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White Liberalism: Jordan Peele Reads Harper Lee

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by

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## White Liberalism: Jordan Peele Reads Harper Lee

Nicholas Oviedo-Torres

In April of 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was imprisoned in a Birmingham jail for his participation in a nonviolent protest against segregation. During his time behind bars, Dr. King penned a letter in response to a statement of caution issued by eight white religious leaders. In the now famous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, King wrote that “the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate...” (King 73). When King wrote this letter, he was referring to white people who were asking the civil rights movement to slow down while also claiming to champion their cause. Fifty-seven years removed from the writing of King’s hard-hitting words, one is left to wonder whether the white liberal is still “the Negro’s great stumbling block” (King 73). Whereas King presents a comparative analysis between white liberals and white supremacists, this research considers whether the white liberal is still “the Negro’s great stumbling block” and how it manifests in contemporary society by offering a political analysis of three depictions of white liberalism in American popular culture and the critical and popular responses to these cultural artifacts.

**Methods**

There is a long tradition of employing cultural texts to talk about politics. As displayed by the University Press of Kentucky’s *Political Companions to Great American Authors*, political theorists, philosophers, and literary scholars have implemented a multitude of approaches to examine the political influence of literature and the value of literature as a resource for political thought and analysis (Frank; McWilliams; Zirakzadeh & Stow). This

multiplicity in political analysis can take so many different forms as some works rely on scholars like Leo Strauss and approach texts as if they have an intrinsic meaning waiting to be uncovered, while others lean on philosophers like Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty to interpret literature on moral grounds (Strauss, *Persecution* 41; Strauss, *Natural*; Strauss & Kojève; Nussbaum; Rorty). Another prominent approach relies on perceiving texts as cultural artifacts that can tell us about the politics of the society from which the text itself comes from because the politics “has been [in the work] from the beginning” (Eagleton 169). Instead of focusing exclusively on the texts themselves, other political literary analysis methods turn their focus towards the audience responses to literature. Most notably, Stanley Fish established a concept called interpretive communities, which he defines as communities “made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions” (Fish 483). By utilizing an approach that relies on Stanley Fish’s concept of interpretative communities, scholars are able to better understand readers of a certain text and the communities they come from based off their interpretations of a text. Each of these different established methods provide their own value for the political analysis of literary texts.

This research will focus on two forms of media: films and novels. Nevertheless, following the examples of thinkers like Steven Johnston and Michael Rogin, this study will approach the analysis of both mediums in much the same way (Johnston; Rogin). As displayed by the methods used in these various works, there are an abundance of approaches to employing cultural texts for political analysis. With this understanding, this research will not prioritize any particular methodological approach to cultural texts. Rather, the study will draw elements from many of these different approaches. Unlike certain other areas of political science, this study does not rely upon quantitative analysis or respondent surveys, yet this does not mean it necessarily adopts a

subjective or idiosyncratic technique. Instead, it seeks to be rigorous, not rigid. In addition to its own careful reading of the texts, this research draws upon representative reviews, articles, and statements in order to consider reactions to these mediums while also noting the evidence of relevant outliers. In such an approach that draws on cultural analysis and political theory, the value of the analysis is ultimately demonstrated by the plausibility of its arguments and the veracity of its insights.

Central to the rigor of this method is the distinction between politics and the political. Political-theorist Chantal Mouffe distinguishes politics from the political by stating that “‘politics’ refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence...[whereas] ‘the political’ refers to this dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations” (“Democratic Politics and Conflict: An Agonistic Approach”; *On the Political: Thinking in Action; The Democratic Paradox; The Return of the Political*). While politics refers to systems in place, the political refers to the many arenas in which citizens become conscious of their conflicts and fight them out, such as aspects of American popular culture like literature and film. This study will analyze three works from the political arena of American popular culture and their relevance to understanding the issue of white liberalism with Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Go Set a Watchman*, and Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*.

Since its publication in 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has served as one of the nation’s most beloved novels, even being voted “America’s Best-Loved Novel” in 2018, much due to its story around the false accusation of a black man who is defended by a white lawyer in a 1930s Southern town (McClurg). Harper Lee’s first novel also provided the American public with one of its most esteemed fictional characters, Atticus Finch. On the other hand, Lee’s second

published novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, did not receive such a warm reception from readers despite its highly anticipated release in 2015. Lee's second published novel is widely believed to be a first draft of sorts for *To Kill a Mockingbird* as exhibited by its several shared characters, passages, and locations (Collins & Sonnad; Mahler). Though the novel appears to continue the story of main characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird* twenty years later, the different take it offers of cherished characters like Atticus Finch are often cited as reasons for a large number of readers' rejection of the 2015 novel. Unlike these two novels written by a liberal white woman, Jordan Peele's *Get Out* is written by a black man and utilizes horror to tell its story regarding race in a contemporary United States from the perspective of a black character. Since its release in early 2017, *Get Out* has received widespread praise for its insight into the lives of black people in the post-Obama United States. Each of these cultural works were chosen deliberately to help consider what these texts tell us about the role and significance of white liberalism in American culture.

### **White Liberalism Defined**

In order to properly address whether the white liberal is still “the Negro’s great stumbling block” through political analysis of cultural artifacts, it is important to understand how white liberalism is being understood within this study. In his letter, Martin Luther King Jr. described a white liberal as someone “who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods...’” (King 73). With this description, King conveys that a white liberal is someone who appears to support social reform, yet actually prefers the status quo. King’s description, however, runs

contrary to the common perception of liberalism within the American political framework. Instead, liberalism is often perceived as “a form of radical realism responsible for almost all the humane changes that the Western world has seen in the past two hundred years” in the American context (Gopnik 90). The mere association here of liberalism with the term “radical” and most of “the humane changes that the Western world has seen” like “[t]he liberation of women, the emancipation of slaves and then of the racially oppressed” suggests that liberalism is commonly viewed as being rooted in accomplishing progressive reform in the United States (Gopnik 91, 90).

Yet reform always requires effort on the part of the individual, while the status quo does not. A white liberal must place themselves out of their comfort zone in order to risk achieving true reform because “[i]f one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving” (Baldwin 336). Despite being rooted in John Locke’s idea of liberalism, the modern American understanding of liberalism is not necessarily the same as the liberalism developed by John Locke which rests upon liberal political theory (Locke; Grant). The Oxford English Dictionary defines liberalism as “[s]upport for or advocacy of individual rights, civil liberties, and reform tending towards individual freedom, democracy, or social equality” (“liberalism”). In this definition, there is nothing that mentions taking action to achieve these goals but merely expressing “support for or advocacy of” these goals (“liberalism”). By this definition, a white liberal practices their beliefs of “individual freedom, democracy, or social equity” by using empty words not supported by action as King highlights (“liberalism”). Though King’s illustration of white liberalism is helpful and supports the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition, it does not encapsulate the term’s full definition. Shannon Sullivan builds off King’s work in her book, *Good White People*, when she defines white liberals as “the bulk of white

people in the post-Jim Crow United States...who consider themselves to be non- or anti-racist” (S. Sullivan 3). I want to push Sullivan’s definition even further and add that white liberalism is an ideology, “a collection of beliefs and values held by an individual or group for other than purely epistemic reasons,” especially when it pertains to the internalization by people of color, with a particular focus on the imbricated elements of motivated blindness and othering (Hondreich 392; Shulman 720; Schwalbe et al. 423). Since white liberalism has different facets, it is important to stress that these various elements do not have a causal but imbricated relationship. White liberalism is thus multifaceted and encompasses multiple different components including motivated blindness and othering.

