digestible for the oppressed, who in turn uphold them.

The revelation of Atticus as a segregationist in *Watchman* serves another purpose: he is the best and most principled man that Maycomb has to offer, showing how truly widespread and ingrained racism in the South was. At the Citizens' Council meeting, which Jean Louise bears witness to, "sat not only most of the trash in Maycomb County, but the county's most respectable men." (105) In *Watchman*, racism is shown to be an issue that is represented in every part of society, even in the best of us. Most white people—"trash" or "respectable", rich or poor—attempted to protect the oppressive status quo in response to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. This element is of course obfuscated in the transition to *Mockingbird*, which displaces the blame of the contemporary 1960s U.S. society onto the more "ignorant" 1930s of the past, much like how readers today probably look back on the more "ignorant" 1960s.

Rather than tracing the blame back to society at large, *Mockingbird* identifies racism as an individual issue. After the attempted lynching of Tom Robinson, Atticus gives voice to a running theme of *Mockingbird*. He attributes the mob's actions to the "blind spots" of what are "basically good" (173) men—weaknesses in the heart of individuals that can be calmly overcome with a bit of sensible discussion and patience. *Mockingbird* depicts racism, especially its resulting violence, as an issue caused by a few deviant individuals and their mercurial "blind spots" rather than its permeation throughout every aspect of society—by way of institutions and hegemonic ideology. This goes against some of the basic tenets of critical race theory: that racism is institutionalized—a society-wide issue—and an everyday reality for African Americans (Tyson 352); it is not relegated to a few tragedies here and there like

Tom Robinson's case, and do not occur only when good people have moments of weakness. The actual source of racism is projected on to something other than society at large because the novel attempts to preserve society and its status quo, not criticize it.

This displacement of blame is what Whitlock and Bronski argue is a part of the "hate frame" (16)—a societal framework of understanding and dealing with hate and violence, which reframes symptoms of systematic, social wide discrimination as actions exclusive to "criminal bigots who exist beyond the pale of decency" (17). But hate, like the discrimination against African Americans, was, and is, not a random phenomenon exclusive to a bigoted minority; it is part of an inherited system of hatred, perpetuated through institutions, that reproduces the conditions which lets it, and its benefactors, continue to dominate. Today the issue of racism is even further obfuscated for U.S. readers, as the most apparent forms of institutionalized racism have been dealt with, possibly giving the impression that racism at large is past us.

For the novel to become so successful, to have the chance of becoming a tool of the civil rights movement, society at large needed to be blameless within the story. "The hate frame allows people to morally disengage from considering how they are implicated in harming others" (Whitlock 103). If racism was shown to be institutionalized, it would have implicated everyone living in that society, including the readers. Instead they were allowed to share in the same blameless innocence that Scout enjoys. The blame put on an evil caricature like Bob Ewell, the poor farmers on the jury, and the fictional past society of Maycomb lets real society at large to distance itself from blame.

This obliviousness of racism being connected to a larger social system is, again, a white privilege. Minorities and their children do not have the luxury of eurocentrism; of not noticing the racial issues that plague the world around them. Today the issue of racism is even further obfuscated for U.S. readers, as the most apparent forms of institutionalized racism have been dealt with, leaving mostly everyday racism which goes unnoticed by those not affected by it.

Mockingbird does portray racism as a wider, societal issue, but the problem is that it excludes an extremely significant section of society; the main benefactors of the continuation of the status quo. The most important, and "respectable" people in *Mockingbird* are shielded from being racists. Instead racism is traced back to ignorant farmers, children, snobby ladies,

and the comically evil Bob Ewell. The people in positions of power are excluded, while everyone below them are blamed—a large, and extremely important, section of society is left uncriticized. *Watchman* made sure point out the permeation of racist discourse throughout all levels of society.

Another event that draws attention from everyday racism is the trial, the key event of *Mockingbird*'s plot. The conviction of Tom Robinson reflects the civil rights movement's need for "black sacrifice" to galvanize its white supporters. Later on, this phenomenon has been argued to be counterproductive, as it reduces racism to singular tragedies and trivializes its many, differing, often subtle, manifestations. Only extreme violence or injustice against African Americans is enough to rouse white support, not everyday racism, which is more commonplace.

