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# ***TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD, THE HELP, AND THE REGENERATING OF THE WHITE SAVIOR***

**BRETT SEEKFORD**



*Filmmakers continue to use the “White Savior “ archetype to construct racialized messages in the post-Civil Rights era. These protagonists, who resolutely defend the rights of African Americans, ultimately focalize whiteness and marginalize black characters and voices. Though a white savior features prominently in both To Kill a Mockingbird (1962) and The Help (2011), The Help’s regendering of the archetype invites viewers to imagine a world in which a white savior is no longer necessary. The Help’s update on the white savior trope from Atticus Finch to Skeeter Phelan allows for deeper development of black characters and a different ending, and creates opportunities for a further shift in filmic protagonists.*

**ABSTRACT**

The white savior has been a common trope in many films featuring African American characters. These men and women, through acts of benevolent courage, bring the issues and concerns of black characters to the fore and consequently serve as their advocates. In essence, they make black characters palatable or sympathetic to a white audience. While numerous filmic analyses note the recycling of the white savior, these studies pay little attention to the role gender plays in the construction of this hero figure. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) and *The Help* (2011), almost fifty years removed from each other, illuminate the evolution of this character by drawing on stereotypical assumptions of gender. This phenomenon of popular culture has taken many forms in its approach to racial politics, but the filmic discourse of the white savior has at least partially shifted, with the introduction of a female archetype, from one of male logic and reason to one focused on female emotion and sentimentality. *To Kill a Mockingbird's* Atticus Finch, a lawyer defending Tom Robinson from false allegations of raping a white woman, embodies the model white savior. *The Help's* creation of Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan alters this trope by presenting a female perspective, projecting a niceness that characterizes African Americans in a way that Atticus's distance from them prevents. Antagonistic racist foils to the saviors further place the focus on white characters in each film, pitting differing gender performances against one another while cementing the stereotypical qualities defining Atticus and Skeeter. Although both films employ a white savior who ultimately emphasizes whiteness and "others" black characters, *The Help's* Skeeter goes further than *To Kill a Mockingbird's* Atticus by giving voice to Aibileen and Minny, the two central black characters, through a female sensibility.

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The construction of Atticus as an archetype exemplifies a struggle between competing brands of Southern masculinity that ultimately creates spaces for the advent of a female hero. In *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South since Reconstruction*, Craig Thompson Friend describes the formation of a virile masculinity that came out of Reconstruction and extended into the future. Detailing the distinction between masculinity—a term associated with white middle-class privilege and manhood ascribed to uncivilized African Americans and other people of color—Friend details the essence of an emergent masculinity in the twentieth

century: "'Manhood,' then, meant courage, valor, virility, honor, and every other noun and adjective that characterized Robert E. Lee and could be applied to any man to indicate that he was morally or physically equal to all and superior to most other men" (xv). Masculinity came to be associated with a sense of violence and a fierce insistence on the virtues of a Southern upbringing. Atticus Finch, however, departed from these teachings to found a more compassionate iteration of manhood.

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The earlier brand of virility, founded on notions of Southern pride and hostility, stood opposed by a white liberal understanding of what it meant to be a man in the South. Dissatisfied Southerners concocted their own form of masculinity, carving out spaces for themselves in the region as socialist William Raoul did: "Raoul's story highlights an upper-class man who sought commonality with regional lower classes. He shaped his manliness within the context of an emerging southern liberalism that argued for social responsibility even as it maintained racial and gendered structures of regional life" (Friend xv). *Mockingbird's* Atticus Finch aligns with this liberal masculinity that seeks out justice while the film's antagonist, Bob Ewell, falls into the earlier, more aggressive brand of masculinity. Atticus's own brand of masculinity ultimately triumphs, suggesting a more compassionate, reasonable manhood will govern the South in the future. Gender, as a social construction, naturally creates binaries; therefore, because the film portrays a just and reasonable masculinity that prevails in Atticus's character, a more sentimental and emotional counterpart is necessary to supplement his manhood. *The Help* modifies this formula in constructing Skeeter Phelan, a young woman whose close connections to black women in Mississippi lead her to serve as their advocate. The historical evolution of Southern masculinity, imagined by the creators of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as one in which the noble gentleman is victorious, creates a space for a distinguished white female savior in future films.