Motivated blindness,<sup>1</sup> as George Shulman defines it, is a type of ignorance and “denial of reality” on the part of a group in power because merely acknowledging that reality would disrupt that person’s comfort within the current power structure (Shulman 721). This ignorance “is willful...[and] requires an active effort on the part of oppressors not to see the world for what it is” (Waters 109). One of the ways this motivated blindness can manifest is through a concept known as “othering,” though othering can also stand on its own. Othering is “when one group seeks advantage by defining another group as morally and/or intellectually inferior” (Schwalbe et al. 423). This theory posits that individuals create their understanding of self by drawing a line between the group they identify with and a subordinate group of people that they consider the other. It is crucial to emphasize that the othered group is always considered to be inferior in some sense, which allows the self to look down on the other. Othering can occur between various groups of people, whether that’s between white and black people, “between Latinos and blacks in post-civil rights Texas, ...[or] between groups of white people themselves” (S. Sullivan 64).

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes referred to as “willful ignorance” (Alcoff 39).

Othering allows people to take the culpability for a problem off of their own shoulders in an attempt to prove that they are not racist and place that responsibility on the allegedly inferior group who is being othered (S. Sullivan 5).

White liberalism often utilizes four different forms of othering, which include distancing from “white trash,” distancing from white oppressive history, adopting racial colorblindness, and othering of the oppressed by the oppressed (S. Sullivan 23; Pyke 557). Each of these different forms of othering allow people to distance themselves from the problem of race in the United States and avoid interrogating their own racial commitments. With distancing from “white trash,” people are able to other “low-income, rural white people,” which the term is directed towards, from themselves by creating a divide between “good” and “bad” white people (Donatella; S. Sullivan 23). This distancing allows many to place the burden of contributing to racism on lower class white people and wash their hands clean of any responsibility for racism because “white trash” is viewed as “the most racist group in society” (Donatella). As James Baldwin, the twentieth century author and social critic, often pointed out in his essays, this kind of distancing has come through in the way “the North...has prided itself on not being like the Southern racists” (Baldwin & Kenan 61). As any kind of othering always does, this mindset of the northern states being less racially prejudiced than the southern states allows northern states to perceive themselves as the non-racist states and, therefore, the “good” white people. In the context of the North perceiving itself as less racist than the South, those “Southern racists” that Baldwin wrote about are often considered synonymous with the “white trash” that Nancy Isenberg writes about (Isenberg).

Though Baldwin wrote about the North’s pride in “not being like the Southern racists” back in 1963, this type of mentality is one that many Americans, especially white-Americans,

still adopt in 2020 (Baldwin & Kenan 61). Whether one uses redneck, hillbilly, or white trash to refer to these lower class white people, these derogatory terms are often directed towards Donald Trump and his supporters who live in “mobile home[s],...[have] no high school diplomas, work... ‘old economy’ jobs, and list...their ancestry as ‘American’” (Isenberg; Marshall). With this use of the term towards Trump supporters, white liberals are able to detract from the suggestion that they contribute to racism because the less educated Trump supporters are “real racism” (Donatella). As sociologist Matt Wray writes in his book, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*, “[w]hite trash names a people whose very existence seems to threaten the symbolic and social order” because it challenges the common association of white with purity (Wray 2). The mere qualification that this is “white” trash, as opposed to merely trash, suggests that these people exist in a space that is not fully white since normal white people would be “educated, classy, kind and good” (Donatella). These different juxtapositions of white people, whether it be rednecks and white trash with white liberals or the North versus the South, are important to address because the motivations behind these different comparisons have the same impact as othering from “white trash.” The hope is that these juxtapositions create a relative distinction between “good” white people and “bad” white people. Despite the beliefs of many Americans, however, there has never been a true difference between the North and the South nor “white liberals” and “white trash” in regard to how racist they are because “what happened in Birmingham happens in New York” (Baldwin & Kenan 61). Instead, there is merely “a difference in the way they castrate” black people, as James Baldwin put it when discussing the difference between the North and the South (Peck). Whether a white person distances themselves from white trash or identifies as white trash, the white person still plays a role in the figurative castration of black people and the continuation of racism in the United States.

Distancing from white trash is not the only type of othering that the perception of the North being less racist than the South is an example of, this mindset also exemplifies distancing from white oppressive history. The thought process behind distancing from white oppressive history is that this type of othering is one of the better ways for white people to display their disapproval for problematic white history (S. Sullivan 60). From the centuries of slavery in the United States to the lynchings of black people, the history of the United States is jam-packed with instances of white people doing horrific things to black people and other marginalized communities. The common response, it seems, of white Americans to the revelation of these true stories is to deem the actions of their ancestors “incomprehensible and monstrous, even literally inhuman” (S. Sullivan 60). Yet the people who committed these awful acts were in fact human and, therefore, their acts were not inhuman. With this perceived “inhumanity of white history, [however,] white people today...find it difficult, and even refuse to relate themselves to white racists of the past” (S. Sullivan 60).

The perception of the North being less racist than the South exhibits, not only a refusal to relate to the racist Southern slave owners of the past but, a refusal to acknowledge the racist history of the North. Northerners love to admonish the South for its relationship with racist historical figures like Robert E. Lee, Andrew Jackson, and Thomas Jefferson, yet fail to confront the role banks, real estate boards, and urban planners like Robert Moses have played in ensuring that “New York is segregated” (Chang 11; Baldwin & Kenan 61). Though this distancing from white oppressive history “can seem to be the best way to demonstrate that...[white people] are not racist,” this othering actually allows white people to ignore the prominence of racism in American history and avoid difficult conversations about racism (S. Sullivan 60). The fleeing

from tough topics and concepts related to race by people is often titled “white flight”<sup>2</sup> (S. Sullivan 91). This distancing from white oppressive history effectively attempts to create a line, and subsequent hierarchy, between the “bad” white people of the past and the “good” white people of the present by preventing the past from bogging down the racial progress of the future. The failure to accept and acknowledge the oppressive impact white people have had on the direction of this nation only serves as a failure in “learning how to use” that same history (Baldwin 333). Whether one refers to the actions of slaveholders or segregationists as inhuman, one outright refuses to acknowledge that they are just as capable of committing these horrific actions as the people who committed them. This refusal by white liberals “to relate themselves to white racists of the past” essentially operates as a refusal to truly seek out the root of the nation’s structural racial problems and, even, how one may contribute to those issues (S. Sullivan 60). Without having “everything white Americans think they believe in...reexamined” and investigating the true cause of white oppressive history, white liberals deny themselves an opportunity to better understand the infrastructure of racial injustice in the United States and, as a result, stand in the way of its solution (Baldwin 345).

Another type of othering that is used by white liberals to deny their role in the racial hierarchy is the adoption of racial color-blindness. The concept of racial color-blindness is to reduce interracial tension by suggesting that “racial categories do not matter and should not be considered when making decisions” about an individual (Richeson & Nussbaum 417). This form of othering once again focuses on creating a stark distinction between “good” white people and “bad” white people. In the case of color-blindness, however, the construction of this line is much more implicit than distancing from “white trash” and white oppressive history. The adoption of

<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with the housing term of the same name that refers to white people leaving urban “areas that are becoming more diverse” (Chang 76; Bates).

racial color-blindness relies on the perception that those who take skin color into consideration in any manner are morally inferior to, and therefore othered by, those who claim not to take race into consideration in any matter. This strategy to combatting racism conflates acknowledging race with discrimination. Though this approach seems very progressive because one allegedly ignores that race even exists and theoretically treats all humans the same on an individual level, it also allows one to completely ignore systematic racism and occupy a “magical place” where racism does not still exist (S. Sullivan 92). One does not have to look very far, whether it is the segregation currently occurring on Long Island, NY or the early signs of the disproportionate impact COVID-19 has had on black communities, to recognize that racism is still very much alive in the United States (Winslow; Eligon et al.).

