Et Tu, Atticus!: The Hero of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the Cold War

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Abstract

Against the background of the Cold War, this article rethinks the novel (1960) and film (1962) *To Kill a Mockingbird*, more specifically Atticus Finch's characterization as the courageous, unblemished defender of an unjustly accused black man in the American South. Because of Atticus's unrelenting efforts to exonerate Tom Robinson, he has been proclaimed the 20th century's greatest American movie hero. At a closer look, however, it turns out that, while Atticus fights hard for Tom, he nevertheless, and as a matter of course, abandons the investigation into the stabbing death of Bob Ewell, a poor white man and Tom's accuser. *The New Yorker* magazine noted this conflict in the movie. So, it begs the question: from what social attitudes does this broad-spectrum admiration for Atticus emerge? This article proposes an answer: it originates in identity-centrism, an attitude that underlies United States ideology during the Cold War era and results, specifically, in a total disregard for the poor. In other words, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not a closed-ended novel of good versus evil, but an open-ended work that raises a troubling question about diversity.

Keywords: poverty, Cold War, justice, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960; film version 1962) recounts the deeds of Atticus Finch, a lawyer whose courageous defense of the falsely accused and unjustly convicted African American Tom Robinson has enjoyed worldwide popularity for more than 60 years. Because of a courtroom behavior based on the belief that "all men are created equal" (Lee, 2015, pp. 273ff), Atticus is celebrated as the 20th century's greatest American movie hero. At the novel's end, however, Atticus's behavior is incongruent with his expressed belief and with the law. While he braves much disapproval to defend Tom, a poor black man, he casually abandons the investigation of poor, white Bob Ewell's death and is indifferent in the face of the incident's evidential facts. From a diagnostic standpoint, it will be proposed here that Atticus (and by extension the film's audience) have little compassion for the poor, despite the novel's early portrayal of poverty (which somehow disappears from the film adaptation). Against the Cold War's tense background, reading and adapting the novel while indifferent to the plight of poverty-stricken individuals like Bob Ewell seems normal and expected. Cold War ideology, especially identity-centrism, makes *To Kill a Mockingbird* seem like a closed-ended novel of good versus evil, but it should be studied as open-ended, as such a deliberation would raise questions about diversity and indifference to poverty. For this conclusion, I historicize *To Kill a Mockingbird* within the context of the Cold War.

A Question about Atticus's Justice

It is general knowledge that, in American fiction, Atticus Finch is a hero among heroes. Since its publication, the novel has been read by generations as a morality tale set within the alienating environment of Southern U.S. racism. Released in 1962, the film version starring Gregory Peck as Atticus has been so popular, that in 2003 the American Film Institute announced Atticus Finch as the greatest hero in 20th-century American film. Indiana Jones (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, 1981) was second, and Rocky Balboa (*Rocky*, 1976) third.

Atticus is so generally popular because audiences perceive him as a man of justice. In the plot, Bob Ewell reports that Tom has raped his daughter Mayella, but Mayella has lied to her father about the incident. Firmly believing "all men are created equal," Atticus, an attorney, fights for Tom's exoneration, despite knowing an innocent verdict is a long-shot in the intensely racist Southern town. When Tom's trial ends – as expected – in a guilty verdict, Atticus's courage in the face of the townspeople's condemnation moves the audience. Atticus's behavior is regarded as educational as well: thousands of U.S. middle and high school students have read the novel as part of their curriculum. Against a background of deep racial discrimination, the heroic image of Atticus fighting a losing battle for justice is amplified for Southerners because he embodies the Southern ideology of honor associated with the Civil War. Thus, the text presents his courtroom struggle as a parallel to the Lost Cause of the Civil War: "You sound like Cousin Ike Finch, [...] Maycomb County's sole surviving Confederate veteran" (Lee, 2015, p. 101).