While Atticus embodies the traditional understanding of the American man, *The Help's* Skeeter mirrors the filmic interpretation of Jean Louise "Scout" Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Gregory Jay details the connotation still associated with Atticus Finch, positing that his

personality is in keeping with a history of masculinity opposed to traditional femininity:

That eloquent performance reinforced [Peck's] character's claims to the status of representative American man, an idealized embodiment of white male normativity updated for modern liberalism but still rooted firmly in the tradition of the founding fathers and of Transcendentalism's allegiance to higher laws. (488)

Atticus's daughter Scout, however, does not embody feminine ideals. Scout's family repeatedly treats her tomboyish behavior as a phase, but her symbolic viewing of her father in the courtroom, watching from the black balcony, allies her with minority groups. Jay further argues that Scout's treatment of Boo Radley at the film's end indicates her own desire to suppress her queerness: "Scout remains at liberty, but, as I have suggested, that freedom depends on projecting the condition of the closet, along with its shame, loneliness, and stigmatizing, onto Mayella and Boo" (519). Scout's occasionally masculine traits relegate her to the margins, granting her a lens of isolation through which she sees the world.

*The Help* similarly fashions Skeeter as a woman whose ostracism informs her worldview. Shana Russell explains Skeeter's racial awakening: "Her position as a marginal figure in the community of women—due to her awkwardness, her education, and her inability (or refusal) to marry—transforms into a willingness to challenge, even in secret, the racial dynamics of Jackson" (75). Skeeter seems to be an extension of the Southern outsider embodied by Scout. Because she does not conform to traditional gender norms, Skeeter can defy the pervasive racism that defines Mississippi in the 1960s. Her embrace of her outsider status forces her to evaluate social conventions and, consequently, leads her to reject gender and racial norms. The criticisms Skeeter receives for her gendered choices lead to a feeling of shared struggle that allows her to ally herself with African Americans. Skeeter, reminiscent of Scout, exemplifies a slightly atypical femininity that positions her to assume the white savior mantle already granted to Atticus because of his privileged manhood.

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The first scene of each film exposes viewers to the level of intimacy they can expect as the films progress. A young Jean Louise "Scout" Finch stands on her porch as a poor

man, Walter Cunningham, Sr., ambles up their driveway to repay Atticus in food for his work. *The Help* begins in the home of Aibileen Clark, a black domestic worker who is participating in an interview for a book Skeeter is writing about the lives of women like Aibileen. The films' similar openings expose the different approaches that the white protagonists adopt in grappling with the thorny issues of segregation and racism. The porch of the Finch home is a safe space where the dangers of the world cannot harm their family. Rachel Watson explains the importance of the porch's parameters: "As an in-between space, the porch ensures this safety by conveying the proper limits of sympathetic access, and the social good to be gained from respecting such limits" (438). The black houses in *The Help*, however, create a space that fosters interracial bonds between black women and their eventual white savior. As Russell argues, Skeeter's trespassing of racial boundaries allows the film to ignore the white protagonist's privilege and power in these settings:

Skeeter returns from Ole Miss on the outskirts of her own social circle, naturalizing the intimate bond she develops with Aibileen and Minny, one that obfuscates the dynamics of privilege between them as though her antiracism is a natural extension of her feminist awakening. (76)

The black home allows the women to cultivate an intimacy necessary for an interracial sisterhood to develop. The differences in black-white relations play out as the plots of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Help* develop. The opening scenes set the tone for the racial dynamics as the films move forward.

