

The Ethical Stance in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Abstract Harper Lee portrays racial conflicts in the southern United States through her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which is based on the “Scottsboro Boys” case and has been celebrated as the “moral Bible” of the United States. However, scrutinizing the novel from the perspective of the ethical literary criticism, we may discover that the work reflects an ethical stance which pins hope of resolving racial conflicts on the high morality of the upper-middle-class whites. This stance is apparent in Harper Lee’s rewriting strategies of vulgarizing the underclass whites, muting the collective voice of black individuals, and constructing a “moral myth” of the white mainstream. This ethical position not only reflects the widespread belief among the southern middle and upper classes that a few degenerate poor whites are responsible for racial conflicts, but also aligns with the public opinion in the South during the Civil Rights Movement and the political needs of the United States to resolve the crisis of “Americanness” during the Cold War.

Keywords Harper Lee; *To Kill a Mockingbird*; the “Scottsboro Boys” case; ethical stance; ethical literary criticism

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Introduction

Harper Lee (1926-2016), a contemporary American female writer, portrays racial conflicts in the southern United States in her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) based on the “Scottsboro Boys” case, which has been hailed as a “moral Bible” of

the United States. The novel not only won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1961 but also has been translated into 40 languages, and has become one of the must-read books for children worldwide.

Since the publication of the novel, critics have analyzed its different themes, including race, gender, and education, mostly focusing on its moral significance. They either discuss questions of “the origin and development of racial liberalism in the novel, as well as the relationship between race and gender identity” (Jay 2015), or pointing out that “the novel, by depicting the psychological and moral growth of adolescents within the context of social and familial morality, reflects the author’s sense of social responsibility” (Rui and Fan 2006), or emphasizing that moral education plays a crucial role in the growth of children (Jiao 2010); yet few critics have attached importance to Harper Lee’s ethical stance in rewriting the “Scottsboro Boys” case. Examining the novel from the perspective of ethical literary criticism can help uncover the author’s ethical stance and the racial attitude of the middle and upper classes in America.

Ethical Stance in Rewriting the “Scottsboro Boys” Case

The “Scottsboro Boys” case, a famous wrongful conviction in American history, serves as the creative blueprint for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The case took place in Scottsboro, a small town in Alabama, USA. On March 31, 1931, on an open freight train through rural Alabama, Ruby Bates and Victoria Price, two white girls who worked as prostitutes, falsely claimed to have been raped by nine black men on board. It was not until April 2013 that the “Scottsboro Boys” case, wrongfully convicted for more than 80 years, was completely vindicated. However, in the aftermath of the case, many whites in the Southern society regarded the black miscarriage of justice as a dire consequence of racial prejudice: Jonathan Daniels, an editor of the *Raleigh News & Observer*, called the sentence “shocking and outrageous,” and an editor of the *Richmond News Leader* said that a black man was sentenced to death “primarily” because he was “black” (Goodman 163). As a prominent lawyer in Monroeville, Harper Lee’s father, A.C. Lee, held the same righteous view. The “Scottsboro Boys” case and her father’s attitude towards it left such a deep impression on Harper Lee that it became the blueprint for her novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Harper Lee spoke candidly about her creation: “I’m more of a rewriter than a writer” (Boyle 11). Her rewriting of the “Scottsboro Boys” case reflects her ethical stance that pins hope of resolving racial conflicts on the high morality of the upper-middle-class whites. According to the theory of ethical literary criticism, “ethic”

refers to the abstract moral codes and norms formed in literary works based on moral behavior (Nie, *Introduction* 254), and the ethical stance of a literary work reflects the moral codes and norms to which the author subscribes. In the novel, Harper Lee's ethical stance is reflected through vulgarizing the lower-class whites, muting the collective voice of black individuals, and establishing a "moral myth" of the white mainstream.

The vulgarization of the underclass whites is the first major tactic of Harper Lee's rewriting. According to ethical literary criticism, the ethical choice consists of free choice and moral choice. Free choice refers to the external expression of instincts originating from one's animal factors (Nie, "Ethical Selection" 21). In the novel, the underclass whites always make free choices to obey their animal factor when faced with ethical choices, reflecting the ugliness and degradation of human nature. Mayella Ewell serves as a representative of the underclass whites. She succumbs to her animal instincts by violating ethical taboos to seduce a black man. While taboo is the basis of the ethical order of mankind in ancient times, it is also the guarantee of the ethical order. And the formation of taboos is the result of controlling the animal factor of the human body, to be more specific, the human instinct (Nie, *Introduction* 261).