To Kill a Mockingbird, novel and film, emerged amid severe racial discrimination and the social upheaval of the 1950s and 60s Civil Rights Movement. Just around the corner lurked the struggle against suppression of identity and for respect of diversity. Indeed, Atticus's battle for an innocent African American served up an idealized image of a just man, and the novel is certainly a portrayal of virtuous humanity, incarnate in Atticus. Yet Atticus's behavior at the novel's end is incongruent with his earlier behavior and with his statements. When a person is found fatally stabbed and the cause is unclear, a thorough investigation should be conducted no matter the victim. So, when Bob Ewell is found fatally stabbed in the chest, Atticus begins

to investigate. But his apathy causes the investigation to fizzle out, which shows that he was not very interested in applying the law and obtaining justice in *this* case.

Ewell, angry at his family's courtroom humiliation, attempts revenge by attacking Atticus's children Jem and Scout as they walk home on Halloween night. Boo Radley, whose reason for marginalization is unclear and who has formed a distant but warm relationship with the children, "intervenes" and then carries the injured Jem home. Ewell is stabbed to death with a kitchen knife. For once showing empathy toward Boo (and the Radley family), Atticus decides to go along with Sheriff Heck Tate's "guess" that the stabbing happened accidentally during the scuffle for the children. Thus, the sheriff and Atticus decide that Ewell got what he deserved during commission of a heinous crime and let the matter fade away. Consequently Boo – not to mention Jem and Scout – does not have to endure the ordeals of an investigation and a trial.

This decision demonstrates that Atticus can change his attitude depending on the victim and on the attacker's background; hence, Atticus does not truly believe that "all men are created equal." Furthermore, Atticus's conflicting attitudes are reinforced by the novel's title because "To Kill a Mockingbird," the bird representing innocence, is to annihilate the innocent. Here, the innocents – besides Jem and Scout – are Tom Robinson and Boo Radley. Tom loses his life because of the workings of an unjust system, but Boo is not subjected to the same process because Atticus hinders it. By way of contrast, Bob Ewell, poor, angry, abusive, and brutal is unworthy of the life and justice that innocents deserve. In other words, not everyone's life is equal, whether outside or inside the courtroom.

Just as *To Kill a Mockingbird* was becoming a film classic, *The New Yorker*, a national weekly magazine, noted:

> …the story's conflict [is] between Atticus's high-minded appeals to the rule of law and his complicity in Heck Tate's ruse that saved Boo Radley from being tried for the murder of Bob Ewell: "The moral of this can only be that while ignorant rednecks mustn't take the law into their own hands, it's all right for nice people to do so." (Crespino, 2018, p. 156)

But in chorus with the novel's characters, especially Atticus, some readers and viewers might still insist that "[The Ewells] were people, but they lived like animals" and "They can go to school any time they want to, when they show the faintest symptom of wanting an education" (Lee, p. 40). In other words, the Ewells are regarded as willfully ignorant, lazy, and less than human; hence, they deserve punishment.

This judgment might seem overly harsh when one considers that most whites in Alabama "were desperately poor" (Crespino, p. 145) during the years spanned by the novel (1933-1935), that is to say, the depths of the Great Depression. Few, if any jobs were to be had. Circumstances stemmed not from character – effort, diligence, and earnestness – but from a capitalist system over which an individual had no control. Thus, many surrendered to despair, if not suicide, gave in to the ruin of their moral fiber and to a desperation that can spawn outrage and violence. In the light of it, the savvy reader might question the novel's soapbox ethics, since, as human beings, don't the Bob Ewells of the world need saving too? Interestingly, S. McIlwaine (1970) demonstrates that from the 18th century to the 1930s poor whites were most often represented as lazy, abusive, and lecherous. In other words, the novel's discourse about Bob Ewell reflects a long-standing stereotype.

Considered in this light, Atticus's statement "all men are created equal" makes him a liar, not a man of justice. Nonetheless, millions have obviously perceived his behavior as just. But what exactly is justice? Why is Atticus regarded as a just man? Why do audiences ignore *The New Yorker*'s spot-on observation about the cover-up of Bob Ewell's death?