As José Medina points out in his book, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*, this mentality encourages someone to be “actively and proudly ignorant of [their] social positionality” and demonstrates “a failure in self-knowledge and a failure in the knowledge of others with whom one is intimately related” (Medina 37). By pretending to completely ignore race, the adoption of racial color-blindness displays an absolute refusal to become aware of one’s own and others’ positionality within the American racial hierarchy that exists whether one wants it to or not. This thought-process only supports James Baldwin’s claim in *The Fire Next Time* that “whatever white people do not know about Negroes reveals...what they do not know about themselves” (Baldwin 312). Color-blindness is a racialized rendition of the naïve saying “out of sight and out of mind” with all of its problems. This mentality and its problems are properly exemplified in so many different ways, whether that’s the former Starbucks CEO claiming he doesn’t see color anymore or a Sidney Poitier fan claiming they don’t care “if [he’s] black, white, or purple,” yet the school

policy research that suggests color-blind school policies actually increase the educational gap between black and white students does it pretty well (K. Sullivan; Robot; Roda & Wells).

Researchers found “a strong positive correlation between increasing racial/ethnic segregation in public schools and the growth in...so-called colorblind” policies, which ignore the races of members of their student body and the school’s role in the desegregation of the United States (Roda & Wells 262). Despite the good intentions of adopting racial color-blindness, this form of othering prevents one from recognizing and addressing the systematic ways racism exists in this nation. As a result, the adoption of racial color-blindness by white liberals prevents many from understanding how they contribute to the problems they claim to hope to resolve.

Another way othering occurs within white liberalism is through distancing by the oppressed of the oppressed. Unfortunately, white liberalism is an ideology that can infect people of color. The infection of white liberalism and othering by those who are subjected to racism starts with the internalization of racial oppression. W.E.B. Du Bois created the foundation for the understanding of internalized racial oppression when he wrote about “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” while discussing his theory of double consciousness (Du Bois). The research behind internalized racism has bloomed in recent years and sociologist Karen D. Pyke was able to build off of DuBois’s groundwork by defining internalized racism as the “internalization of racial oppression among the racially subordinated” (Pyke 551). The internalization of these social contexts can come to fruition in a rather subtle manner to the extent that this internalized racism exists in one’s subconscious. Based on a Gramscian perspective on hegemony, the dominant group in a hierarchy is able to control the construction of reality through the way they control social norms, procedures, and knowledge through processes

often known as indoctrination or mental colonization (Pyke 556; Gramisci et al.; hooks 173).

With this control of how society perceives reality, the dominant group, which are white people in the racial hierarchy of the United States, are able to present their own interests “as reflecting everyone’s best interests, thereby getting oppressed groups to accept the dominant group’s interests as their own and minimize conflict” (Pyke 556). This subconscious internalized racism plants the seeds for the othering of other black people by black people when “the oppressed accept the identities imposed on them by oppressors” (Pyke 557).

The internalization of racial oppression often leads to the othering of members of one’s own oppressed community because one perceives themselves as a member of “a dominant, ‘superior’ class... [above] their alleged inferior[s]” (Pyke 557). In this case, black people who have adopted the internalization of racism effectively view other black people as “the other,” despite never being accepted by white people. White liberalism requires some form of denial of the reality of one’s full role within the racial hierarchy, which includes a denial of one’s full role as an oppressed member within the hierarchy. This othering of the oppressed by the oppressed can manifest in multiple different ways, including seeing oneself as existing outside of the racial hierarchy as the character of Phillip does in Jeremy O. Harris’s *Slave Play* (Harris 59). One of the better examples of this othering of the oppressed by the oppressed comes from Martin Luther King Jr. During a sermon in Montgomery from the late 1950s, King is quoted as urging his congregation to look at the statistics that display black people “are 10 per cent of the population of St. Louis and are responsible for 58 per cent of its crimes” as a reason why black people “can’t keep on blaming the white man” (Baldwin 644). With this statement, King ignored and omitted that black people are more likely to be profiled and arrested by police, which likely played a large role in the statistics he quoted. Instead of displaying how these St. Louis crime

statistics were symptoms of the systematic racism black people have continuously faced in this nation, King chose to utilize the statistics as a way to bolster his argument for why black people “can’t keep on blaming the white man” (Baldwin 644). King used this speech to create a divide between black people who find white people responsible for things like the St. Louis crime statistics and black people like himself who do not and, instead, place that blame on black people. Black-on-black violence is often a talking point used to justify racist policing policies and, not only does King accept this talking point as in his own interest, he uses it to display how he views himself as occupying a more “superior’ class” than that of other black people (Massie; Pyke 557). Even King, a fervent and beloved civil rights leader, internalized his surrounding systems of racial oppression and was infected by the white liberalism mentality.

### **White Liberalism in *To Kill a Mockingbird***

There are a plethora of examples today which embody the ideology of white liberalism. One of the most famous is the beloved liberal fiction icon, Atticus Finch, from *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Eric Sundquist referred to Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* as “a particular touchstone of white liberalism” and this is exactly what it has been since its publication in 1960. Harper Lee’s novel was released at the height of the Civil Rights Movement and received an overwhelmingly positive reception, as displayed by its 1961 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction and the 98 weeks it spent on the New York Times best-seller list (“1961 Pulitzer Prizes”; Mary Jo Murphy). *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not merely an award-winning and high-selling novel though, this is a novel that real readers have proclaimed have changed their lives. One signal of this impact can be found when political consultant and former Clinton campaign strategist James Carville proclaimed that the novel was “the most important book of his life for the change it effected in his view of racial

justice” (Sundquist 182). A larger display of this novel’s perceived impact on the minds of its readers can be found in a survey of 5,000 respondents from 1991 by the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Library of Congress’s Center for the Book that the Bible was the only book cited more than Harper Lee’s debut novel “as making a difference” in the lives of readers (Johnson 14). This book has often been signaled to as the perfect lesson in combatting racism and a large reason for this perceived impact is the novel’s beloved character of Atticus Finch.

Ever since the Pulitzer winning novel’s publication, Atticus has stood on a pedestal for many readers due to his perceived progressive racial views. In the novel, Atticus is a lawyer who defends an innocent black man, Tom Robinson, accused of raping a white woman in a town where this type of accusation, without questioning its credibility, was a guilty conviction for a black man. Though Atticus was unsuccessful in his attempt to achieve Tom Robinson’s acquittal, readers have viewed Atticus as a liberal icon and symbol of morality merely because he espoused seemingly progressive rhetoric and was able to get the jury to hesitate about their guilty verdict. In 1964, Martin Luther King Jr. highlighted Atticus’s “heroism” and “moral courage” when advocating for the necessity of nonviolent protest in the Civil Rights Movement (King 24). While author Wally Lamb referred to Atticus as the “model we can all aim toward,” one law school professor went as far as referring to Atticus as “justice in the flesh” (Mary McDonagh Murphy 116; McMillian 701). This is all to say that readers love Atticus because he put “his career and life on the line for a wrongfully accused black man,” which seemingly “meet[s] the standards that we set for ourselves but can seldom attain” (Barge; Lubet 1340).