The image of Mayella is a rewriting of Ruby Bates and Victoria Price, the white girls who were prostitutes in the "Scottsboro Boys" case. By portraying a poor white girl who was driven by animal instincts to seduce a black man, Lee ignored the plight of the poor underclass women in the context of the Great Depression. Bates and Price chose to be prostitutes not because of the depravity of human nature, but because they needed to survive. Prior to prostitution, they worked at Margaret Mill in Huntsville, north Alabama. In 1929, they were paid approximately \$2.40 per day; by 1931, their wages had shrunk to \$1.20 per day. To make matters worse, the mills had been running so slowly since "hard times" had come that they could work only two days a week or at the most three. And they were laid off every other week, which meant that they worked only five or six days a month (Goodman 20). "Poverty almost crushes the spirit of man, makes him see no hope, gives himself up, and leads him to degradation and crime" (Li 66). By highlighting the moral degeneration of a white lower-class woman while neglecting her extremely harsh living conditions, Harper Lee reveals the limitations of her class perspective.

The second tactic of Harper Lee's rewriting is muting the collective voice of black individuals. Foucault emphasizes the relationship between discourse and power. He points out that "discourse must be seen as a series of events, as political events through which it transports the regime and through which the regime in

turn controls the discourse itself” (Foucault 465). In other words, discourse is a form of power, and power must be achieved through discourse. In the novel, black characters do not consciously resist the white’s oppression, they were merely passive objects, being talked about and observed. When the underclass white wanted to lynch the black boy Tom Robinson, none of the black individuals dared to stand up to blame or stop the whites’ atrocities. On the day of the trial, the crowd outside the courtroom was buzzing, “It was a gala occasion[...]In a far corner of the square, the Negroes sat *quietly* in the sun...” (Lee 176). This quietness implies that blacks were unable to resist or save themselves, who could only silently endure the oppression of the white.

In fact, the black men in the “Scottsboro Boys” case were not silent throughout. Faced with the unfairness of the judicial process, the black boys’ appeals were crucial to the retrials of the case. Black farmers spoke out for the unjust sentence of the nine black boys: “They had gathered to air sharecropping grievances and draft a letter to the governor protesting the Scottsboro verdicts” (Goodman 70). Additionally, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Scottsboro Defense Committee were instrumental in bringing the case to light and helping the black boys regain their freedom. Yet in Harper Lee’s novel, black people were silent, and their suffering was reduced to evidence of the high morality of whites in mainstream society.

The third tactic of Harper Lee’s rewriting is to construct a “moral myth” of mainstream whites. Moral choice is an external expression of rationality, originating from the human factor (Nie, “Ethical Selection” 21). When faced with ethical choices, the mainstream whites always make moral choices based on the human factor, reflecting the goodness of human nature. Atticus Finch serves as a representative of the mainstream whites. To the residents of the town, “he’s civilized in his heart” (Lee 109). Faced with the racial conflicts, Finch set aside the violence and coercion of ethical customs with his rational will and made an ethical choice to help the black people, becoming a symbol of integrity in the complicated ethical environment of the South. His defense of Tom Robinson delayed a trial that would have otherwise ended in minutes by several hours, and was seen by the mainstream as a step forward in the treatment of racial equality in the South. Atticus Finch, as the spokesman of the white ideology of the upper-middle class in the American South, is created based on Harper Lee’s father, A.C. Lee, and Samuel Leibovitz, the lawyer who exposed the injustices in the “Scottsboro Boys” case. Lee combined and elevated two figures in her creation of Atticus Finch, portraying a perfect southern white Lawyer with romantic and idealized strokes. She depicted his qualities of

perseverance, courage, elegance, honor, dignity, and integrity, establishing a moral myth of the southern white people.

Harper Lee's rewriting of the "Scottsboro Boys" case is neither an accidental or isolated act of literature. The main purpose of her creation is to expose and criticize racial discrimination in the southern society. However, in the process of rewriting, she attributes the goodness of human nature such as honor, integrity and courage to the mainstream whites, and endows the degradation and ugliness of human nature to the underclass whites. The image of black people is portrayed as ignorant and powerless, as a tool to highlight the moral glory of the upper-middle whites. Lee's rewriting reveals clearly her ethical stance of pinning hopes and solutions on the high morality of the white middle and upper classes.

