The Regendering of the White Savior

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The Regendering of the White Savior

Since the inclusion of African Americans in novels and film, the white savior has become a common trope. 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 the recycling of the white savior has been cited in numerous filmic analyses, little attention is paid to the role gender plays in the construction of this hero figure. Both *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. Since the advent of the female white savior, the filmic discourse of the white savior has at least partially shifted 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, comes to embody the archetypal white savior. *The Help*’s creation of Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan, however, alters this historical trope by presenting a female perspective, projecting a niceness that characterizes African Americans in a way that Atticus’s distance from them prevents. While both films employ a white savior that ultimately continues to center whiteness while othering black characters, *The Help*’s Skeeter goes further than Atticus by at least lending some semblance of a voice to Aibileen and Minny, the two black characters, through her female sensibility.

Atticus’s construction as a character is rooted in a struggle between competing brands of Southern masculinity that ultimately allows for the creation of a space for a female hero. Craig Thompson Friend describes in *Southern Masculinity* the formation of a virile masculinity that came out of Reconstruction, extending 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 reveals 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” (Friend xv). This brand of virility, founded on notions of Southern pride and aggressiveness, found itself 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 as it maintained racial and gendered structures of regional life” (Friend xvi). Mockingbird’s Atticus Finch aligns with this liberal masculinity that seeks out justice while the film’s antagonist, Bob Ewell, is constructed within the framework of the earlier, more aggressive, brand of masculinity. Atticus’s 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, in portraying 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 therefore regenders Atticus as Skeeter Phelan, a young woman whose close connections to black women in Mississippi leads her to serve as their advocate. The historical evolution of Southern masculinity, imagined by the creators of To Kill a Mockingbird to be one in which the noble gentleman is victorious, creates a space for a distinguished white female savior in future films.
While Atticus is iconized as the quintessential American man, *The Help* understands Skeeter in a manner similar to the way in which *Mockingbird*’s creators saw Jean Louise “Scout” Finch. In his article “Queer Children and Representative Men,” Gregory Jay details the connotation still associated with Atticus Finch: “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” (Jay 488). Atticus’s daughter Scout, however, does not embody feminine ideals. Her tomboyish behavior is repeatedly treated 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 is indicative of 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” (Jay 519). Scout’s occasionally masculine traits cast her to the margins, a lens of isolation through which she sees the world. *The Help*’s Skeeter is similarly fashioned as a woman whose ostracism informs her worldview. Shana Russell explains Skeeter’s racial awakening in her essay for the collection *From Uncle Tom’s Cabin to The Help*: “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” (Russell 75). Skeeter seems to be an extension of the Southern outsider embodied by Scout. By not conforming to traditional gender norms, she becomes positioned to defy the pervasive racism that defines Mississippi in the 1960s. Skeeter, reminiscent of Scout,
exemplifies a slightly atypical femininity that positions her to assume the white savior mantle already granted to Atticus due to his privileged manhood.

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 with Skeeter for a book she is writing about the lives of women like Aibileen. The juxtaposition of the films’ openings exposes 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 parameters of the porch in “The View from the Porch”: “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” (Watson 438). The black houses in *The Help*, however, created a space that fostered interracial bonds between black women and their eventual white savior. As Shana 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” (Russell 76). The black home comes to foster an intimacy necessary for an interracial sisterhood to develop. The differences in black-white relations plays out as the plots of *Mockingbird* and *The Help* develop. The opening scenes grant audiences the level of intimacy they can expect as the films progress.
The distance or closeness created through the white saviors’ relations to African Americans indicates the differences that must be established when employing a female hero. For instance, viewers never witness Atticus enter Tom’s home; they only see him stand on the black family’s porch through Jem’s point of view as he gains insight into his case. Rachel Watson substantiates the argument that the porch comes to act as a divider 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” (Watson 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 to the black characters. The porch comes to act as a buffer between the privileged world of whiteness that the Finch family inhabits and the inescapable world of degradation consuming the Robinsons. His rationality, a seeming byproduct of his masculinity, helps him avoid the need for a close-knit relationship with Tom. Meanwhile, as The Help flashes back in time after the opening scene, Skeeter quickly enters the black area of Jackson, Mississippi. The settings of these two films present another layer of contrast: Whereas Atticus never ingratiates himself in the black community while fighting vigorously in Tom’s defense, Skeeter’s repeated appearances in the other part of the city leads Aibileen and the rest of the black community to accept her as their own. This phenomenon is evidenced by the scene where Skeeter enters Aibileen’s house to find several black women waiting for her arrival, announcing that 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 is not based in historical reality,
as Luminita M. Dragulescu argues in “Bearing Whiteness?”: “Furthermore, that black servants would allow a white mistress into the inner sanctum of the black community—the literal and symbolic black kitchen—and would trust their personal stories to a white employer, particularly in a time and place when race relations were so tense, is a problematic premise” (Dragulescu 20). But this acceptance is necessary for the cultivation of a sisterhood that permits Skeeter to both find success and assist black women in her community. *The Help* utilizes the space of the black home to foster an intimacy that makes Skeeter’s acceptance believable while Atticus’s place on the porch marks him as separate but still morally bound to justice.

Personal relationships with black characters also distinguish Skeeter’s female white savior from Atticus’s male white savior. *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 death after escaping police custody and running into the distance. The suggestion thus becomes 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. Upon hearing of Tom’s death, Atticus laments his actions because he believed that Tom’s case would be received more favorably if appealed. In his review of the film, Roger Ebert explains the ridiculous premise upon which Atticus’s comments about Tom’s death are founded: “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” (Ebert). His comments reveal his allegiance lies with the law, not a belief in *racial* justice or equality. *The Help*’s Skeeter reverses *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s narrative of white male rationality through the inclusion of Constantine, the domestic worker in the Phelan home. Skeeter finds out that Constantine has been fired by her mother and this connection serves as the foundation upon which she seeks to write the stories of
“the help.” This additional difference shows that Atticus’s ideology is rooted in a judicial rationality that 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.

