ESSAY

The Strange Career of Atticus Finch

by Joseph Crespino

Contemporary debates concerning race in America owe much to the 1960s when African Americans and other minority groups gained basic legal protections and rights of citizenship denied them in the century following Reconstruction. The current offspring of this movement is multiculturalism, a term that encompasses a range of progressive educational techniques, policy recommendations, and social movements that celebrate racial and ethnic differences and seek to empower people to pursue goals of personal and communal freedom. One of the basic questions raised in the 1960s that reverberates in multiculturalism today is who in our society is allowed to speak authoritatively on racial issues. Over the

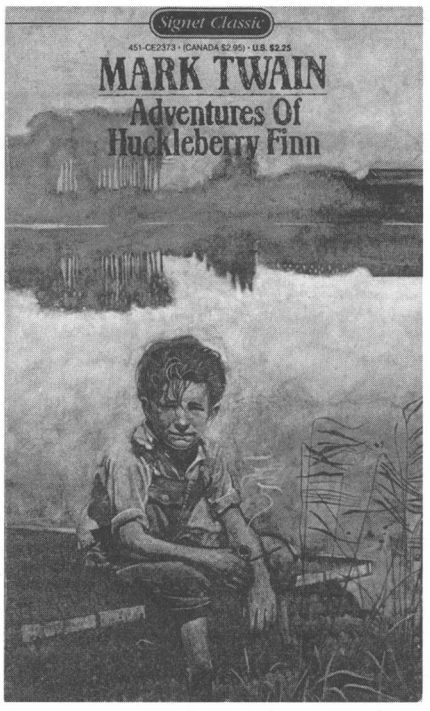
above: *In defense of the "helpless"? Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch in* To Kill a Mockingbird. *Courtesy of Universal Pictures and the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.*

Atticus Finch himself remains a touchstone figure of decency and respect.

course of the twentieth century, but particularly with the flowering of African American studies, the era in which white intellectuals debated the "Negro problem" among themselves has ended once and for all. In countless cultural productions and scholarly works from the civil rights era and more recent decades, African Americans are the subjects in the exploration of racial inequality in American history and life. And yet looming among the most popular and enduring works on racial matters since the 1960s is Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the Depression-era account of Atticus Finch's legal defense of a black man wrongly accused of raping a white woman, told through the eyes of Finch's nine-year-old daughter, Scout.

In the twentieth century, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is probably the most widely read book dealing with race in America, and its protagonist, Atticus Finch, the most enduring fictional image of racial heroism. Published in the fall of 1960, the novel had already sold five hundred thousand copies and been translated into ten languages by the time it received the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. The story was almost immediately snatched up by Hollywood, and the Alan Pakula-directed film had the double distinction of landing Gregory Peck an Oscar for his portrayal of Finch and giving Robert Duvall, with a brief role as the mysterious Boo Radley, the first of his seemingly countless screen appearances. It is estimated that by 1982 *To Kill a Mockingbird* had sold over fifteen million copies, and a 1991 American "Survey of Lifetime Reading Habits" by the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Library of Congress revealed that next to the Bible the book was "most often cited in making a difference" in people's lives.[1]

The novel influenced a generation of Americans raised during the turbulent years of the 1960s and 1970s. Former Clinton adviser James Carville, who spent his formative years in the 1960s South, reflected on Harper Lee's achievement: "I just knew, the minute I read it, that she was right and I had been wrong. I don't want to make it noble, or anything. I was just bored with all the talk of race." Evidence of the novel's continuing influence on rising generations can be found on the internet, where dozens of high school and college chat groups discuss the adventures of the Finch children or debate the meaning of the Radley neighbors. Atticus Finch himself remains a touchstone figure of decency and respect. In the recent Democratic primary campaign in New Hampshire, Bill Bradley, in an effort to appear above ordinary political wrangling, posed in a rocking chair on the set of a theatrical production of *To Kill a Mockingbird*; one of his speech writers told reporters later that Bradley had been in his best "Atticus Finch" mode. Given this legacy, the dearth of critical commentary on the novel is surprising. Literary critic Eric Sundquist writes, "It is something of a mystery that the book has failed



The tales of Huck and Jim in Twain's great novel about race in the American South, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, *invite comparison to Lee's* To Kill a Mockingbird. *Front cover from the Signet Classic release, published by Penquin Books USA Incorporated, New York, New York.*

to arouse the antagonism now often prompted by another great novelistic depiction of the South . . . *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which arguably uses the word nigger with more conscious irony than does *To Kill a Mockingbird* and whose antebellum framework and moral complexity ought to be a far greater bulwark against revisionist denunciation."[2] A critique as basic as noting Atticus Finch's paternalism did not emerge until recently, and even then such a reading has been contested by Finch defenders.

The enduring career of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a story of racial justice, and of Atticus Finch as a racial hero, reveals much about American racial politics in the second half of the twentieth century. From 1960s liberalism to 1990s multiculturalism, from the inchoate conservatism of Goldwater through that of the Reagan-Bush era, Atticus Finch has been both admired and scorned by liberals and conservatives alike. Tracing Atticus's place within the American imagination reveals some of the major fault lines in the struggle for racial equality over the past forty years and allows us to look again at how competing groups have framed racial issues in America.