Individual cases of discrimination do factor into racism, of course, but the issue is that *Mockingbird* shows a world in which individual hearts corrupt the system, and not how the system itself is already corrupt and corrupts in turn. The representatives of the local institution of law, Judge Taylor, Sheriff Heck Tate, and Atticus, are all shown to perform their duties honorably—the ideal of their respective positions—but their efforts are shown to be thwarted by the corruption around them.

This paper does not mean to downplay any individual's deterministic capacity for evil, but to show how racist acts often fit within societal frames, ultimately serving the purpose of protecting the status quo. "Systemic violence is always carried out in the name of the larger society, with public support and often with public resources; all members of society are in some way, intentionally or unintentionally, complicit in its continuation" (Whitlock and Bronski 104). The hegemonic interpretation of *Mockingbird* reframes discriminating social customs, which serve society's interests, as the individual actions taken by dissidents.

Atticus belief that anyone is inherently good draws attention from everyone's capability to commit evil. In *Mockingbird*, only the poor are shown to commit, or attempt, violence against black people. The most "respectable" men in society are stalwart advocates of justice, uncompromising in their work; Atticus, Sheriff Tate, Judge Taylor. These characters are all representatives of the institution of law. This institution is marketed as being a tool for justice, sadly compromised by the "blind spots" of the farmers on the jury, rather than a mutual relationship, both working towards the same end—to impose the will of the

dominant; the economic and political oppression of the marginalized.

An egregious difference between the two novels is the character of Bob Ewell, the comically evil and ignorant man who falsely accuses Tom Robinson of rape. He is the antagonistic replacement of Atticus, who was very purposefully one of the most respectable and principled men in Maycomb; an ideal person in every way save his opinions on race. Instead of pointing upwards, to the rich and privileged—the proprietors of the status quo and cultural hegemony—*Mockingbird* points the finger down at the poor and oppressed, at the Ewells and the jury of farmers who gives Tom a guilty verdict.

When Ewell dies, Sheriff Tate reasons that “a black boy’s dead for no reason, and the man responsible for it’s dead” (304). Ewell alone is blamed, rather than the courts that convicted him, or the guards who put “seventeen bullet holes in” (260) Tom during his supposed escape attempt. Ewell, Maycomb society, and the forces of the law, all work in tandem to ensure the protection of the status quo, but only Ewell is blamed for it. Diverting the blame down the social ladder would save many readers at the time from introspection, increasing the book’s appeal.

Mockingbird further diverts attention from society’s racist aspects. A common criticism of the book is that there are certain glaring misrepresentations in the description of Maycomb, Alabama; such as the hand waving of the Ku Klux Klan’s harmfulness and the outright omission of Jim Crow laws and their effects. Jim Crow defined U.S. society during the events of *Mockingbird*, and set the boundaries for African-American life. These segregational laws which were put into effect, during the end of the 1800s and up until the 1960s, should be readily apparent in Maycomb, yet there is no mention of them. African Americans are clearly relegated to their own separate spaces in the text, such as their own church, a conclave near the Ewells, and the upper floor of the courtroom. But the reason why they are sectioned off like this is never questioned. Again, the fact that this boundary is enforced by law is not mentioned, and is instead portrayed as natural. Not even the African American population of Maycomb, being characterized as calm and amiable, questions it. The end result is that the text shows no inclination of wanting to change this boundary, again not seeking to question the status quo.

Atticus’, and in effect *Mockingbird*’s, political perspective shows a desire to preserve the social boundaries of the status quo. The segregational boundaries of Maycomb are never

acknowledged in the novel and are thus portrayed as something natural, rather than institutional.

Of course, it could be argued that Lee did not have to directly reference Jim Crow laws and their effects, as every U.S. reader at the time of the book's release would already be intimately aware of it—they would be able to point out any and all allusions available in the text. And today it is reasonable to expect that every student obligated to read *Mockingbird* is also being taught the surrounding context of Jim Crow and the Great Depression.

However, it can also be argued that this absence offered escapism to a world where readers specifically were not forced to confront the material circumstances of the real world—the segregated society which they inhabited and did not want to take responsibility for. Also, there is no actual guarantee that the Eurocentric readers of *Mockingbird* were fully aware of the racist issues of their society, as Jean Louise's earlier epiphany shows. For many real people, even in the South, *Mockingbird* was a wake-up call.