Though it has been sixty years since *To Kill a Mockingbird* was first published, the novel and its beloved hero have yet to be abandoned by readers. Oprah Winfrey famously referred to Lee’s novel as “our national novel” and it seems she’s not wrong as *To Kill a Mockingbird* is still the

most read book by 9<sup>th</sup> graders in the United States in 2020 (Mary McDonagh Murphy 202; “What Kids Are Reading”). Readers have even displayed the durability of the nation’s love for Atticus Finch as reactions to Obama’s allusion to the fictional lawyer in his farewell address and Aaron Sorkin’s take on the “towering lawyer from fiction” on Broadway has displayed how beloved this novel and its esteemed savior still are in American popular culture (Kornhaber; Marks). Despite the love many readers evidently have for Atticus Finch, and thus *To Kill a Mockingbird*, due to Atticus’s seemingly progressive racial politics, readers often create this version of Atticus by failing to recognize the underlying problems behind Atticus’s perceived liberal actions.

Atticus’s black female servant, Calpurnia, is often pointed to as support for Atticus’s non-racist image because Atticus seems to respect her as a human and stands up for her. This treatment allows Atticus to take on the appearance of someone who supports racially progressive reform. One critic even praised Atticus and his family for being “one which welcomes as one of its members a black woman,” which properly exhibits the praise Atticus receives for his relationship with Calpurnia (Johnson 137). One of the instances that has helped readers form this opinion of Atticus’s attitudes towards Calpurnia is when Atticus defends Calpurnia against his sister, Alexandra, after she has moved into the Finch household and suggested getting rid of Calpurnia as a servant. Atticus responds to this suggestion by proclaiming:

Alexandra, Calpurnia’s not leaving this house until she wants to. You may think otherwise, but I couldn’t have got along without her all these years. She’s a faithful member of [the] family and you’ll simply have to accept things the way they are. Besides, sister, I don’t want you working your head off for us—you’ve no reason to do that. We still need Cal as much as we ever did. (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 182-183)

To many readers, this came off as Atticus sticking up for Calpurnia against the mean Aunt Alexandra who just wanted to rip the Finch household apart. Despite this common reading, Atticus says something in this scene that seems progressive on the surface but is not actually so. Atticus claims that Calpurnia is a part of his family yet he fails to treat her like family. For starters, he makes clear later in his statement that he would not work his own family the way that he works Calpurnia, despite his claim that Calpurnia is family. In addition, Atticus makes evident that he views black and white women to be on two separate levels when he tells Alexandra, a white woman, that he does not want her to work for the family like Calpurnia, a black woman. Despite this statement seeming on its face to be progressive because it asserts Calpurnia as a member of the family, it actually reveals Atticus's view of Calpurnia as being solidified in her social ranking due to the color of her skin.

Some of Atticus's most famous progressive quotes often come out of moral lessons he bestows upon his children. These instances also happen to be when Atticus displays white liberalism and its underlying problem. At one point in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus is asked by his daughter and the book's narrator, Scout, "what exactly is a nigger-lover?" (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 144). This is an important moment for Atticus as a progressive liberal figure because of the role Atticus has in shaping his children's views concerning race. At this moment, Atticus can either give Scout a truthful definition of the term and address why it is not a term that should be used or he can sidestep the term's true derogatory meaning and, thus, fail to address and help Scout understand the problem of racism that infects their hometown of Maycomb. Atticus decides to describe "nigger-lover" as "just one of those terms that don't mean anything – like snot-nose... [and] is use[d by ignorant, trashy people] when they think somebody's favoring Negroes over and above themselves" (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 144). With this definition,

Atticus attempts to prove he is not racist by effectively sidestepping the racial connotations behind the term. He does this first by attempting to take any power away from the term, as opposed to addressing the term's true meaning of demeaning black people, by claiming it "don't mean anything" though in fact it is clear to the reader and Scout that this term means something negative (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 144). Atticus sidesteps the racial problems with this term even more by taking the burden of this term off of his shoulders and placing it on those of "ignorant, trashy people," effectively othering the novel's "white trash" (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 144). This distances Atticus and his daughter from the term altogether by sending the message that, though this has some sort of negative connotation that will not be addressed, it is a reflection of "white trash," not the Finch family. By doing this dance to avoid addressing racism, Atticus Finch, the great liberal hero, merely contributes to the racism in the country by promoting a sense of motivated blindness in his daughter and failing to acknowledge any role he plays in the issue of racism.

Another instance where Atticus lets his white liberalism show is when his son, Jem, mentions the Ku Klux Klan in a conversation about gangs. During this conversation, Atticus claims that the Klan "was a political organization more than anything" that is gone and will "never come back" (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 196). Lee does not provide us with a reaction from Jem to Atticus's history lesson, but it is not far-fetched to assume that the lawyer's child took his father's words as fact and merely assumed that the Klan was a political organization that no longer was a threat. In an attempt to love everyone, Atticus completely mislabels the KKK as a political organization and, once again, opts to avoid addressing race as an issue with his white children. Atticus sidesteps race as a problem here by distancing himself from the white oppressive history of the United States by claiming that the KKK only existed "[w]ay back" and

will “never come back” (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 196). Though it is problematic alone to provide someone with a false image of history, it is even worse here when Atticus does this because he has the power to shape the conscious opinions of his children towards race. In his attempts to appear anti-racist by supporting a willfully ignorant view towards the KKK, Atticus perpetuates the racist society that corrupts the United States by shaping another white person with the idea that race is not a problem in Maycomb through his distancing of white oppressive history.

### **White Supremacy in *Go Set a Watchman***

Before proceeding with this analysis, it is important to address the relationship between *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* and how this research approaches it. The events leading up to the publication of *Go Set a Watchman* are confusing to say the least and have left plenty of room for speculation regarding the intent behind its publication. Despite the speculation surrounding its release, Lee’s second published novel is generally believed to be a first draft of sorts for *To Kill a Mockingbird* as displayed by its several shared characters, passages, and locations (Collins & Sonnad; Mahler). Despite being considered a first draft for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the events of *Go Set a Watchman* occur about twenty years after the events of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The origin story of this novel presents the reader with an interesting situation in regards to understanding the relationship between the contents of the two novels, especially considering the inconsistencies between the two storylines. In light of these circumstances, James Kelley presents a solution in reading the two texts as palimpsest, “an approach that seeks to position *Go Set a Watchman* not as having been written after or...before *To Kill a Mockingbird* but rather as lying underneath or behind the text of that bestselling novel” (Kelley

2). Kelley's suggested reading method of the two texts allows one "to make productive connections, references, and/or juxtapositions between the two texts without having to commit to some essentialist device — such as authorial intent — to 'prove' their relevance or relationship" (Stow). With the freedom and productivity that this type of reading provides, this research adopted Kelley's approach in order to properly understand the complexities underlying the two novels.