The distance or closeness created through the white saviors' relations with African Americans indicates the necessary establishment of differences when employing a female hero. For instance, viewers never see Atticus enter Tom's home; they only see him stand on the black family's porch through Jem's point of view as Atticus gains insight into his case. Watson substantiates the argument that the porch divides between the worlds of whiteness and blackness:

The film's repeated spatial logic of the porch thereby creates a fantasy place/position from which one can employ a homogenizing notion of race as a way of sympathetically identifying with others: in effect, creating the illusion of moral sentiment while reinscribing the very racial ideology that such empathic imagining purports to fight. (437)

Despite Atticus's lecture to Scout about sympathizing with the plight of others near the beginning of the film, one never sees him sympathizing or relating personally to the black characters. The porch acts as a buffer

between the privileged world of whiteness that the Finch family inhabits and the inescapable world of degradation consuming the Robinsons. Atticus' rationality, a seeming byproduct of his masculinity, helps him avoid the need for a close-knit relationship with Tom.

*The Help*, on the other hand, places Skeeter in the segregated part of the city to fashion a plausible scenario where she can instill sisterly trust and confidence in her black sisters. The film repeatedly flashes back in time after the opening scene, and Skeeter quickly enters the black area of Jackson, Mississippi. The settings of these two films present another layer of contrast: Atticus never ingratiates himself in the black community while fighting vigorously in Tom's defense, whereas Skeeter's repeated appearances in the *other* part of the city lead Aibileen and the rest of the black community to accept her as their own. The scene where Skeeter enters Aibileen's house to find several black women waiting for her arrival demonstrates this phenomenon, as the women announce they are ready to contribute their stories to Skeeter's manuscript. While Aibileen expresses fear in having a white woman in her home, the black community's willingness to welcome Skeeter into their homes does not reflect historical reality, as civil rights scholar Luminita M. Dragulescu argues: "That black servants would allow a white mistress into the inner sanctum of the black community . . . particularly in a time and place when race relations were so tense, is a problematic premise" (20). But this acceptance is necessary to cultivate of a sisterhood that permits Skeeter both to find success and to assist black women in her community. Despite being historically erroneous, Skeeter's integration into the black community acts as a precursor to the emotional connections formed with black women which inform her sense of heroic duty. *The Help*, therefore, uses the space of the black home to foster an intimacy that makes Skeeter's acceptance believable while Atticus' place on the porch marks him as morally bound to justice but still separate.

*Atticus views Tom as a legal case rather than as a human with whom he can engage empathetically*

Personal relationships with black characters also distinguish Skeeter's female white savior archetype from that of Atticus. *To Kill a Mockingbird* includes a strange scene where Atticus shoots a rabid dog because it presents a threat to the community. This event seems to foreshadow Tom's eventual gunshot death after escaping police custody and running into the distance. These scenes, when read in conjunction, lead to the conclusion that Tom transforms into a danger to the white system of control—no longer evoking sympathy—and must be put

down like a mad dog. Atticus laments Tom's behavior after hearing of his death because he believed that an appeal offered the prospect of a more favorable hearing. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert argues Atticus's acceptance of the sheriff's explanation for Tom's death strains credibility due to his reputation for liberal reason: "That Scout could believe it happened just like this is credible. That Atticus Finch, an adult liberal resident of the Deep South in 1932, has no questions about this version is incredible." His comments reveal his allegiance lies with the law, not a belief in *racial* justice or equality. Consequently, Atticus views Tom as a legal case rather than as a human with whom he can engage empathically.

*Skeeter's crusade against racial injustice deepens as she bonds with the black women of Jackson.*

*The Help* reverses *To Kill a Mockingbird's* narrative of white male objectivity by including Constantine, the domestic worker in Skeeter's family home. Skeeter finds out that her mother fired Constantine, and this childhood connection serves as the foundation upon which Skeeter seeks to write the stories of "the help." Grounded in the common humanity she feels in response to the harrowing history of discrimination against African Americans in the South, Skeeter's crusade against racial injustice deepens as she bonds with the black women of Jackson. These intensely emotional relationships, with their origins in Constantine's love, serve as the impetus for her writing as she departs from the stoic distance employed by Atticus. This additional difference shows that a judicial rationale defines Atticus's ideology and informs his decision to defend Tom. Skeeter, on the other hand, comes to sympathize with the plight of women like Aibileen and Minny through her relationship with Constantine.