It could of course also be argued that *Mockingbird*'s lacking depiction of institutionalized racism, its lack of Jim Crow segregation, is due to Scout's ignorance of these issues—an accurate narration from a child's perspective. Children are not necessarily able to parse or understand in full everything they come across and unpleasant experiences may also be actively repressed. This argument certainly holds water when looking at the book purely from a literal perspective; the story could consciously have been meant to show the perspective of a Eurocentric child in order to reach a Eurocentric audience. But this only further begs the question of why it is taught so widely in U.S. education; it was designed to let a specific group of people grapple with racism, and yet it is used to teach people of all cultures. Even when teaching students about racism and different cultures, a Eurocentric perspective is deemed to be the most appropriate way to educate.

Of the two, the 1930s version of Maycomb, Alabama is the more marketable one, even with potential lynching included. One might think that the post *Brown v. Board of Education* world of *Watchman* would be more appealing, but 1950s Maycomb shows an uncomfortable reality: the extreme backlash against civil rights reforms. (some citation?) Scout, now grown up, and the readers are forced to realize that the father they idolized and the people she loved are racists born and bred.

Ultimately, the combined narrative of *Watchman* and *Mockingbird* is very mundane: it

is about a woman that has grown up to realize that she ideologically disagrees with father, her assumed moral ideal. Jean Louise's uncle, Jack, makes her understand that "[t]he Negroes were—' Incidental to the issue in this war... to your own private war.'" (243) *Watchman* does not actually seem all that concerned with the African-American cause; their struggle is just the backdrop to the disagreement between Jean Louise and Atticus. And their Eurocentric depiction in *Mockingbird* does not do much to change that sentiment, since they are calm and complacent spectators rather than self-determinate actors resisting oppression. The end of *Watchman* has Jean Louise becoming able to look past Atticus' racist bigotry, and *Mockingbird* continues this narrative by focusing entirely on the good parts of Atticus—a story, not about the plight of African Americans, but about white heroism.

The combined narrative of the two books ends on a very hopeful note that is lost on those who have not read both texts: The younger Atticus does not display any sign that he will grow up to be his later, more cynical counterpart. Reading into the narrative that forms between the two works, the narrative voice is shown to have fully come to terms with Atticus, looking past, and ignoring, his questionable beliefs. A way to love those that you ideologically disagree with is found and presented. For Southerners with troubled consciences, this was sure to have alleviated ailing minds. This idea is infused throughout *Mockingbird* and is the source of its theme of individuality, which unfortunately draws attention away from the reality of socially shared hatred.

Before closing, it has to be mentioned that this research, and other research like it, would be greatly aided by actually knowing how the text in question is being taught in various classrooms. The text's message is second to the discourse which actually discusses it, changing its meaning according to various needs, hegemonic or otherwise. This was, however, beyond the scope and resources of this paper.

This paper has also largely ignored the hegemonic oppression of women, which is a topic that demands further research. *Mockingbird* is lauded for its feminist themes due to Scout's tomboyish nature, her disdain of all things ladylike, and Atticus not displaying traditional masculine traits. But even though Scout is a tomboy with a fair degree of independence, it is ultimately her father who grants her that freedom. Scout also eventually finds common ground with her aunt, and pretends to blend in with the women of her class, rather than confront them. Again, an issue is marketed as being subverted, while in actuality

the status quo is maintained.

Mockingbird also shows a particularly critical view of these upper class women. Because Scout has the privilege of being given free reign by Atticus, she is ignorant of the fact that most women were disenfranchised, and forced into specific behaviors by a hegemonic system.

Another interesting topic of research related to the displacement of blame could be *Mockingbird's* use by the North to displace blame on the South, as the book's story, and its tragedies, are confined to a definitively Southern town.

Finally, it has to be reiterated that this sort of research is applicable to any text, though it is primed for tackling popular texts, as they often gain popularity due to aligning with hegemonic views.

This paper set out to illuminate *To Kill a Mockingbird's* hegemonic function as a canonical work. A Cultural Materialist approach was assumed in order to dislodge the book from its contemporary pedestal and reconnect it to the context of its original material circumstances. *Go Set a Watchman* has proved itself to be crucial in showcasing these circumstances, and in reinforcing already existing criticism of *Mockingbird*. Critical Race Theory was used to show how key aspects of *Mockingbird's* narrative actively run counter to beliefs that fuel racial political activism.