*Go Set a Watchman* was Harper Lee's second published novel, published 55 years after the release of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1960. The long period of time between the publication of Lee's two published works helped *Go Set a Watchman* become one of the most anticipated novels in recent memory, as exhibited by the book becoming Amazon's most pre-ordered novel since *Harry Potter: Deathly Hollows* at the time ("Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman*"). Despite the high level of anticipation, everything from the controversial circumstances around the novel's release to its "shocking" depiction of Atticus Finch has often made this work hated by ardent fans of Lee's first novel (Kakutani). One of the problems readers often take with *Go Set a Watchman* is its seemingly opposite portrayal of Atticus Finch compared to the depiction of that character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. While Atticus is an "avatar of integrity" in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, he is a "racist" in *Go Set a Watchman* (Kakutani). The combination of *Go Set a Watchman*'s highly anticipated release and its alleged recast of Atticus Finch led to an uproar among fans of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Atticus Finch. One journalist claimed that *Go Set a Watchman* "ruin[ed] everything," while another fan emphasized that their friends outright refused to read Lee's 2015 novel because they "want[ed] Atticus to remain the Atticus that [they] adore[d]" (Ulanoff; Alter). Even political historian Joseph Crespino asked his friend whether they "[h]ad...heard that his hero Atticus Finch had an evil twin" in reference to the Atticus in *Go*

*Set a Watchman* (Raines). Most fans of *To Kill a Mockingbird* found themselves in an identity crisis of sorts upon *Go Set a Watchman*'s release as one writer even asked what those "readers and watchers and admirers of Atticus Finch as a father and a fighter, [those] who have embraced his heady symbolism, [those] who have named [their] children in his honor" are supposed to make of Atticus's new characterization (Garber).

Individuals who deemed Atticus as the "model we can all aim toward," now had no model of racial justice reform to aim at (Mary McDonagh Murphy 116). In the face of this crisis, readers often decided to outright reject *Go Set a Watchman* or write off its validity to the manipulation of Harper Lee into releasing a second novel (Alter; Kovaleski). Though it was determined that Lee was indeed in control of the decision to publish a second novel, this mere rejection of *Go Set a Watchman* altogether reveals a crucial element of white liberalism, motivated blindness, within the *To Kill a Mockingbird* reading community. Readers of *To Kill a Mockingbird* who reject *Go Set a Watchman* adopt a "denial of reality" or a motivated blindness because merely acknowledging that Atticus may be racist would place into question whether they are, in fact, racist as well since they "grew up looking up to this character" (Shulman 721; Alter) Despite the desires of white liberal readers for a white liberal hero who makes them feel like they are not racist, *Go Set a Watchman* attempts to have readers confront their motivated blindness.

At the point when *Go Set a Watchman* picks up, the reader is twenty years removed from the *To Kill a Mockingbird* storyline and Scout is in her twenties and goes by Jean Louise as opposed to her childhood nickname. Though the story is still told from Jean Louise's perspective, as *To Kill a Mockingbird* was, the readers receive a much less progressive version of Atticus than they had grown accustomed to. The first sign given to the reader by Harper Lee of

this is when Jean Louise finds a pamphlet that Atticus “brought home from a citizens’ council meeting” that claims that “Negroes...couldn’t help being inferior to the white race” (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 103, 102). From this point on, Lee makes clear to the reader that Atticus’s racial views will not be as gilded as it seemed they were in the first book. In this book, Atticus, the beloved liberal hero, is a member of a white supremacy group. The reader that adored Atticus in *To Kill a Mockingbird* loses all familiarity with the Atticus in *Go Set a Watchman* when Atticus is presented with the opportunity to defend Calpurnia’s grandson in a court case. Without hesitation, Atticus accepts the case to prevent the case from falling into the hands of “NAACP-paid lawyers,” who would “demand Negroes on the juries...[and] raise every legal trick in their books” to secure an acquittal (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 149). Instead, Atticus would rather “stand up with [Calpurnia’s grandson] in court” and help him “plead guilty” (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 148). There is no avoiding that this is an explicitly white supremacist point of view as Atticus is literally taking on more work to ensure that a black man is incarcerated as opposed to standing by and allowing him the opportunity of a somewhat fair defense. This reasoning aligns with Atticus’s character in this novel as he is a board member of a white supremacy group.

In *Go Set a Watchman*, Atticus definitely does not hide his white supremacy leanings. Towards the end of the book, Atticus confronts Jean Louise for her grudge with him over his position with the citizens’ council and racist views. As opposed to writing some plot twist that places Atticus back on the liberal pedestal he was on following *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Lee twists the knife for fans of Atticus and has the lawyer defend his racist views against Jean Louise. In this confrontation, Atticus tells Jean Louise that she “can’t have a set of backward people living among people advanced in one kind of civilization” and asks whether she “want[s] her] children going to a school that’s been dragged down to accommodate Negro children” (Lee,

*Go Set a Watchman* 242, 246). These assertions by Atticus make evident to the reader that Atticus wholeheartedly believes that black people are inferior to white people because they are “a set of backward people” who would drag down education standards (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 242). By sketching Atticus as a white supremacist in this book, Harper Lee forces the reader to reconsider the liberal hero Atticus from *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

### **White Liberalism: White Supremacy in Disguise**

Dr. King referred to the white liberal as “the Negro’s great stumbling block” and a greater hindrance than explicit white supremacists, a group that actively pursues goals which maintain the status quo of racism in this country (King 73). Though King presented a dichotomy between white liberalism and white supremacy in this statement, this research is not concerned with a comparative claim but with how white liberalism is merely white supremacy in disguise. The reality is that though white liberalism operates in a different fashion from white supremacy, they do in fact have much in common. One of the main commonalities between white liberalism and white supremacy is a shared underlying motive of preserving the status quo of the American racial hierarchy. Though the impacts and methods of these two ideologies may differ, this shared motive remains the same.

Since motivated blindness helps to make white liberalism possible, white liberalism champions the status quo of systematic racism as white supremacy does. Motivated blindness “requires an active effort on the part of oppressors not to see the world for what it is” in order to preserve their comfort within the status quo (Waters 109). This is the same racial status quo that white supremacists fight so vehemently for. The shared motive between white liberalism and white supremacy is well captured by a speech from 1961 delivered by Attorney General and self-

proclaimed believer of the civil rights movement Robert F. Kennedy. In the speech, the younger Kennedy brother proclaimed that there was “no question that in the next thirty or forty years a Negro can also achieve the same office that [his] brother [had] as President of the United States” (Kennedy 63). For Kennedy and many other white people, this prediction came off “as a very emancipated statement,” as James Baldwin pointed out, because the then-attorney general seemed to promote equality between the races by stating that a black person could one day be equivalent to his adored brother, John F. Kennedy (Peck). A white supremacist would absolutely never say such a prediction because they are explicit about their racism. Kennedy’s statement was not very progressive. Instead, Kennedy’s words actually meant that “maybe in forty years, if [black people were] good, [white people] may let [a black person] become president” (Peck). Following Baldwin’s revelation of the underlying meaning behind Kennedy words, it becomes clear to the reader that this “very emancipated statement” does not promote equality between the races but, instead, promotes a relationship that is reminiscent of a parent-child relationship (Peck). Any explicit attempt by a politician to promote a parent-child relationship by white people over black people would be perceived as a white supremacist talking point. As most of white liberalism, however, this statement seems progressive on its face and is able to cover-up its leaning towards maintaining the status quo of race relations in the United States. Though white liberals may be unaware of their proximity to white supremacy due to motivated blindness, all white Americans have been “[s]ocialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority” regarding race (DiAngelo 2). Without acknowledging and addressing this reality, white liberals retain the same racial biases that drives white supremacists. One of the crucial differences between white supremacy and white liberalism lies in its methods, not its motives or impacts.