The Problem of Poverty and *To Kill a Mockingbird* as an Open-ended Story

For many centuries, philosophers have discussed what constitutes justice, from ancient Greeks like Thrasymachus, Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, to moderns like John Rawls and Michael Sandel. But while the many views of justice exceed this article's scope, it needs to be mentioned that Atticus espouses utilitarianism and/or communitarianism. Utilitarianism seeks the greatest happiness of the greatest number, so a "just" person might tolerate the killing of a human being if doing so can save others' lives. Similarly, communitarianism emphasizes the common good even when it might victimize some. From other perspectives, liberalism, for instance, utilitarianism and communitarianism might not be a true representation of justice. But utilitarians and communitarians, who maintain that people's happiness *can* be founded on another's sacrifice, may see Atticus as a man of justice.

Significantly, the Ewells are considered "white trash" and thus, as mentioned above, have been historically maligned by both white and black townspeople, their poverty blamed on lack of moral integrity. Certainly, *To Kill a Mockingbird* directs attention to poverty as well as to racism. In fact, the novel begins by particularizing the town's poverty, and the story continues focusing on poverty until at least the beginning of chapter four (of thirty). For instance, in Maycomb, there was "nothing to buy and no money to buy it with" (Lee, 2015, p. 6). Indeed, Mr Cunningham pays not with money but with "a load of stovewood," "a sack of hickory nuts," "a crate of smilax and holly," and "a crokersack full of turnip greens" (Lee, 2015, p. 27). Dr Reynolds "charges some folks a bushel of potatoes" (Lee, 2015, p. 28). According to Atticus, "professional people were poor because the farmers were poor" (Lee, 2015, p. 27). And the Ewell family lives in abject misery:

> Maycomb's Ewells lived behind the town garbage dump in what was once a Negro cabin. The cabin's plank walls were supplemented with sheets of corrugated iron, its roof shingled with tin cans hammered flat, so only its general shape suggested its original design: square, with four tiny rooms opening onto a shotgun hall, the cabin rested uneasily upon four irregular lumps of limestone. Its windows were merely open spaces in the walls, which in the summertime were covered with greasy strips of cheesecloth to keep out the varmints that feasted on Maycomb' s refuse. (Lee, 2015, p. 227)

The Ewells' residence in "what was once a Negro cabin" "behind the town garbage dump" instantly identifies them as the lowest of the low. Additionally, the novel's first four chapters demonstrate that the (white) middle-class has little or no understanding of such grinding poverty. Caroline, for example, the elementary schoolteacher, has just graduated from college, indicating her relatively moneyed, middle-class status. She begins teaching enthusiastically, but her attitude gradually deteriorates as she faces the reality of her pupils' poverty. She is angered that some do not bring a lunch, that some are infested with lice and that, not surprisingly, some do not concentrate on their studies, thus severely wounding her enthusiasm. Despite her education, dedication, and enthusiasm, Caroline cannot even perceive, never mind actually comprehend, her students' poverty and subsequent mindset.

Indeed, Caroline's failure to comprehend raises the issue of identity-centrism. As Walter Benn Michaels (2004) notes, "The problem of the poor is not the problem of a minority." As such, the poverty-stricken "are victimized by capitalism" rather than by "oppressive definitions" reserved for ethnic groups, so people committed to identity-centrism "have tended more or less to ignore them. [Those with money] have begun to treat poverty as if it were an identity, or, more precisely, as if it were identity itself" (2004, pp. 180–181).[1] But again, not being an ethnic minority within which to compose a set of idiosyncratic identitary virtues and symbology, the poor's identity is characterized by an indelible set of negative traits. Certainly, it seems like there is an oppressive norm that has been formed about poor whites and then applied as a stereotype. That is why Michaels states that the problems of a minority and the poor have always been (but should never be) confused. Respect for diversity could benefit an ethnic minority. But it does not work for the poor (and certainly not for poor whites) because they are saved only when they make money and climb out of poverty. And this, during the Great Depression, was fundamentally impossible. If, as Charles J. Shields (2007) points out, *To Kill a Mockingbird* fully reflects white paternalistic values, schoolteacher Caroline articulates them vis-à-vis the poor quite memorably.