Ideological Connotations of the Ethical Stance

Harper Lee's ethical stance reflects the ideology of the upper-middle class in the United States, which, at the time, held that the upper class holds a high moral lustre. As we know, when Lu Xun debated with Liang Shiqiu about class nature and human nature, he pointed out that in class society there is neither humanity beyond class nor literature beyond class. He observed, "the poor will never be annoyed by the loss of capital in the exchange; how can the king of kerosene know the bitterness of the old woman who picks up coal slag in Beijing, and the victims of the famine area will probably not plant orchids" (Zhang 551-558). And Harry Crews argued that class structure of the Old South is so rigid that people of one particular class are unable to cross the barriers therein to understand the real lives of other classes (193). The ethical stance behind Harper Lee's rewriting reflects her upper-middle-class ethical identity and ideology. By vilifying the characters of lower-class whites and blacks, she constructs a moral myth of upper-middle-class whites.

Decent family background and well-fed life experiences shaped Harper Lee's class identity and ideology. Lee was born in 1926 in a small town in Monroeville, Alabama, USA. She was the fourth child of Frances Cunningham Finch and Amasa Coleman Lee. Her father, A.C. Lee, grew up on a farm in Florida, where her grandfather was a Confederate soldier; her mother, Frances, was part of the Finch family in Finchburg, Virginia. After their marriage and settlement in Monroeville, Alabama, A.C. Lee taught himself law and passed the state bar exam, and became a partner in the law firm of Barnett & Barger. Even during the Great Depression, the law firm prospered; in 1929, when most companies in America were on the verge of bankruptcy, A.C. Lee bought the local newspaper, *The Monroe Journal*, and won a seat in the Alabama House of Representatives (Cep 149). A.C. Lee, just like the

protagonist Atticus Finch in the novel, was a well-known and popular man in town. And several black maids were always employed by the Lee family, “instead of managing the household, Lee’s mother gave the job to her older two daughters and several black maids” (Cep 150). Family background shaped Lee’s ethical identity, as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines the concept of class “habitus” to be a subjective social structure of the individual after internalizing the objective structure of society(88), the influence of the family plays a crucial role in the construction of an individual’s subjective social structure, nurturing his or her ideology and mode of thinking about life, society, and the world. And Althusser also emphasizes that the family is the key institution through which the bourgeoisie promotes its ideology (282). By internalizing the external social norms and ideologies of the upper middle class, Lee developed an ethical stance that the high morality of the upper-middle-class whites is the best path to resolving racial conflicts.

Lee’s ethical stance aligns with the popular value held by the middle and upper classes of the American South, which claimed that a few degenerate poor whites are responsible for racial conflicts. In his critically acclaimed book, *Stories of Scottsboro Boys* (1994), Harvard historian James Goodman documented the attitudes of white southerners toward the case at the time:

Most white southerners agreed, but most white southerners were not *all* white southerners. A significant number of white southerners believed that the jury had made a tremendous mistake [...]. The white southerners who criticized the Decatur verdict, like the interracial leaders and antilynching activists who two years earlier had expressed doubts about the Scottsboro trials, were mostly middle-class and upper-middle-class men and women from cities and towns. Few of them were wealthy, but none of them were millworkers or miners, sharecroppers or tenant farmers, clerks or unskilled laborers, uneducated or poor. Their position in southern society was important to them and to their understanding of Scottsboro. What bothered them most about northern opinion and criticism was not that it came from northerners, which was what bothered most white southerners. It was that the critics, ignorant of the class structure of the South, did not distinguish among southerners, but assumed that southerners were monolithic in their attitudes and behavior toward blacks. (Goodman 163-164)

Most of the whites who held this attitude were descendants of the plantation owners of the Old South. Burdened by the generational guilt of enslaving black people,

their families were imbued with a sense of guilt and compassion toward the black community—a complex emotion that plantation-born southerners often described as a “mental heritage.” Over time, attitudes toward black people became a key marker of the southern white identity. “In fact, nothing more immediately establishes the outlook and background of a southern white man than his attitude toward the Negro” (Cason 84-85). In their opinion, it was the poor whites—the sharecroppers and mill workers, descendants of the independent farmers who had been driven to hills and poor lands by slavery—who mistreated black people (Goodman 164). Faced with the stigma brought to the southern society by the “Scottsboro Boys” case, the white middle and upper class attributed racial conflicts to the underclass whites whose lives were degraded by excessive poverty. By expressing sympathy for the black community, they sought to establish their “moral myth” and distance themselves from the responsibility for racial tensions. In political practice, a political entity often requires that its individuals maintain a high degree of consistency with its leading group, ensuring that its will and behavior remain highly unified. As a member of the upper-middle class in the southern society, Harper Lee’s rewriting of the “Scottsboro Boys” case was not merely an act of personal interpretation. It reflects the ideological framework of the upper-middle class, serving as a reinforcement of their moral narrative and an expression of their political and social cohesion.