The whitewashing of black women in *The Help* acts as a form of stereotype that portrays them as objects of sympathy. The film places Constantine, Aibileen, and Minny into the stereotypical "mammy" role through their devotion to the children and families they serve. The prevailing image of the mammy casts black women as asexual, domineering women who take great joy in caring for white people and their children, often to the detriment of their own families. Micki McElya reveals one explanation for the reproduction of the mammy:

The myth of the faithful slave lingers because so many white Americans have wished to live in a world in which African Americans are not angry over past and present injustices, a world in which white people were and are not complicit, in which the injustices themselves—of slavery, Jim Crow,

and ongoing structural racism—seem not to exist at all. (3)

As Melissa Harris-Perry, a popular American writer and television show host, discussed on her eponymous network program, *The Help* strips black women of any semblance of racial politics to render them palatable to mainstream white audiences. In effect, the film pigeonholes black women to make them less threatening and therefore worthy of white audiences' sympathy. Once *The Help* places black women into this racial mold, white viewers become amenable to their stories.

The process of telling their stories falls to the misfit Skeeter, a white woman who bolsters her racial awareness by listening to these women's narratives. Dragulescu explains how the film constructs Skeeter so her ownership of black narratives is not overtly problematic, for her struggles become associated with the larger oppression of other societal outcasts:

A victim of trauma thus needs an ally: a sympathetic audience to help his or her narrative come through . . . Looking beyond Skeeter's goal to achieve her freedom by finding a journalistic position up North, at the risk of exposing her subjects, she is portrayed as an unlikely but sympathetic and involved listener. (21)

This feminine sympathy, coupled with the fact that she is saving the South's cherished mummies, separates her from the judicially minded Atticus, who defends a black character of little depth. Stereotypically gendered assumptions inform Skeeter's sympathy, establishing her as more emotional and sympathetic. Her interactions with Aibileen and Minny reveal these traits, while Atticus's male white savior archetype draws on rational and contemplative qualities often attributed to the masculine ideal.

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The racist foils for Atticus and Skeeter in the two films further display the gendered transformation of the white savior. Two scenes in particular show how racist white characters like Bob Ewell in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Hilly Holbrook in *The Help* work to center the white savior figure while the concerns of blacks remain at least partly marginal; for instance, after the jury rules against Tom, Atticus returns to the Robinson home to speak with the family. While there, a seemingly intractable Bob

Ewell appears. After the jury sides with Bob in suggesting Tom raped Mayella Ewell even though evidence suggests her father engaged in abuse, Bob remains embittered by Atticus's demonization of him in the courtroom and seeks to settle the score. A confrontation between Atticus and Bob takes place outside of the Robinson home, complete with a close-up shot of the two men staring with animosity toward each other that ends when Bob spits in Atticus's face. This scene suggests the real concern of the movie is the tension between these competing forms of masculinity — Atticus's contemplative rationality versus Bob's unjust criminality. The courtroom setting that prevails throughout the movie, moreover, contrasts Atticus's just behavior with Bob's unjust behavior. As the scene near the Robinson home progresses, the attention given to this collision of opposing masculinities overshadows revelations about Tom's character.

*The Help's ending takes a different approach, as Skeeter leaves for New York City after offering Aibileen and other black women in Jackson a voice through her book. .*

*The Help* includes a scene where Hilly interrupts a conversation Skeeter has with Hilly's maid, Yule May, that emphasizes conflict between differing feminine approaches to racial issues. Hilly accuses Yule May of asking Skeeter for money, which Yule May requested earlier of Hilly to send her children to college. After Yule May exits, a jarring divide develops between the two women that exposes Hilly and Skeeter's opposing femininities, Hilly's rooted in callousness and Skeeter's based on sympathy. Skeeter's feminine sympathy allows her to cultivate a niceness that leads women like Yule May to become sympathetic, developing the maids as characters who can ultimately earn a voice. Both films focus on whiteness by including white savior protagonists. However, issues of race in the films are further complicated by the re-gendering of the white savior role.