The vaunted innocence of Scout's narration is in fact a sign of her ignorance. She fails to recognize the racist beliefs of the most respected people in society, such as her father, and instead ennoble them. Her narration displaces the blame of racism onto singular immoral individuals, such as Bob Ewell. Portraying racism as an individual and moral issue ignores the fact that racism is a widespread custom, deeply ingrained in the American social system. This displacement of blame allows society itself to remain blameless.

Watchman showed that this ignorance was an intended aspect of *Mockingbird's* story. The ignorance of these issues falls in line with Eurocentric ignorance. *Mockingbird* was consciously written with this perspective in mind, which greatly appealed to the Eurocentric readers whom would go on to appropriate the work for hegemonic purposes. Being able to experience the world of *Mockingbird*, a world in which Scout, and the reader, can easily look away from the harshest realities of racism, lets them focus on the heroism of Atticus. This perspective enables readers to enjoy the feeling that comes from standing on the side of

obvious moral good. Obliviousness, white privileges, and class privileges are successfully marketed as the essential, and universal, innocence of children.

Scout's ignorance is enabled by Atticus, who trivializes the actions of Klan members and lynchers, further softening the reality of racist discrimination and hate crimes. His passive ideology, his message of patience and respect, reflects the view of white liberal moderates of the time. These moderates advocated gradual moral enlightenment, rather than direct action and immediate legislative changes. King disagreed, explaining that moderation would likely not result in any change at all. In an unequal world, time would inevitably favor those already in power, as political movements inevitably lose their agency.

Although the ideologies fueling the Civil Rights Movement differed, it would eventually be remembered through a Eurocentric perspective. *Mockingbird* has long found success as a part of a greater narrative, which posits the Civil Rights Movement as a white quest for moral enlightenment, ignoring the black core which drove the movement. *Mockingbird's* Eurocentric narrative suppresses the voices of African-American and lower class characters, while being vaunted as a multicultural work.

However, if multiculturalism is truly so valued, it should not be represented by a 60-year old Eurocentric narrative written to be blind to the issues of class and race. There needs to be a greater effort to promote works of other cultures besides the majority, and discussion around books like *Mockingbird* needs to be reassessed and recontextualized. The teaching and promotion of *Mockingbird* today runs the risk of positioning issues of racial and economic inequality as problems of the past, solved by great men such as Atticus Finch. It also perpetuates the misguided notion that racism is an individual and moral issue, rather than a widespread and deeply ingrained aspect of U.S. national identity.

Watchman traces racism not to the few, but the many; furthermore, it posits that this ideology does not just extend to the ignorant, the hateful, or the weak of heart, but also to those closest to you—your lovers, your confidants, your role models—people who you know are capable of so much love and kindness. Atticus was the best that Maycomb had to offer, the best that America has offered for a long time, but the high bar set for him only precipitated his long fall today.

But there should however never have been a need to consign Atticus to the status of a fallen hero; his moral lessons shaped the hearts and minds of many and his image often

provided a positive model to aim for. But he was a product of his time, and products go out of date. His message of slow and gradual enlightenment ring hollow 80 to 90 years in the future. Through *Mockingbird* he preached patience during the same era in which Martin Luther King Jr. wrote *Why We Can't Wait*. But the Civil Rights Movement had to make do with what they had, and Atticus proved himself a very potent and marketable tool. As such he served his role well and, as the material circumstances of history changed, he could have been granted a dignified retirement alongside the movement that he outlived. Alone, he is now revealed to serve another agenda—the defense of a white status quo.

Today, the anti-racist message of *Mockingbird* is undermined by its colorblind narration and passive, moderate ideology, but it is still venerated as a moral beacon and is taught in schools as such. However, if the civil rights movement washed out most of the filth of institutional racism, *Mockingbird* will now find itself hard pressed to iron out the wrinkles of its contemporary incarnation. The release of *Watchman* has managed to drive a wedge between *Mockingbird* and its image of moral righteousness, but only time will tell how hard the gavel will fall on its dominant position within literary canon.

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