ATTICUS FINCH AND THE LIBERAL CONSENSUS

The early success of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Atticus Finch's warm reception can be explained in part by the way Finch embodies what historians have called the "liberal consensus" of mid-twentieth-century America. With the defeat of the

Depression at home and fascism abroad, postwar Americans were confident that democracy and western capitalism could answer basic questions of material need and class inequality that plagued the nation in prior decades. Among American historians, the generational change away from the concerns of Progressive historians, who emphasized conflict and inequality in American history, to the new focus on the "liberal tradition" reflected this consensus. Consensus historians described an adventurous but fundamentally conservative America in which liberalism marked the continuity between past and present.[3]

By the time of *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s publication, civil rights had become an important part of the liberal consensus. The decades stretching from 1935, the year in which the novel was set, to 1960, the year in which it was published, witnessed several important modernizing trends that shaped the world in which Harper Lee wrote her first and only novel. By 1935 industrial expansion in northern cities, along with reduction in foreign immigration, had attracted a significant number of African Americans from rural areas of the South. This migration would expand in the years following World War II so that by 1960 as many African Americans lived outside the South as within it. Liberated from southern disenfranchisement, progressive, urban African Americans demanded that America address questions of racial inequality. African American representatives elected from these urban areas drew Congressional attention to racial issues, and legal battles in the Supreme Court laid the groundwork for later, more far-reaching decisions such as *Brown v. Board of Education.* With northern African Americans focusing attention on the South, northern whites could not continue to ignore the transgressions of southern segregation. The Scottsboro trial of the 1930s and the murder of Emmett Till in 1955 became *causes célèbres* that focused attention on southern discrimination. Undoubtedly, the Scottsboro trial's false accusations of rape influenced Harper Lee's depiction of Tom Robinson's trial.

Liberal trends within the American academy gave new attention to issues of race. In the 1930s and 1940s, southern racism was the focus of several prominent works echoed in Harper Lee's novel. Studies such as Charles Johnson's *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934), John Dollard's *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937), and W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* (1941) exposed the indignities of southern racism. The most influential contribution to racial liberalism was Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944). An instant classic, Myrdal's 1,500-page study argued that the discrepancy between the egalitarian impulse of the "American Creed" and the oppressive treatment of African Americans presented a troubling dilemma for white America. Myrdal offered hope for an end to discrimination and predicted that the democratic rhetoric following World War II and the convergence of other social trends would force "fundamental changes in American race relations."[4]

The Cold War also held important implications for the rise of American racial

W. J. Cash's The Mind of the South *exposed indignities of southern racism that later were echoed in* To Kill a Mockingbird. *This photograph of Cash was taken for Knopf Publishing's publicity files in 1936. Courtesy of the Photography Collection in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin.*

liberalism. By the end of World War II, the United States emerged as capitalism's primary defender in the fight against Soviet Communism. As the two superpowers competed for influence in the decolonizing areas of the globe, the rhetoric of American democratic liberalism became an important ideological weapon in the battle against what Americans saw as a repressive totalitarian state. The continued presence of legalized racial discrimination in the South was, of course, the glaring contradiction to American egalitarian rhetoric. The geopolitical demands of international diplomacy necessitated that the country incorporate the South into the American ideal by eradicating all vestiges of southern segregation.[5]

Much of the American South was insulated from these liberal trends, yet there were a small number of southerners influenced by the dominant intellectual developments of the day. Harper Lee was among this tiny minority of southern liberals in the 1950s South. A native of Monroeville, Alabama, which became the inspiration for the novel's fictional town of Maycomb, Lee attended a small women's college in Montgomery, Alabama, and later transferred to the University of Alabama where she completed her undergraduate studies and, in 1947, enrolled in law school. In October 1946, she contributed a one-act play to a university humor magazine satirizing a fundamentalist, racist politician of the kind who came to dominate southern political rhetoric in the age of massive resistance: "Our very lives are being threatened by the hordes of evildoers full of sin . . . SIN, my friends . . . who want to tear down all barriers of any kind between ourselves

Atticus Finch is not a wild-eyed reformer who rejects his southern heritage.

and our colored friends." In the February 1947 issue she parodied country newspapers by creating the fictional *Jacksassonian Democrat*, whose logo included two white-sheeted figures carrying burning crosses. Lee's budding liberalism undoubtedly grew after she moved to New York, where she was active in the city's literary circles along with fellow aspiring writer and childhood friend, Truman Capote.[6]

Lee's characters and choice of narrative strategies in *To Kill a Mockingbird* reflect the moral tensions that all liberals faced in the Jim Crow South. They combine the passion and ambivalence characteristic of southerners drawn to the South's agrarian tradition and heritage but frustrated by the South's ugly racial history. Lee places Atticus Finch within the tradition of southern progressivism by linking him with the turn-of-the-century New South booster Henry Grady. Atticus advises Jem to read the speeches of Grady, who, if not a believer in the absolute equality of the races, was enough of a racial progressive to be despised by many white southerners of his day. Lee's political consciousness was formed during a period when the Georgia novelist Lillian Smith emerged as the most acerbic and outspoken liberal southerner. Smith's nonfiction work *Killers of the Dream* (1949) explored the deleterious effects of segregation on children and, like antilynching reformer Jesse Daniel Ames, exposed the links between racial and gender inequality.

Critical of the "paternalism" of liberals and their confusion of "the public rights of men with their private right to control their own personal relationships," Smith was deeply committed to the liberal vision of racial change. She could well have been describing Atticus Finch when she wrote of liberals, "They are the carriers of the dream. They will make the future, or the human being will have none. For they and only they have held on to a belief that man is more than his institutions. It is they who refuse to let him become a slave to his own logic; who know that though he is his own end he never arrives there. And it is they who value his life." Smith believed that racism was a moral and logical aberration, the glaring contradiction to the American egalitarian spirit. Optimistic that the South "can change quickly if given convincing reasons," she was confident that liberalism would provide them.[7]

Smith and Lee shared similar visions of the southern racial landscape and its prospects for social change. Lee sardonically critiqued southern white womanhood through Scout's unwitting observations of the women's missionary circle, who discuss over tea the horrible plight of the Mruna tribe in Africa while remaining blind to the racial injustice in their own community. Similarly, Smith condemned southern white women who willingly participated in a society that glorified white womanhood at the expense of African Americans. Both writers shared