Southern novels written during the Cold War frequently include not only the problem of poverty but also that of racial discrimination. As Jordan J. Dominy states (2020, p. 123), "Cold War authors and intellectuals presented Southern identity and values as congruent with American democracy in an effort to package racism and poverty as moral problems that would not affect the United States' foreign policy ambitions." In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, attention to poverty and racism is supported by the background of the Scottsboro case, in which nine African American boys were accused of raping a white female. However, organizations addressing racism (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and poverty (the Communist Party of the United States of America), claimed false accusation and took action to exonerate the wrongfully convicted. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, however, racism and poverty are not amalgamated. Poverty resulting from capitalism stands apart from racism, as the author pays special attention to the plight of the white poor.

Therefore, when readers applaud only Atticus's heroic behavior on Tom's behalf, they are blind to the victimization of poor Bob Ewell, his discrimination practiced in the service of the status quo. In a sense, then, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not a moral story. Instead, the novel remains open, asking readers "What are justice and morality?" by presenting Atticus's situational ethics regarding Tom and Bob. Nonetheless, the novel's readers focus on identity. Dominy states that

> Another important historical context for understanding the emergence of a formalized, academic literary study of Southern literature at the dawn of the Cold War is racism and poverty, the great challenges of the U.S. South that threatened the proliferation of American democracy and capitalism abroad. (2020, p. xiv)

I would challenge this by saying that the novel has more to do with Cold War ideology. That is why Julia L. Mickenberg (2006) found that radicals and progressives managed to disseminate, through children's books, or to children who read and watch *To Kill a Mockingbird* in school and in private, ideas that McCarthyism labeled as subversive.

[1] Also, see Michaels, 2006, pp. 85–86 and p. 89.

The Cold War and Reading to Cloak the Poverty Problem

As mentioned, both the *Mockingbird* novel and the film entered the world in the early 1960s during the Cold War. In "The Cold War Literature of Freedom and Re-conception of Race," Reiichi Miura (2010) sheds light on identity-based ideology during and after the Cold War. When Lionel Trilling and others supported the universal values of liberalism and freedom during the Cold War's ideological battles, novels of individualism and personal freedom (*On the Road* (1951), *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), etc.) triumphed over collectivism (Dickstein, 2002, p. 90). On the other hand, novels expressing Marxist beliefs, like *Native Son*, for instance, explained the American domestic problem of oppressed identity.

Emphasis on individualism and liberalism did not tend to lead intellectuals to oppose capitalism, but rather to oppose totalitarianism, including domestic technocratic bureaucracy and conformism.[2] In the 1960s and 70s, the disastrous Vietnam war against communism, diplomatic failure, and civil rights violations revealed that individuals are formed not in a social, bureaucratic mold but by their own will, through which identity can be freely changed. The value of identity was supported by postmodern theories, or, as T. Siebers (p. 126) called them, "Cold War theories," influenced by modern French thinkers. As R. Wolin (2010) explains in detail, French thinkers sympathized with Maoism, but after the disastrous Cultural Revolution, they transformed Maoism into a fundamental belief in the analysis of politics in daily life and of oppressed identities while preserving Maoist populism.[3] Supported by Susan Sontag's proposition of sensibility in reading literature and by scholars' desire to lift the scientific veil on literary study, modern French thought became popular in the study of literature and accelerated the focus on identity and diversity.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, American literary works have basically been cautious about obsession with identity. However, especially during the Cold War, American novels cautious about identity-centrism and American working-class stories tended to be misread, criticized, or ignored by middle-class readers. *The Great Gatsby* (1925), a novel of tragedy that results when money is equated with class identity, was read as a story of men's objectification of women. The novel, however, clearly describes both men and women's obsession with identity through maintenance of a good appearance and mutual objectification. This is true of Daisy, who even discriminates against the lower class.[4] Thus, Gatsby betrays his low origin but later attempts to win Daisy from Tom through an upper-class identity of appearance and status symbols. Still, his life ends tragically. Another tragedy resulting from money equated with class identity is true of Clyde Griffith, an inhabitant of the East, in *An American Tragedy* (1925). Like Gatsby, Griffith is attracted to an upper-class woman and ruined because of his ambition to achieve the American dream. In *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Thomas Sutpen also lives a tragic life. A white man from a background of poverty now earning money, he is criticized for his low origins, thus driving him to adopt an upper-class life: owning a dynasty and slaves, marrying, and having a son and heir. Still, his obsession with identity defeats him.