Both white liberalism and white supremacy are motivated by the preservation of one's own comfort within the racial status quo of the United States. Dr. King referred to the white liberal as "the Negro's great stumbling block" instead of white supremacists because white supremacists acknowledge their desire to maintain the racist status quo in the United States, white liberals do not (King 73). When the failure to acknowledge one's role in systemic racism, the lack of motivation to enact true reform, and the appearance of being in support of racial justice come together, white liberalism as an ideology provides people with the ability to undermine the black struggle for equality by failing to address racism head-on and failing to take action to accomplish reform. An instance which properly captures white liberalism's undermining capabilities comes from Robert F. Kennedy's meeting with Lorraine Hansberry, James Baldwin, and other civil rights activists in 1963. At the meeting, the then-attorney general was asked to have his brother and then-president, John F. Kennedy, escort a black girl into a formerly all-white southern school in the midst of the desegregation of schools in the nation. The hope was that this would send the message to pro-segregationists that the nation stands by black children as they enter white schools. Despite all of Kennedy's pro-civil rights rhetoric, he rejected the proposal because he viewed it as a "meaningless moral gesture" (Peck).

Kennedy viewed the proposed action as "meaningless," which ignored the prominence of desegregation and racism in the nation in that moment (Peck). This example exhibits the problem with white liberalism because, despite the desires of black activists, Kennedy opted for inaction and against addressing racism head-on. By failing to take action to promote racial justice reform, white liberals who claim to support the endeavors of black equality make black Americans who take any action towards reform seem too extreme. Black people struggling for equality are better off not seeming so extreme next to the empty support of white liberals like Robert F. Kennedy,

which is in part why Dr. King labeled white liberals as the “Negro’s great stumbling block” (King 73).

### **White Liberalism in *Get Out***

In today’s society, it is easy to disregard an example like Atticus Finch’s implicitly problematic white liberalism as a product of the times without acknowledging that this ideology exists today. This cannot be done as easily, however, with the contemporary examples of white liberalism that appear in Jordan Peele’s Oscar winning horror film, *Get Out*. Not only is *Get Out* critical of white liberalism, it has quickly become a staple of contemporary American culture. Jordan Peele’s debut film received overwhelming praise from the moment it was released into the public eye in 2017. *Get Out* was able to gross \$33.4 million domestically during its opening weekend, while also receiving an Oscar for Best Original Screenplay in 2018 (D’Alessandro; Desta). This film’s cultural significance cannot be overstated as, not only was it the first debut film by a black director to gross over \$100 million domestically, it was referred to as a full-blown cultural phenomenon by the LA Times due to its inspiration of “countless...Internet memes and other...fan art across social media” (Jacobs; “Jordan Peele”). *Get Out* focuses on Chris, a black man, as he visits his white girlfriend’s family, the Armitages, for the first time during a weekend getaway and the inherent fears that accompany Chris on his visit to the household. Unlike *To Kill a Mockingbird*, this story takes on the perspective of a black man viewing white liberalism as opposed to that of a white child viewing white liberalism, which adds a less naïve view of white liberalism to *Get Out*. In addition to this difference in perspective, the story is set in present day and forces viewers to confront the problems and existence of white liberalism in the contemporary world. As displayed with *To Kill a*

*Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman*, however, readers may be spoon-fed this confrontation and still reject it due to their motivated blindness.

As a result of the almost constant stream of praise the film received for its commentary on race in the United States, *Get Out* was nominated for four awards at the 2018 Oscars (Desta). The Oscars are not exactly known for having many non-white nominees, so this was quite the feat for the film alone. One of the 7,258 Oscar voting members was anonymously interviewed in *The Hollywood Reporter* and shared their rationale for withholding votes for *Get Out* in the 2018 Oscars by stating:

It's a good B-movie and I enjoyed it, but what bothered me afterwards was that instead of focusing on the fact that this was an entertaining little horror movie that made quite a bit of money, they started trying to suggest it had deeper meaning than it does, and, as far as I'm concerned, they played the race card, and that really turned me off. In fact, at one of the luncheons, the lead actor [Daniel Kaluuya], who is not from the United States [he's British], was giving us a lecture on racism in America and how black lives matter, and I thought, "What does this have to do with *Get Out*? They're trying to make me think that if I don't vote for this movie, I'm a racist." I was really offended. That sealed it for me.

(Feinberg)

For this viewer, they perceived *Get Out* as "an entertaining littler horror film" and nothing else. For reasons that will be laid out later in this analysis, this is clearly not the case. The film has everything to do with "racism in America and how black lives matter," yet this viewer completely rejected that notion despite the film's attempts to have viewers analyze its political relevance. Yet due to their motivated blindness, this viewer refused to see the dots that Jordan Peele connected for them. This viewer is clearly uncomfortable when made aware about the

reality of their privileged position within the racial hierarchy of the United States, which is captured by their frustration of receiving “a lecture on racism in America and how black lives matter” (Feinberg). This voter evidently prefers to remain in their state of motivated blindness and not challenge their positionality, which seems to be why the viewer refused to understand what race has “to do with *Get Out*” (Feinberg).

This viewer was definitely not the only person to misunderstand *Get Out* and its engagement with the issue of white liberalism in the United States. In 2017, *Get Out* was nominated for a Golden Globe in the comedy/musical category and the nomination caused uproar amongst the film’s fans. Many of the black fans of the film, including the film’s director, felt this nomination symbolized a much deeper misunderstanding of the film by the white audience (BET Staff). Many black viewers laughed at the film as a coping mechanism. These black viewers were able to recognize the scenarios that Chris faced in the film from their daily lives and laughed in order to extricate themselves from the pain those scenarios brought rise to (Ngangura). Many white audience members of the film, however, did not have this sort of tie to the scenarios displayed in the film. White people either laughed at the film as a way to avoid viewing themselves as perpetrators of the systems *Get Out* makes fun of or out of discomfort for *Get Out*’s interrogation of their own racial commitments. This is exemplified by a question Allison Williams, the actress who plays the film’s white girlfriend, gets asked frequently by white fans of the film. These white fans frequently ask for assurance that Rose, the film’s white girlfriend, was not complicit in the Armitage family’s slave trading scheme because she was actually hypnotized like the black characters (“Allison Williams”). The answer to this question is a resounding no, yet this question’s mere existence reveals more than its answer does. This question displays the need by white people for a good white character, though *Get Out* has none,

to help white people avoid feeling racist and support their own motivated blindness. This highlights a larger problem of the existence of white liberalism in today's society because, as per usual with white liberalism, white liberals are desperately looking for a way to prove that they are not racist as opposed to combatting racism and their complicit role in it. Since *Get Out* does not provide viewers with such an easy escape route to avoid confronting racism and partake in white flight or even the disconnecting storyline that *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a Watchman* offer, the white liberal is often pushed to confront their motivated blindness and analyze their own racist tendencies. It is then left to the viewer whether they utilize this opportunity to confront the problems of white liberalism or continue to depend on their motivated blindness.

This confrontation of white liberalism's problems does not occur immediately in the film, however, as white liberalism is merely displayed as it is found today in the film's first act. Though the film makes the audience uncomfortable with its use of white liberalism, viewers tend to see no problem with many things that are said, as was the case in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. One instance of this uncomfortable white liberalism is towards the beginning of the film when Chris and Rose first arrive to the Armitage household. Upon the couple's arrival to the house, Dean, Rose's father, insists on providing Chris with a tour of the house and the audience really gets to see the character's progressive side. During this tour, Dean, like Atticus, attempts to distance himself from racism by making it so abundantly clear that he is not racist. This includes saying things such as "I would have voted for Obama for a third time if I could" and "I get it, white family, black servants, it's a total cliché" in reference to the image of his household (Peele). With these statements, Dean is attempting to rid Chris of the idea that there is even a slight possibility that he is racist by showing how much he champions the cause of black equality.