The "hero" has a moment with his daughter, Scout, in To Kill a Mockingbird.
Courtesy of Universal Pictures and the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

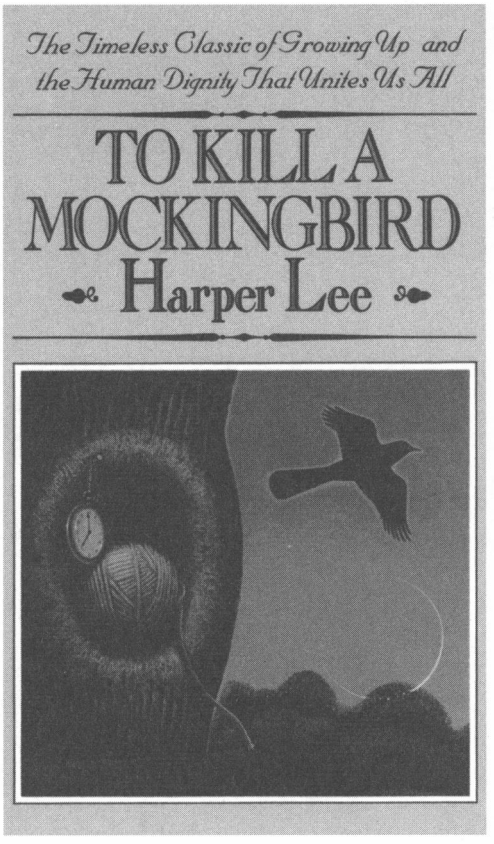
similar limitations as well. Tom Robinson is sweetly innocent and naïve; Atticus feels a moral responsibility to defend him, as the novel's title attests, because a black man accused in the Jim Crow South was as helpless as a mockingbird. In the same way, Smith saw African Americans as innocent and helpless victims of rabid racism. Smith wrote that African Americans "were brought into our backyards and left there for generations"; she never conceived an active role for African Americans either in the creation of the modern South or in the abolition of racial segregation.[8] Lee and Smith imagined a form of racial change that would occur through the leadership of people like Atticus Finch—in other words, through elite southern white liberals.

Though these limitations may seem obvious to readers today, if the northern press recognized *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s paternalism they did not note it in their reviews. The book received widespread critical acclaim; reviewers praised the novel's liberal racial politics. The *New York Times* called the book a "level-headed

plea for interracial understanding" and singled out Atticus Finch as "a highly esteemed lawyer and legislator and the embodiment of fearless integrity, magnanimity and common sense." *Harper's* called Atticus Finch "an old-fashioned 'hero' if there ever was one," adding that "Miss Lee has written a first novel which will satisfy all those . . . who are interested in the problems of the South to which there are no easy solutions." While reviews in the *Saturday Review* and the *Atlantic Monthly* noted Lee's evident difficulty in telling a complex story while maintaining the narrative voice of a child, they praised Atticus Finch's "determination as a lawyer, liberal, and honest man, to defend a Negro accused of raping a white girl." The *Review* wrote that Lee's "insight into Southern mores is impressive, and in Atticus she has done a notable portrait of a Southern liberal."[9]

Reviews of the 1962 film version of the novel were similarly laudatory. The *New York Times*, though disappointed that the film did not capture more fully the range of emotions experienced by Scout and Jem, praised the role of Atticus, "played superbly by Gregory Peck." *Variety* called the film "a significant, captivating and memorable picture that ranks with the best of recent years." Peck's performance stood out in particular, especially for the *Variety* reviewer who praised his powers of transformation: "For Peck, it is an especially challenging role, requiring him to conceal his natural physical attractiveness yet project through a veneer of civilized restraint and resigned, rational compromise the fires of social indignation and humanitarian concern that burn within the character." Clearly, the transition from page to film did not dim Atticus's liberal charm.[10]

The lone negative review appeared several months after the novel received the Pulitzer Prize. Elizabeth Lee Haselden remained unimpressed with the novel on the grounds that it failed to offer characters with which the reader could identify. She noted Atticus Finch's "Olympian wisdom and calm" and argued that the novel "depicts on the part of no one involved in the trial any inner struggle for an ethical answer to injustice, and is lacking in real compassion for people." Haselden believed the book presented "character types" rather than real people with real struggles and suggested this quality as an explanation for the novel's success. "Acclaiming the merits of the book's theme, keeping the book on the best-seller list, soothes the public conscience," wrote Haselden. "Thus the reader can witness to his concern about injustice-in-general, in some removed place, at a distant time, without feeling any personal sense of guilt or involvement in the extensions of injustice into our own time and place." Haselden reveals the curious manner in which the novel succeeded in reducing complicated matters of regional difference, racial inequality, and social justice to simple moral tales of right versus wrong. Furthermore, her review provides evidence that at least one of the more perspicacious commentators of the early 1960s recognized the novel's place within the contemporary political moment. The very qualities that stretched Haselden's belief, such as Atticus's "Olympian calm," were the characteristics that



Harper Lee's novel won the Pulitzer Prize and prompted an Academy Award-winning film—and an enduring debate. Front cover from To Kill a Mockingbird, *published by Warner Books, Inc., New York, New York, by arrangement of J. P. Lippincott Company, a subsidiary of Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*

liberal America embraced. Liberalism held that southern racism was an obvious blight on the nation's conscience and should be fought with the level-headedness, moral equanimity, and common sense exemplified by Atticus Finch.[11]