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[2] With regard to the material in this section, see A. Suzuki (2017).

[3] Regarding the history, see P. Buhle (2013).

[4] As for Daisy's discrimination against the poor, see F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby (Penguin, 1978), pp. 24, 114.

As these examples demonstrate, identity-centrism has long been under serious consideration in American literature.[5]

Nonetheless, middle-class readers, including Kate Millet, who are careful about oppressed identity also criticized Henry Miller's novels in the post-World War II era. Miller's poor protagonists do not care about wealth or class, however. They oppose fetishized capitalism; they hate to identify themselves with anything because they think identity is essential to capitalism and to commodity fetishism. Instead, they feel happy in a life of "non-identity."[6] The novels of some African American women writers like Ann Petry, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Lorraine Hansberry, who focus on the poor, have been less popular than those of authors who, like Toni Morrison, emphasize on community, affiliation, and norms. In other words, the voice of the poor is rarely heard.

This focus on identity and diversity, instead of on poverty, was advantageous both externally and internally to the United States government during the Cold War. By turning attention to problems of identity and diversity, the government could propagandize democracy and capitalism's excellence, ignoring poverty while showing potential solutions for racism, a problem the Eastern bloc criticized. This was done by disseminating cultural images in which white folks take racism seriously and firmly believe that "all men are created equal." Therefore, United States cultural policy, particularly following World War II, is crucial to this discussion: A book and a film are strong cultural tools. In fact, except for a few like that of Cunningham's son, the film adaptation excluded scenes of impoverishment and references to the poor so that consciousness of poverty was weakened.

The Cold War as a Cultural War

Indeed, the United States used literary works, music, films, and other cultural products and cultural figures as tools to dissipate hostile feelings toward America while also spreading its political ideals throughout the world.[7] For instance, just after World War II, the General Headquarters of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (GHQ) designated 620 books to spread American democratic ideals in Japan, presenting them as a "Gift of Books" (Suzuki, 2013, p. 261). Moreover, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs persuaded American author William Faulkner (1897-1962) to visit Japan and speak with the Japanese. Indeed, authorities expected that a compassionate speech by this American Southerner, one who lived in a culture that felt the Civil War defeat for a long time, would dissolve Japanese hostility toward the United States (Suzuki, 2013, 263–265). The U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs also dispatched popular cultural figures to Japan such as Pearl S. Buck, author of *The Big Wave* (1948), a work inspired by the Nagasaki tragedy.[8]

These efforts were intended to exalt capitalism and democracy while disparaging communist ideology. An important byproduct of the United States cultural policy of distributing the

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[5] Many scholars have also been cautious about an identity-centric ethos in the U.S. About 150 years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville acknowledged that under the name of democracy, competitive spirit reinforced anxiety to outdo others. Unlike European aristocratic society, according to Jack Solomon, American democratic society has no innate feature signifying status, and this lack reinforces American use of material goods as status symbols representing achievement of social success. See J. Solomon, 1988, 62–63.

[6] Non-identity" is the term used by Adorno. See A. Suzuki, 2010, 1–22.