Scenes in which black characters act outside white systems of control cement the argument that *The Help*, in creating a female white savior archetype, adopts a feminine sensibility to address racial issues. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, viewers never see Tom Robinson run from the police after being found guilty. Had he instead relied on Atticus, the powerful white lawyer, he could have been found innocent. The belief in the possibility of Tom's acquittal, of course, fails to reflect a long history of white juries in the segregated South ruling against African

Americans, but Atticus's frustration regarding Tom's escape from custody advances the notion that his death was unavoidable. The black community in Maycomb stands and applauds Atticus's efforts in an earlier high angle shot, suggesting to viewers that Atticus's moral code and sense of reason are worthy of praise. In other words, black men need white men like Atticus because he is just. The film establishes his judgment as sound regarding Tom's demise despite the fact that viewers never receive Tom's point of view.

*The Help's regendering of the character allows the female white savior archetype to transfer her agency to African Americans.*

*The Help's* ending takes a different approach, as Skeeter leaves for New York City after offering Aibileen and other black women in Jackson a voice through her book. After the white savior figure leaves Mississippi, Hilly accuses Aibileen of theft. The scene concludes with Aibileen labeling Hilly hateful and mean-spirited, saying, "Ain't you tired?" Hilly runs off in tears. Aibileen's question to Hilly effectively exposes the feminine shield that masks Hilly's horrid behavior. In effect, the white savior transfers her own power to the victim once she leaves. The relationship created between Skeeter and Aibileen reveals Skeeter's inherent niceness, a product of her stereotypical femininity. Minny's hapless employer, Celia Foote, similarly possesses both a niceness and an unbelievable racial naiveté that grants Minny a more powerful voice that is not transferred to Aibileen until the film's end. Minny may seem to subvert racial codes of conduct with the scatological pie she delivers to Hilly, but this act has dire consequences, namely that Minny faces more abuse from her husband. Similar to the dynamic between Celia and Minny, Aibileen's connection to Skeeter grants her the power to stand up to Hilly and assert her autonomy. Without Skeeter delivering money to Aibileen and Minny for their contributions to her book, Aibileen's decision to confront Hilly would endanger her safety and livelihood. In a scene reminiscent of Atticus in the courtroom, a high-angle shot depicts Aibileen marching away from Elizabeth's house after being fired. The black victim is able to save herself after relying on a white hero. The ending encourages viewers to applaud a black Aibileen instead of a white man like Atticus. Skeeter's transfer of power to Aibileen is only possible because the film intimately involves its viewers in the interracial bonds ignored in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The employment of the male savior figure suggests the need of black men and women to rely on this superior figure, but *The Help's* re-gendering of the character allows the female white savior archetype to transfer her agency to

African Americans like Aibileen so they can develop a voice against their white oppressors.

The construction of the female white savior archetype relies on the same basic formula for creating the male figure, but a female hero allows for the inclusion of female traits and a sisterly transfer of power. *The Help* adopts the white male savior embodied by *To Kill a Mockingbird's* Atticus Finch and constructs a plot line that allows viewers to distinguish the differences inherent to the new female savior. *The Help* creates a female savior who departs from Atticus's strict adherence to reason and decides instead to use her emotional awareness to voice the mistreatment of African Americans by crafting an atmosphere that lends itself to the development of black-white relationships. Most importantly, this female white savior archetype, while still problematically central to the story, at least transfers her voice to oppressed blacks by the film's end. Unlike in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the use of the white savior model in *The Help* invites viewers to imagine a world where a white savior is no longer necessary. In turn, under a twenty-first century framework of greater racial progress, Skeeter's emotive tact keeps alive the white savior model while meeting the needs of the moment. The continued evolution of the white savior, while gradual, reduces its rigidity, exposing its fundamental malleability in adapting to different racial attitudes and time periods. With further progress, marginalized characters like Aibileen and Tom could come to replace Skeeter and Minny as filmic protagonists.



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