Atticus's liberal pedigree comes through most clearly in his concern for his children. In a conversation with his brother, Atticus worries about the effect Tom Robinson's trial and Maycomb's racism will have on Jem and Scout. "You know what's going to happen as well as I do, Jack, and I hope and pray I can get Jem and Scout through it without bitterness, and most of all, without catching Maycomb's usual disease. Why reasonable people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don't pretend to understand. . . . I just hope that Jem and Scout come to me for their answers instead of listening to the town. I hope they trust me enough."[12] Atticus's puzzling over why people go "mad" and his concern with "Maycomb's usual disease" foreshadows the following scene in which Jem and Scout watch from the porch as their father shoots and kills a mad dog running loose on the street in front of the Finch home. The dog seems a likely symbol of white racism in the South. Up to this point, Scout and Jim think of their father as "feeble" because he was "nearly fifty" and did not play in the church football games. By shooting the dog, Atticus confirms his virility both as

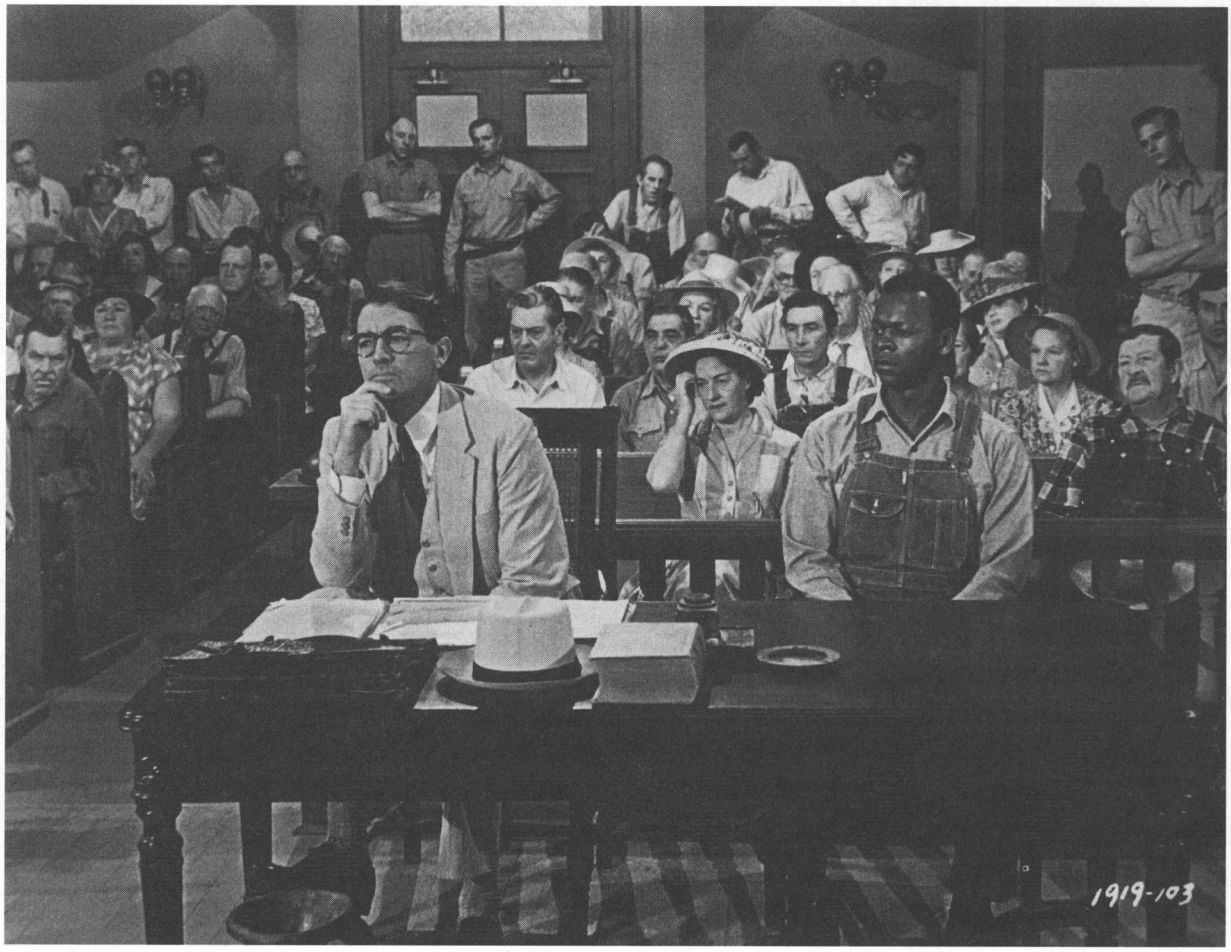
Atticus's elite social class is an essential part of his heroism.

a father protecting his children and as a southern liberal dealing with white racism.

It is significant that Calpurnia, the Finch's domestic servant and the lone African American in the scene, is the one who alerts Atticus to the dog's presence and warns the all-white neighborhood to stay off the streets. In Calpurnia, Lee recognizes the role African Americans played in exposing white racism; through her Lee acknowledges the working-class African American civil rights protestors in the South who revealed the ugly face of Jim Crow to liberal America. While Lee does not entirely deny African Americans a place in the destruction of southern racism, in this scene their role is limited to that of warning the liberal white hero of the danger to come. As Finch bravely stops the mad dog in his tracks, Calpurnia watches on the porch with the children. It is also significant that Heck Tate, the Maycomb County sheriff, arrives with Atticus to stop the dog. Finch expects Sheriff Tate to shoot the dog, but the sheriff hesitates and then anxiously hands the gun to Finch: "For God's sake, Mr. Finch, look where he is! . . . I can't shoot that well and you know it!"[13] Atticus, a crack shot as everyone in town but his children knows, finishes the responsibility. The figure of Heck Tate in this scene may well refer to the elected officials of the South, such as Arkansas governor Orville Faubus in Little Rock, who through fear, incompetence, or narrow-mindedness were unable to face down the mad dog of southern racism. Only Atticus possesses the skill and courage to put the rabid dog to rest.