[7] With regard to the American political strategy of using cultural products, see, N. Suzuki, 2013, 258–276.

[8] For details, see Suzuki, 2018.

country's ideal image abroad was, interestingly, the more defined conceptualization of its own national identity. But for the United States, which required the national self-image of an exemplary, tolerant, peace-loving democracy, racial problems, especially in its South, contradicted the idealized international projection of its society, a fact that was not lost on communist regimes.

To Kill a Mockingbird was adapted into film shortly after the publication of the book. Clearly, Harper Lee depicted racial discrimination *and* poverty, but Atticus, popularly celebrated as the heroic man of justice whose attitude toward Bob Ewell is not deemed problematic, insures that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is ultimately read as an anti-racism novel. Such a reading is glaringly apparent in the film adaptation. As mentioned, the novel begins by describing the town's conditions of poverty, and, indeed, highlights poverty throughout. And it actually addresses *two* important issues: discrimination against African Americans *and* poverty among the white population. However, the film adaptation seldom refers to poverty – a sole instance is the white teacher Caroline who discriminates against poor students – ocusing almost exclusively on racial discrimination and Atticus Finch's heroism (Figures 1, 2, and 3). During an era when the United States was constructing its national identity, this film sent out to the world the image of an ideal, democratic nation, with a white character who courageously opposes racial injustice. But it ignores impoverished victims of capitalism, both black and white.[9]

Figure 1
This film scene does not depict the town's dingy and bedraggled appearance that is so much a part of the novel (Mulligan, 1998, 0:03:38).

[9] Regarding the relation among the self-image of a nation, political benefit for a nation, and film production, Graeme Turner's argument is suggestive. See Turner, 2006, Chapter. 6.

Figure 2
In the film, none of the elementary pupils look undernourished, dirty, or ragged (Mulligan, 1998, 0:34:57).

Figure 3
The film's neat, well-paved road that contradicts descriptions in the novel (Mulligan, 1998, 1:00:57).

Conclusion

If Atticus were undeviatingly impartial, he would follow the law by bringing the case of poor, white, Bob Ewell to *justice*. Yet Atticus's justice sacrifices one person in the interests of others. According to U.S. philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum (2004), the law is not fair, neutral, and inorganic but designed to mitigate society's negative emotions, such as disgust, in their entirety. If so, then Atticus's actions may embody the nature of law, not of justice.

But law and justice could coincide only if the law were impartial: Injustice is wrong, no matter the skin color. The image sought is that of a society where even if discrimination against African Americans is rife, some whites do justice without regard to race. But that image is blurred by the evident injustice suffered by a poor, white man who was stabbed to death, with no consequences for the perpetrator. His death, possibly at the hand of a mysteriously marginalized person, is portrayed as justified homicide, poetic justice, and a kind of divine punishment against a false accuser. This is how the United States shows the world that Americans recognize racism as an evil that must be punished at any cost. Atticus remains a hero, despite the cover-up about the exact circumstances of Bob Ewell's death.

Considering that poor whites have been discriminated against even by African Americans, the problem is as much capitalism as it is race. However, foregrounding race was necessary for the United States during the Cold War because it distracted the poor from expecting Marxist solutions to poverty, averted international solidarity with the poor in the United States, kept communism away from the nation, and, finally, distracted from poverty by punishing racism.

Atticus remains a hero as long as audiences of *To Kill a Mockingbird* do not question his conflicting attitudes regarding Tom and Bob, as long as the story remains a closed-ended one of good versus evil, and as long as Atticus is assumed, even while disregarding poverty, to be a hero who bravely seeks justice. But a deep dive into the story shows that Atticus is not governed by unyielding moral principles, but rather acts in the interests of U.S. policy, identity and international image. In doing so, he betrays people whose abject poverty keeps them ignorant, malnourished and exploited. In the light of such treachery, we cannot but say to him, "Et Tu, Atticus!"

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