Dean also shows, however, how little he is willing to do to support this cause due to his unwillingness to risk his own comfort within the racial hierarchy. One of the ways Dean tries to show his support during the house tour is by saying that he “would have voted for Obama a third time if [he] could” and, though this seems nice, even Dean acknowledges that this was not possible (Peele). This displays that Dean views this hypothetical action as being enough in terms of accomplishing racial reform, despite being a hypothetical action. Dean is someone who is voicing his support for a cause and views this word of support as enough to deserve a pat on the back. In addition, Dean claims that he recognizes that it does not look good that his family seems to hire exclusively black servants, implying that it brings back images of slavery. By acknowledging this, Dean is hoping that Chris will view him as someone who understands racism in this country. Though this stance seems progressive, by failing to mention any action he was taking to address this recognized issue, however, Dean displays just how weakly he supports this struggle towards equality.

As Atticus avoided the problem of racism in his conversation with Scout, *Get Out* has Chris’s white girlfriend, Rose, sidestep the existence of racism within the film’s first ten minutes. When discussing their planned visit to Rose’s family, Chris asks Rose whether her parents know if he is black to which she responds with “no, should they?” (Peele). This question is the contemporary form of what Atticus did to respond to Scout’s question about the meaning behind the term, “nigger-lover” (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 144). With the question, “should they?” Rose promotes the idea that racism is no longer an issue in this post-racial era because she implies that there would be no difference in her parents’ eyes whether Chris was black or white. With this, Rose is attempting to seem progressive by avoiding race as an issue and, instead, exhibits her motivated blindness by adopting the idea of racial color-blindness.

*Get Out* does a good job at displaying how white liberalism can infect people of color as an ideology. One of the best examples of this othering of the oppressed by the oppressed comes when Chris reveals to Georgina, the Armitage family's black servant, in confidence that he gets nervous, for understandable reasons, when there are too many white people around. Georgina responds to this statement with a condescending laugh followed by her stating that "that's not [her] experience...at all...[because] the Armitages are so good to [black people and] treat [them] like family" (Peele). With this reaction to Chris's emotional vulnerability, Georgina discredits Chris's experience as a black person and effectively distances herself from black people, like Chris, who are uncomfortable to some extent around white people. Though the Armitages do not even thank her when she serves them drinks, Georgina claims that the Armitage family treats her like their own. This claim suggests that this complacency may be due to an acceptance of the identity imposed on her by white people and an internalization of racial oppression as opposed to reality (Peele). Instead of acknowledging that she has accepted the interests of white people as her own and internalized racial oppression, Georgina paints herself as being morally superior to black people like Chris and others this class of black people below her who view white people in a negative light. Georgina's adoption of white liberalism hides her undermining of Chris's experience as a black individual in the United States by attempting to love everyone.

Both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the first act of *Get Out* put white liberalism on display to their audience. Without reading *Go Set a Watchman*, a continuation to the lives of the characters in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or watching the second act of *Get Out*, it is easy to ignore the problems with some of the liberal things that are said and consider the white characters as racially progressive people. This reading and viewing of these two works contradicts Martin Luther King Jr.'s assertion that the white liberal is "the Negro's great stumbling block" because it fails to

realize the problematic nature of white liberalism (King 73). By taking *Go Set a Watchman* and the second act of *Get Out* into consideration of one's view towards the white liberal, it becomes easier to see these underlying problems.

### **White Supremacy in *Get Out***

Quite like *Go Set a Watchman* reveals the perceived white liberal to be a white supremacist, the second act of *Get Out* pulls off this same trick by pointing out that the seemingly progressive Armitage family are not quite as liberal as they seem. The first true indication of the lack of conviction in their alleged liberal values is when Chris steps away from a party filled with white people who seem to be interested in him. As Chris moves away from the party, the hectic social environment polluted with white people is taken over by an almost bothered silence. With this drastic change in the energy of the room, Peele makes clear to the audience that these people, including the Armitage family, are putting on a façade with their perceived liberal rhetoric to trick Chris about something. We later learn that this white liberalism was just a way of hiding their white supremacy in plain sight.

Jordan Peele tries to put off revealing the Armitages' white supremacy leanings for as long as possible but, when he finally does, he does it through an analogy. As Chris is away having a heart-to-heart with Rose, the Armitage family hold a silent auction for their white friends with bids being placed on the acquisition of Chris (Peele). With this calm but crazy scene, Peele creates an analogy between the Armitages and slave traders as the family is orchestrating an auction for the purchase of a black man which is reminiscent of a slave auction. As the rest of the film unfolds, Peele continues to hammer down this connection between the Armitages and slave traders as it is revealed that the family has been kidnapping young black

people, hypnotizing them, and placing the consciousness of an aging white person in the body of a random kidnapped black person. As a result of this procedure, the black person loses autonomy of their own body and their body must work at the will of the white person who now owns their body. Sounds an awful lot like slavery. Merely to place a cherry on top of this slavery analogy he created, Peele has Chris free himself from the Armitages' bondage by picking cotton, like slaves picked cotton in their master's field, from the arm of a chair he is strapped into (Peele). Peele strictly picked these details to align an image of slave traders with the Armitage family. This image of the Armitage family as slave traders in the latter part of the film forces the audience to more critically analyze the progressive liberal family portrayed in the first act of the film.

### **Looking Under the White Liberal Hood in *To Kill a Mockingbird* & *Get Out***

As readers and viewers, the revelation of these characters' true colors forces earlier renditions of those types of characters to be considered under a different light. This remains true with both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the first act of *Get Out* as it is difficult to overlook the problems with the allegedly progressive things said and done by characters in these works after witnessing *Go Set a Watchman* and the second act of *Get Out*. For Atticus Finch, his defense of Tom Robinson in the midst of a racist southern town is often pointed to as a major reason for him being a liberal icon. Merely by taking on the case and not lynching Tom, Atticus was morally above the other inhabitants of Maycomb. While explaining his reasoning to Scout for taking on Tom's case in the face of resistance in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus claims that "if [he] didn't [he] couldn't hold up [his] head in town, [he] couldn't represent this country in the legislature, [he] couldn't even tell [Scout] or Jem not to do something again" (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 100). When reading this scene without the knowledge of Atticus's opinions in *Go*

*Set A Watchman*, this rationale makes the liberal hero seem racially progressive because he seems to imply that he cannot morally allow the black defendant to go through the trial without something reminiscent of a fair defense. This is what we assume Atticus is referring to when he says he “couldn’t hold up [his] head in town” if he did not take on Robinson’s case (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 100). In *Go Set a Watchman*, however, Atticus explicitly points out his motive for taking a different black defendant’s case was to prevent the case from ending up in the hands of an “NAACP-paid lawyer” that would actually try everything in their power to get the defendant acquitted (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 149). With this knowledge of Atticus’s motive for taking a black defendant’s case, there is no reason that readers should not at least suspect that Atticus was applying this same reasoning to Tom’s case. With this information in mind, it seems that Atticus did not mean that, if he did not take Tom’s case, he “couldn’t represent this country in the legislature” because he would have failed to hold up the ideals that the country was built on. Instead it seems he meant that he “couldn’t represent this country in the legislature” because he would have failed to protect the status quo of black inequality that existed in the country (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 100). The insight provided to the reader by meeting Atticus in *Go Set a Watchman* allows us to understand that Atticus’s intentions may not have been as pure as initially believed when first reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As opposed to being a progressive liberal figure, Atticus may have been trying to keep black people in their place the whole time as he was trying to do twenty years later in *Go Set a Watchman*.