Lee's vision of liberal racial change remained distinctly regional; Atticus Finch is not a wild-eyed reformer who rejects his southern heritage. Lee believed that racial change would come through liberalism refined by a certain understanding of how the world works—particularly how white southerners work when it comes to the explosive issue of race. When Jem, frustrated by Tom Robinson's conviction, suggests doing away with all juries, Atticus stops him. "Those are twelve reasonable men in everyday life, Tom's jury, but you saw something come between them and reason," Atticus tells Jem. "The one place where a man ought to get a square deal is in a courtroom, be he any color of the rainbow, but people have a way of carrying their resentments right into a jury box."[14] Atticus understands that America's historic claim to justice and equality could not be realized without racial justice in the South, but he recognizes as well the extreme difficulties involved, given the prejudices of his region.

Similarly, Scout's precocious literacy becomes a symbol of southern liberals' competence in dealing with racism. At Scout's first day of school she encounters a recent college graduate schooled in what Jem mistakenly calls "the Dewey Decimal system," Lee's reference it seems to pedagogical techniques developed by the northern, progressive educator John Dewey. In the first half of the twentieth cen-



A classic courtroom scene in To Kill a Mockingbird.
Courtesy of Universal Pictures and the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

tury, Dewey had become one of the most prominent liberal members of the American academy. Lee's indirect reference to him here encapsulates her vision of the relationship between northern and southern liberalism. Scout does not need the new, "improved" pedagogical techniques of the young teacher; she knows how to read already. She was taught by her father, Atticus, the model of southern erudition. Scout's literacy here is a symbol of the South's ability to analyze its own problems, to deal with them in its own regionally specific way.

Part of Atticus Finch's heroic power lies in his ability to embrace the need and the moral imperative for racial change without rejecting his native South. He reminds Scout that though this time they were not fighting against "the Yankees, we're fighting our friends," she should hold no grudges because "no matter how bitter things get, they're still our friends and this is still our home." But in this scene Lee comforts white southerners fearful of the change that was imminent in

the South. As Eric Sundquist writes, "Just as the South closed ranks against the nation at the outset of desegregation . . . so *To Kill a Mockingbird* carefully narrows the terms on which changed race relations are going to be brought about in the South." Through Atticus Finch, Lee reassured anxious white southerners that civil rights change could come to the South peacefully, without bitterness, and without dividing the white southern community. After all, the southern liberals leading the change were longtime friends and neighbors; they were, first and foremost, southerners.[15]

At the same time, for readers North and South who admired the book's racial mores, Atticus represented the continuity of American values of justice and equality. The novel tells us that even in the Depression-era Jim Crow South, the era of Scottsboro and Bilbo, there existed within the South men like Atticus Finch who would be the seeds of the transformation to come. Atticus is a modern hero who, while embodying the most noble aspects of the southern tradition, also transcended the limits of that tradition and attained a liberal, morally rational racial viewpoint that was seen as quintessentially American.

Above all, Atticus's morality drives the novel, a morality that is as evident in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as it is in one of American liberalism's signature documents, the Supreme Court's majority decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Earl Warren's decision resonated with moral authority: "Such considerations apply with added force to children in grade and high schools. To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone." In *To Kill a Mockingbird* Lee's decision to report Atticus's heroics through the perspective of his nine-year-old daughter is crucial in reinforcing the moral impulse that it is children who ultimately have the most at risk in the nation's struggle to end racial segregation. The project was to be carried out by good liberals like Atticus, but even then it was most effective because it was backed by the moral weight of a child's voice. This is the meaning of one of the novel's most famous scenes, in which Scout faces down a lynch mob that is ready to lynch Tom Robinson. As Sundquist writes, scenes such as this "are calculated to substantiate the ethical authority driving *Brown*."[16]

ATTICUS FINCH IN THE AMERICAN RACIAL IMAGINATION

While *To Kill a Mockingbird* shows American racial liberalism in full flower, by the close of the 1960s the liberal assumptions of racial change had come under serious attack. With the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the last vestiges of southern segregation were legally destroyed and the Civil Rights movement moved north. Incidents of racial violence in Chicago suburbs and urban uprisings, like those in Los Angeles, Detroit, and Newark, ex-

Atticus and his children face-to-face with vigilantism in To Kill a Mockingbird.
Courtesy of Universal Pictures and the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

posed the fallacy that racism was the South's problem. At the 1964 Democratic National Convention, a committee headed by soon-to-be Vice-President Hubert Humphrey granted convention credentials to the traditional, all-white Mississippi state delegation over the racially integrated Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Leaders of the Black Power movement would later point to this incident as exposing the essential bankruptcy of American liberalism.

Social movements such as Black Power were the American version of a larger global moment in which the basic tenets of modernist development came under attack. Black Power advocates identified with decolonization movements around the globe, and throughout the 1960s they mounted a devastating attack on American racial liberalism. In the classic statement of the movement, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967), Stokely Carmichael (who has since changed his name to Kwame Ture) and Charles V. Hamilton exposed the impotence of

American racial liberalism in winning meaningful change for the vast majority of African Americans. They most likely had in mind as the object of their attack the most prominent southern liberal of their day, Lyndon Johnson, though their criticisms could be applied with equal force to Harper Lee's fictional southern lawyer. *Black Power* asked, "How fully can white people free themselves from the tug of the group position—free themselves not so much from overt racist attitudes in themselves as from a more subtle paternalism bred into them by the society, and perhaps more important, from the conditioned reaction of black people to their whiteness?"[17] *To Kill a Mockingbird* provided a classic scene of just this kind of black deference. The setting was the Maycomb County courtroom; as Atticus Finch passes below them, the segregated, all-black balcony stands in recognition of Atticus's efforts in defending Tom Robinson.