Black women in *The Help*, however, are whitewashed so viewers see them as sympathetic. Constantine, Aibileen and Minny are placed into the stereotypical box labeled “mammy” through their expressed devotion to the children and families they serve. Micki McElyea reveals the reason for the reproduction of the mammy in her book *Clinging to 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” (McElyea 3). As Melissa Harris-Perry discussed on her eponymous television show, the black women of *The Help* are stripped of any semblance of racial politics so they are palatable to mainstream white audiences. They are reduced to the mammy stereotype because their personalities are ones that white America wishes to preserve. Therefore, their stories become worthy of being told. The process of telling their stories falls to the misfit Skeeter, a white woman whose racial awareness is further enhanced by these women’s narratives. Luminita M. Dragulescu explains how the film constructs Skeeter so her ownership of black narratives is not overtly problematic: “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” (Dragulescu 21). This feminine sympathy, coupled with the fact that she is
saving the South’s cherished mammies, separates her from the judicially-minded Atticus, who defends the quintessential black man. The construction of Skeeter’s female white savior is therefore founded on stereotypically gendered assumptions of women as more emotional and sympathetic, traits that are exposed through her interactions with Aibileen and Minny, while Atticus’s male white savior draws on rational and contemplative qualities often attributed to the masculine ideal.

The racist foils of Atticus and Skeeter in these films further display the gendered transformation of the white savior. Two scenes in particular show how racist white characters like Bob Ewell from *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Hilly Holbrook in *The Help* work to center the white savior 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 sided with Bob in suggesting Tom raped Mayella Ewell even though evidence suggested she was beaten by her father, Bob remained embittered by Atticus’s demonization of him in the courtroom and sought 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 in animosity at each other and ending when Bob spits in Atticus’s face. This scene seems to suggest 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, moreover, contrasts Atticus’s just behavior with Bob’s unjust behavior, creating a judicial framework that avoids intimate knowledge of Tom as a character. Similarly, *The Help* includes a scene where Skeeter’s conversation with Hilly’s maid, Yule May, is interrupted when Hilly enters the kitchen. Hilly accuses Yule May of asking for money from Skeeter, which Yule May had requested earlier of
Hilly to send her children to college. After Yule May exits, viewers witness a shot/reverse-shot scene that exposes Hilly and Skeeter’s dichotomous feminities, Hilly’s being rooted in callousness and Skeeter’s being 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 that can ultimately earn a voice. Both films continue to center whiteness by including white savior protagonists, but the regendering of the savior and the racist foil serves to expose the conflict as being one that exists between men’s and women’s utilization of their gender roles in approaching issues of race.

The scenes in which black characters act outside white systems of control further cement the argument that *The Help*, in regendering *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s white male savior, adopts a female sensibility to address racial issues. While viewers never see Tom Robinson run from the police after being found guilty, one can assume that his actions are a disappointment because relying on Atticus, the powerful white lawyer, could have proven his innocence. Atticus’s lamentation suggests Tom’s death could not be helped. The black community in Maycomb stand and applaud Atticus’s efforts in an earlier high angle shot, suggesting to interpellated viewers that Atticus’s moral code and sense of reason are to be lauded. In other words, black men need white men like Atticus because he is just. His judgment is presumed to be sound regarding Tom’s demise despite the fact that viewers never receive Tom’s point of view. *The Help*’s ending seems to take a different approach. After granting Aibileen and other black women in Jackson an anonymous voice through her book, Skeeter leaves for New York City. After the white savior is written out of the plot, Aibileen is accused of theft by Hilly. An intense shot/reverse-shot scene occurs, and Aibileen accuses Hilly of being hateful and mean-spirited, saying, “Ain’t you tired?” Hilly runs off in tears. Aibileen 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 has left. The relationship created between Skeeter and Aibileen was rooted in
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 naïveté that grants
Minny a more powerful voice that is not transferred to Aibileen until the film’s end. Minny may
have seemed to subvert racial codes of conduct with the scatological pie delivered to Hilly, but
this action was committed with dire consequences, namely that Minny faced more abuse. Until
Skeeter is able to deliver money to Aibileen and Minny for their contributions to her book,
Aibileen’s decision to confront Hilly would be hard to comprehend. The connection to Skeeter
grants Aibileen the power to stand up to Hilly and assert her autonomy. 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.
Viewers come to applaud a black Aibileen instead of a white man like Atticus. Skeeter’s
transferal of power to Aibileen is only possible because viewers are intimately implicated in the
interracial bonds that are ignored in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The employment of the male savior
suggests the need of black men and women to rely on this superior figure, but *The Help*’s
transfiguration of this character allows the female white savior to transfer her agency to African
Americans like Aibileen so they can develop a voice against their white oppressors.

The regendering of the white savior relies on the same basic formula for creating this
figure, but the construction of a female hero requires the inclusion of female traits and a sisterly
transferal of power. *The Help* adopts the white male savior embodied by *To Kill a Mockingbird*’s
Atticus Finch and concocts a plotline that allows viewers to distinguish the differences inherent
to the new female savior. By crafting an atmosphere that lends itself to the development of
black-white relationships, *The Help* creates a female savior that departs from Atticus’s strict adherence to reason and decides instead to use her emotional awareness to voice the mistreatment of African Americans. Most importantly, this female white savior, while still problematically centered, at least transfers her voice to oppressed blacks by the film’s end. Unlike *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the use of the female white savior in *The Help* allows viewers to imagine a world where a white savior is no longer needed.
Works Cited