As *To Kill a Mockingbird* provided a special insight into the troubles with Atticus’s liberal figure, the second act of *Get Out* illuminates events from the first act in a certain way that makes it difficult to ignore the problems and ulterior motives behind these seemingly liberal actions. This works for a scene when Rose and Chris encounter the police early in the film after

they fatally hit a deer while driving to the Armitage household. Once the police officer asks Chris for identification without any apparent reason, Rose adamantly confronts the officer and defends her boyfriend. This has a similar impact as Atticus defending Tom Robinson in that the audience perceives Rose as someone who will put herself on the line in order to fight against racial profiling and unequal treatment of black Americans (Peele). Peele makes Rose seem very progressive here. After viewing the second act of the film, however, it is revealed to the audience that Rose is just as racist as the rest of her family and is a key player in luring black people to the household to enslave them. With this knowledge of Rose's end goal throughout the film, it is impossible not to view her in a cynical light when watching her actions from earlier in the film. After watching the film's latter act, this defense of Chris against the police no longer seems like a stand against racial profiling, but an attempt by Rose to destroy any sort of paper trail that could lead the police to the Armitages' slave trading. With these two examples from *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Get Out*, white liberal characters have the authenticity of their perceived progressive actions tossed out the window as it becomes clear these progressive actions are façades for white supremacist ulterior motives.

A common reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* allows the reader to believe that Atticus's treatment of Calpurnia supports the view that Atticus is a liberal icon. After reading *Go Set a Watchman*, however, it is difficult to retain this view of Atticus's treatment of Calpurnia upon reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* once more. When Lee writes Atticus as a white supremacist in *Go Set a Watchman*, she has him refer to black people as a "population [that] is backward" and "still in their childhood as a people" (Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* 242, 246). With the knowledge that Atticus views black people in this inferior light only twenty years after the events of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, it is impossible to read the book and not consider that he probably viewed

Calpurnia in the same inferior light twenty years prior. Upon reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* once more, the reader cannot help but recognize the racial inferiority Atticus treats Calpurnia with. While Calpurnia only “request[s the] presence” of the white Finch children, Atticus “summon[s]” her into the house (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 32). By this distinct difference in word choice, Lee makes clear to her reader that Calpurnia treats her employer’s children with more respect than her employer does with her. On top of this distinction between the word choice of characters, it is tough to ignore the less than comfortable sleeping arrangements Atticus provides Calpurnia with when she stays over as well after seeing Atticus’s true feelings. Calpurnia must sleep “on a folding cot in the kitchen” when she stays in the Finch household for a night (Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* 156). A reader cannot ignore that Atticus does not actually treat Calpurnia in a progressive manner, contrary to what a reading of the book without the companionship of *Go Set a Watchman* would allow, after witnessing Atticus’s true feelings in *Go Set a Watchman*.

As the Finches have a black female servant they claim is a member of their family, the Armitages have a black female servant who is actually a part of the family. Quite like Atticus’s white supremacy leanings revealed in *Go Set a Watchman* forced readers to analyze his feelings towards Calpurnia, the second act of *Get Out* provides us with a different perspective of the relationship between the Armitage family and their female servant, Georgina. Upon an initial viewing of the film, the relationship between the Armitages and Georgina is uncomfortable, to say the least, as they fail to thank her for her services and do not let her eat with them. This is surprising treatment of a black servant for a family who often works hard not to appear racist, yet, this treatment is often disregarded as negligence and nothing more upon an initial viewing of the film. Towards the end of the film, it is revealed to the audience that Georgina is actually

Rose's white grandmother in the body of a black female (Peele). This revelation provides the viewer with more insight into Georgina's internalization of racism which comes to the surface during her undermining of Chris's experience as a black man. Georgina is able to so easily adopt the interests of white people as her own and distance herself from black people because she is literally a racist white woman on the inside. Georgina gaslit, "to induce in someone the sense that [their] reactions...are...utterly without grounds," Chris about his black experience in order to help her family sell his body (Abramson 2). More importantly, the audience understands that Peele was telling us more about the Armitages' underlying racism than initially realized by viewing the family's treatment of Georgina in the first act of the film with her familial ties in mind. By failing to allow someone who is literally a member of their family to eat at their dinner table with them, the Armitages display their inability to look past color as an inferior characteristic for anyone, including family.

The Armitages speak big game about not being racist early on but, in reality, they are consistently displaying their extreme racism and distracting everyone's view from it, including Chris, by spewing supposedly progressive statements. When watching *Get Out* again with this knowledge, it is difficult to ignore the white supremacist motives driving the Armitage family's white liberal actions. The same applies for Atticus's white liberal actions in *To Kill a Mockingbird* after learning about his white supremacist views in *Go Set a Watchman*. By having these white liberal characters turn out to be white supremacists, Peele and Lee display for their audience that there are few differences between white supremacists and white liberals. In forcing their audience to reconsider the perceived white liberal versions of these characters, both provide their audience with the opportunity to better pinpoint the underlying problems with white liberalism.

## Conclusion

By offering a political analysis of three depictions of white liberalism in American popular culture and the responses to these cultural artifacts, this research considered whether the white liberal is still “the Negro’s great stumbling block” and how it manifests in contemporary society (King 73). An analysis of three culturally significant American works, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Go Set a Watchman*, and Jordan Peele’s *Get Out*, allowed us to look at different fictional depictions of white liberalism and how readers responded to those depictions. From the nationally beloved twentieth century novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* to the highly acclaimed 2017 film *Get Out*, readers and white liberal characters responded in ways that were consistent with the components of the multifaceted ideology that is white liberalism.

Dr. King’s claim that “the Negro’s great stumbling block” is the white liberal is still true fifty-seven years later (King 73). As the Armitage family and Atticus Finch displayed, white liberalism allows people to focus so much on trying not to be perceived as racist that they avoid racism as an issue completely. This does the black community no favors as it merely ensures that white people will not address racism as an issue head-on. This, however, does not have to continue to be the case. As shown by audience reactions to *Go Set a Watchman*, readers did not want to confront the concept that a white supremacist could be hidden under the cover of a white liberal. *Get Out*, however, does not provide audiences with the comfort of being able to disconnect one from the other and does a better job at forcing audience members into this confrontation, though there were still limitations for *Get Out*’s reach as seen by the interview in *The Hollywood Reporter* (Feinberg). By doing this, *Get Out* ideally forces viewers to reconsider the motivations behind character actions that were initially perceived as progressive and liberal.

By reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* through the lens of *Get Out*, which forces viewers to confront the white supremacist motives of white liberalism, readers should be able to recognize the problematic nature behind Atticus's white liberal persona more easily. The hope would be that this recognition of white liberalism's problems in literature can translate to an ability to recognize white liberalism's problems in the real world and in oneself, but first motivated blindness must be overcome. Until this happens, white liberals will continue to undermine true racial justice reform and fail to see that black people "simply want them out of [their] way, and, more than that, out of [their] children's way (Baldwin 525).

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