Black Power also questioned liberalism's assumption of American moral rectitude and its fundamentally bourgeois character. Invoking Myrdal, Carmichael and Hamilton wrote, "There is no 'American dilemma,' no moral hang-up . . . Black people should not base decisions on the assumption that a dilemma exists." The liberalism represented by Atticus Finch viewed integration as the ultimate goal for the races, yet Black Power questioned whether such a goal could ever provide equality for a black minority: "The goal of black people must not be to assimilate into middle-class America, for the values of the middle class permit the perpetuation of the ravages of the black community. That class mouths its preference for a free, competitive society, while at the same time forcefully and even viciously denying to black people as a group the opportunity to compete."[18]

Atticus's elite class position within the small southern town of Maycomb is an essential part of his heroism. Atticus is a paternal figure not only for blacks but poor whites as well. In a telling passage, Jem explains to his sister Maycomb's four different classes: "There'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." While Scout denies these distinctions, she lives in a world clearly divided along class lines. Atticus explains to Jem, "You and Jean Louise . . . are not from run-of-the-mill people . . . you are the product of several generations' gentle breeding . . . and you should try to live up to your name." Though they are both members of the white working class, the novel distinguishes between the Cunninghams and the Ewells based on the degree to which they aspire to bourgeois values—the degree to which they accommodate themselves to the hegemony of the dominant class. The young Walter Cunningham goes hungry rather than borrow money from the teacher that he knows he cannot pay back. Mr. Cunningham diligently pays back his legal debt to Atticus Finch through subsistence crops from his farm. Although Mr. Cunningham is a member of Tom Robinson's potential lynch mob, he politely retreats when faced by Scout's authentic moral presence. In contrast,

the Ewells place no value on education, showing up the first day and never coming to school again. Mr. Ewell breaks the law by hunting out of season, and Mayella Ewell breaks the fundamental code of middle-class southern womanhood by desiring the black body of Tom Robinson.[19]

Schools have censored the novel for its sexual content and depiction of racism.

In the context of Black Power politics, one of the book's peripheral characters—Lula, the black-separatist member of Calpurnia's church—becomes one of its most interesting. Lula challenges Calpurnia for bringing the Finch children to worship at the black church: "You ain't got no business bringin' white chillun here—they got their church, we got our'n. It is our church, ain't it, Miss Cal?" Lula reminds Cal that she is a servant to the Finches, not an equal: "Yeah, an' I reckon you's company at the Finch house durin' the week." Calpurnia verbally spars with Lula in front of the church, reverting to an African American dialect that the children had never heard from her before. Lula mysteriously disappears from the scene, and the rest of the church comforts the children, telling them they should ignore Lula: "She's a trouble-maker from way back, got fancy ideas an' haughty ways—we're mighty glad to have you all." Lee uses this scene to reveal her expectations for what the proper African American response to the white presence should be. Lula objects to both the white children's freedom to enter the black world and the inordinate respect they receive once they are there. Lula's position in relation to Calpurnia reproduces Black Power's position toward African American liberals during the civil rights era. Lee removes all doubt as to which model white America prefers; as one critic observes, "Lee makes it clear that people like Lula are not what is expected in the Blacks who hope to be protected by the white law."[20]

Despite its cogent critique of liberalism, Black Power failed to mount an enduring political movement that could advance African American interests. Government repression, accusations of reverse racism, and internal conflicts over issues such as sexism undoubtedly played a part in this failure. The breakup of American liberalism in the late 1960s made room for the American right to maneuver into cultural and political dominance. One example of this in racial politics was the conservative shift in the Supreme Court that led to decisions that pulled back from earlier liberal mandates. In the *Bakke* case the Court limited the reach of affirmative-action programs, and, in combination with other decisions, the Justices greatly qualified liberal commitments made in the previous decade. By the time of Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, American racial liberalism could hardly be heard from in an American political and cultural arena dominated by conservative voices. In the 1990s, Bill Clinton's record remained mixed. While his presidential commission on race generated discussions of race in American life at

Boo Radley and Scout listen to community gossip—and its underlying social politics—in To Kill a Mockingbird. *Courtesy of Universal Pictures and the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.*

the highest levels of government, his administration triangulated not so much between the right and left as the right and center; the welfare bill he signed into law stands as one of conservatism's greatest victories over 1960s liberalism.

Although *To Kill a Mockingbird* has maintained its popularity as a modern-day race tale, in the aftermath of Black Power and with conservative ascendancy, both liberals and conservatives have become markedly more ambivalent in their views of Atticus Finch as an American racial hero. Certain school districts across the country have censored the novel for its sexual content, and more recently some have banned it because of its depiction of societal racism.[21] *To Kill a Mockingbird* has increasingly become a battleground where cultural critics from the left and right debate their respective views of contemporary racial politics. For example, a 1992 debate among legal scholars amounted to a public trial of Atticus Finch. Monroe Freedman, a law professor at Hofstra University, wrote an article in *Legal*

Times titled "Atticus Finch, Esq., R.I.P." that questioned Finch's role as a model of humanity and morality for the legal profession. Freedman argued that as a state legislator and community leader in a segregated society, Finch was the "passive participant in that pervasive injustice." Freedman would extend his comments later in a symposium at the University of Alabama: "Throughout his relatively comfortable and pleasant life in Maycomb, Atticus Finch knows about the grinding, ever-present humiliation and degradation of the black people of Maycomb; he tolerates it; and sometimes he even trivializes and condones it."[22] Freedman de-emphasizes the personal heroism of Finch to focus on the larger structural racism of which he was a part and which, in Freedman's estimation, he did little to combat.

Once a tool of liberal racial politics, Atticus is now the pawn of racial conservatism.

Freedman's critique appalled many of his colleagues. One legal commentator attacked Freedman personally, pointing out the violence, abuse, and crime of Freedman's own hometown of New York and asking why he wasn't "putting [his] butt on the line for these people instead of criticizing Atticus Finch, who did put his butt on the line for an innocent black man."[23] In his eagerness to challenge notions of legal ethics, Freedman does ignore Finch's more commendable character traits, but the public outcry against his article suggests that something more was involved.

Many who objected argued that Freedman ignored Finch's individual act of racial heroism and its power to inspire similar acts today. In an article revealingly titled "Atticus Finch *De Novo*: In Defense of Gentlemen," Timothy J. Dunn charged that Freedman underestimated "the value to the human spirit of acts of heroic value." No less an authority than the president of the American Bar Association, Talbot D'Alemberte, rose in defense of Finch. "Sixty years after Judge Taylor appointed Atticus Finch to defend a poor black man in *To Kill a Mockingbird,* these . . . fictional heroes still inspire us," wrote D'Alemberte. "Finch rose above racism and injustice to defend the principle that all men and women deserve their day in court."[24]

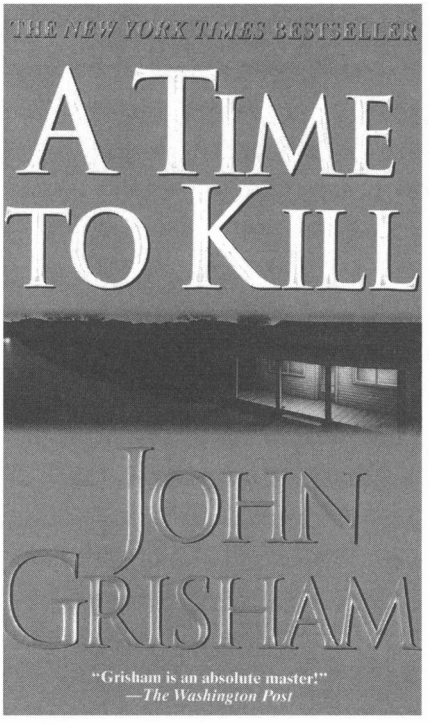
Dunn and D'Alemberte defended Atticus Finch not just as a man ahead of his times, but as a model of decorum in the very sensitive arena of race relations. Yet their defense did not take into account the many differences between Atticus's era and the present. As Freedman pointed out, Atticus Finch acted heroically in 1930s segregated Alabama, but to a modern reader the limits of his heroism should be fairly evident. Racism today does not always rear its head in such blatant and perverse forms as it did in Depression-era Alabama. Even unreconstructed liberals, however, would admit that the discrimination of the Jim Crow South that American liberalism defeated in the 1950s and early 1960s did not end

racism in America. Carmichael and Hamilton warned of liberal blindness to institutional racism, which "is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive of human life."[25] At its core, the debate is over the nature of the racism at work in the post–civil rights era. If institutional racism survived the civil rights struggles of the mid-1960s, as the Black Power movement maintained, to what degree does holding up the model of Atticus Finch as racial hero obscure structural forms of racial discrimination?

Of course, one need not look in legal journals to find contemporary defenses of Atticus Finch. White lawyers who buck racial hostility and heroically defend African Americans have become one of Hollywood's stock figures. Films such as *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Ghosts of Mississippi* (1996), and John Grisham's *A Time to Kill* (1996) present updated versions of Atticus Finch-style white racial heroism. Mindlessly following in the tradition of earlier courtroom racial blockbusters, *Ghosts of Mississippi* is largely about white assistant district attorney Bobby DeLaughter's fight to reopen the Medgar Evers's assassination case. The movie is based on a book of the same name by Maryanne Vollers that focuses much more clearly on Evers's life and work (DeLaughter is not mentioned until the twenty-second chapter). But *Ghosts of Mississippi* is more than another example in a long line of films that fail to do justice to a companion book. Its decision to place Bobby DeLaughter rather than Medgar Evers at the narrative center of the story is an affront to those who have struggled and continue to struggle to serve as the subject of their own narratives of liberation. As *Variety* reviewer Godfrey Cheshire wrote of *Ghosts of Mississippi*, "When future generations turn to this era's movies for an account of the struggles for racial justice in America, they'll learn the surprising lesson that such battles were fought by square-jawed white guys."[26]

This is the strangeness of Atticus Finch's career: once a tool of liberal racial politics, Atticus has now become the pawn of racial conservatism. The right, in its insistence on focusing on racial bias on the personal level, glorifies Atticus Finch-style racial heroism. If racism exists only on an individual basis, then racial reform can occur only through individual moral reform—not through social or structural change that might challenge the legal, economic, or political status quo. As conservatives beatify the racial heroism of Atticus Finch, they fight the symptoms of the disease and fail to look for a cure that might get at the issue of white privilege.

How is it in a multicultural America that Atticus Finch and his various cinematic progeny continue to be held up as racial heroes? One explanation is that having a white racial hero at the center of the story allows the public to conceptualize race issues within an individual, moralistic framework. Movies traffic in stereotypes: racist rednecks, innocent black victims, white liberal heroes. Unfortunately, so do American politicians. White people solving the "American



John Grisham's A Time to Kill *provided an updated version of Atticus Finch-style white racial heroism and also inspired a film by the same name. Front cover from the novel, from Island Books, published by Dell Publishing, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, New York.*

Dilemma" was the fundamental assumption of postwar racial liberalism; today application of the same principle underlies claims of reverse racism and forms the basis for conservative opposition to affirmative action and declarations of "the end of racism." Ultimately, it is the belief that even though racism exists it cannot last because it is an aberration from American ideals of equality. Freedman's critique highlighted the structural racism of segregation-era Alabama but failed to link Finch to the obfuscation of white privilege that persists in America today. It should come as no surprise that when we place Atticus Finch under the lens of contemporary multicultural politics, we see the same symptoms that Black Power initially diagnosed in the sickness of American liberalism—a paternalistic and hopelessly moderated view of social change.

If multiculturalism is about racial and ethnic minority groups finding and using their own voices within American politics, there is also a segment of multiculturalism influenced by postmodern cultural critiques that objects to the idea of an essentialized, racial subject that is at the heart of minority group mobilization. Scholar and activist Cornell West has prevailed upon Americans concerned with issues of race, whatever race they may be, to deconstruct traditional American narratives of individual advancement and racial emancipation, particularly those which to this day persist with white males as their heroic protagonists. As West writes, "The new cultural criticism exposes and explodes the exclusions, blindnesses and silences of this past, calling from it racial libertarian and democratic

projects that will create a better present and future."[27] The difficulty lies in realizing the practical political manifestation the new "libertarian and democratic projects" should take. How do they differ from the freedom movements of the 1960s? In West's case, with a personal charisma rooted in the oratorical traditions of the African American church, his activism is often hard to distinguish from that of the 1960s Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

The question of where Atticus Finch fits into this movement remains. My initial reaction is that the American social commentators who still invoke Atticus Finch's image, and the secondary school teachers who assign *To Kill a Mockingbird* in their classes year after year, should let Atticus come down from his perch as an emblem of American racial heroism. Harper Lee described her novel as "a simple love story"; while this element of the book cannot be separated from the novel's racial politics, one should not necessarily swim against the tide of Atticus's continuing popularity. This is a difficult thing to do because what one person sees as Finch's gentlemanly demeanor towards women another might characterize as sexist patronizing; what is decorum and self-restraint in racial matters to some may well seem small-minded and compromising to others.

My suggestion is that we reassign *To Kill a Mockingbird* from English class to history class and that rather than dismissing Atticus we deconstruct him. Certainly, we can no longer simply hold him up as a racial hero, for in a multicultural society that honors the dignity and agency of all people it is not clear what one would actually look like. But we can place Atticus alongside other members of the white liberal establishment, fictional and real, such as Lyndon Johnson, Gavin Stevens, Lillian Smith, Ralph McGill, and Gunnar Myrdal to name just a few. Like any good historian, we should historicize this group, celebrating their courage and success, lamenting the limits of their vision. We should teach students that racial liberalism played a part in ending a system of Jim Crow discrimination that had developed in the aftermath of emancipation; it also helped provide for equal political participation for African Americans, a phenomenon that, aside from a brief period during Reconstruction, this nation had never known. For all of its successes, however, the assumptions of American racial liberalism do not function well in contemporary America. The job for us today is to reconceptualize the problems of race by recognizing the continuing presence of white racial privilege and devising means of addressing it.

NOTES

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1. Claudia D. Johnson, *To Kill a Mockingbird: Threatening Boundaries* (Twayne Publishers, 1994), xiii–xiv.

2. Louis Menard, "Opening Moves," *New York Review of Books*, 2 December 1999, 4; Garry Wills, "From the Campaign Trail: Clinton's Hell-Raiser," *New Yorker*, 12 October 1992, 93; Eric Sundquist, "Blues for Atticus Finch," in ed. Larry J. Griffin and Don H. Doyle, *The South as an American Problem* (University of Georgia Press, 1995), 181–209.

3. John Higham, "The Cult of the 'American Consensus': Homogenizing Our History," *Commentary*, 27 (January 1959): 93–100. For a fuller definition of the liberal consensus, see Godfrey Hodgson, *America in Our Time* (Vintage Books, 1978), 67–98; for an opposing view, see Gary Gerstle, "Race and the Myth of the Liberal Consensus," *Journal of American History*, September 1995, 579–86.

4. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (Harper & Brothers, 1944), xix.

5. See Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954–1992* (Hill and Wang, 1993), 3–60, and Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945–1980* (Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 38–73.

6. Johnson, *Threatening Boundaries*, xii.

7. Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (W.W. Norton, 1949), 244, 240.

8. Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Warner Books, 1960), 227–37, 112.

9. *New York Times Book Review*, 10 July 1960, 5; *Harper's*, August 1960, 101; *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1960, 98; *Saturday Review*, 23 July 1960, 15.

10. *New York Times Film Reviews*, 15 February 1963, 3374; *Variety*, 12 December 1962, 6.

11. *Christian Century*, 24 May 1961, 655.

12. Lee, *Mockingbird*, 88.

13. Ibid, 96.

14. Ibid, 220.

15. Ibid, 76; Sundquist, "Blues for Atticus Finch," 194.

16. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka et al.*, 347 U.S. 494; Sundquist, "Blues for Atticus Finch," 189.

17. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (Vintage, 1967), 28.

18. Ibid, 77, 40.

19. Lee, *Mockingbird*, 229, 135–36.

20. Ibid, 119; Teresa Godwin Phelps, "The Margins of Maycomb: A Rereading of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Alabama Law Review*, 45 (1994): 529.

21. Johnson, *Threatening Boundaries*, 14–17.

22. Monroe Freedman, "Atticus Finch, Esq., R.I.P.," *Legal Times*, 24 February 1992, 20; Monroe Freedman, "Atticus Finch: Right and Wrong," *Alabama Law Review*, 45 (1994): 479.

23. R. Mason Barge, "Fictional Characters, Fictional Ethics", *Legal Times*, 9 March 1992, 23.

24. Timothy J. Dunn, "Atticus Finch *De Novo*: In Defense of Gentlemen," *New Jersey Law Journal*, 27 April 1992, 24; Talbot D'Alemberte, "Remembering Atticus Finch's *Pro Bono* Legacy," *Legal Times*, 6 April 1992, 26.

25. Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 4.

26. *Variety*, 16 December 1996, 78.

27. Cornell West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," in ed. Steven Seidman, *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 79.