To Kill a Mockingbird was published on July 11, 1960. Immediately after its publication, the novel received widespread acclaim. “It hit the best-seller list immediately, then kept moving up it, propelled by glowing review after glowing review. In December, it made all the end-of-the-year roundups and rankings” (Cep 191). Publishers in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Holland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Czech Republic bought foreign rights. The year following its publication, the novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and was adapted into a successful movie, and even became required reading book in many high schools. Lee believed that her novel represented a universal moral standard: “My book has a universal theme [...] a novel of a man’s conscience, universal in the sense that it could happen to anybody, anywhere people live together” (Allison 13C). The critical and commercial success of the novel appears to validate Lee’s aspirations, but an analysis of its ethical stance reveals a deeper layer of the class ideology masked by its high moral tone. Such ethical values, rooted in the vulgarization of the underclass whites and the silence of black people, are far from universal. Instead, it only reflects the ideological framework of the upper-middle class. This raises a critical question: why did *To Kill a Mockingbird* become an instant hit?

The Political Motivation behind the Ethical Stance

To Kill a Mockingbird was published in the 1960s. Its bestseller is inextricably linked to the political environment of the time in the United States. In the United States, the “1960s” remains a distinctive term to this day, which represents a specific era. During this period, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States was in full swing, and the deep-rooted racial conflicts made the South a target of public criticism; Concurrently, the Cold War extended these domestic conflicts into the international arena, tarnishing the United States’ global image and creating a crisis of “Americanness,” or American national identity. This dual pressure—domestic and international—necessitated narratives that could reconcile these tensions. The publication of *To Kill a Mockingbird* did not happen in a vacuum. Before its release, it took two years for editor Therese von Hohoff Torrey to convince Lee to make the necessary structural, political, and aesthetic changes (Cep 174). These changes were instrumental in aligning the novel with the sociopolitical expectations of the time. Within the context of the domestic Civil Rights Movement and the international Cold War, the novel constructed a “moral myth” of the whites. This myth not only satisfied the public opinion in the South but also catered to the broader political needs of the United States in addressing its crisis of “Americanness.”

Racial inequality has a deep-rooted history and complex cause-and-effect relationships in the South. Compared to the North, the traditional southern societies were less urbanized, less industrialized, and less educated. For ordinary people, achieving wealth through intelligence or hard work was exceedingly difficult. Instead, wealth was typically preserved through family assets and hierarchical exploitation, particularly of black people, who occupied the lowest position in the social hierarchy. As a result, racial inequality has become a major “historical legacy” of the southern society. With the Civil Rights Movement in full swing, the South became the epicenter of the storm. Faced with a series of social changes brought about by the Civil Rights Movement, white southerners reacted in two different ways: strong resistance from the southern hinterland states, and symbolic reforms by the moderates in the so-called “progressive states,” and moderates dominated local political life. Rather than resisting changes in race relations outright, they had adopted symbolic reforms and responded less violently to the local black community’s demands for equal rights. For them, desegregation was a long-term process of cultural change, and the alternation of generations would eventually eradicate racial prejudice, but it would take generations (Jackson 99).

At the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement, *To Kill a Mockingbird* addresses

the sensitive issue of race relations, and its ethical position must have been carefully considered to avoid sparking controversy. By rewriting the case of “Scottsboro Boys,” the theme of criticizing racial discrimination aligns with the demands of the era. Meanwhile, its ethical stance—placing hope on the moral choices of the mainstream whites and advocating a gradual resolution of racial tensions—catered to the reformist attitudes of southern moderates, “Atticus Finch won’t win, he can’t win, but he’s the only man in these parts who can keep a jury out so long in a case like that...we’re making a step—it’s just a baby-step, but it’s a step” (Lee 265). At the same time, through a successful portrayal of Atticus Finch as a moral model, Harper Lee established a heroic image of the southern whites, which conveyed the idea that “there are noble white men in the South and that good men could remain that way even in bad times” (Cep 197). Such a depiction resonates strongly with the public opinion of the white southerners in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Cold War brought racial conflicts into the international arena, exposing the inherent contradictions between “Americanness” and the United States’ racial policies. These conflicts not only jeopardized America’s global reputation but also became a pressing political issue that demanded resolution. In *Why We Can’t Wait* (1964), Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “It is indeed a bitter irony that the United States defends freedom abroad, but fails to secure freedom for its own 20 million Negroes” (Washington 523). Similarly, in July 1950, Walter White, the executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), testified before the Senate that “news of discrimination against Negroes in the United States is widely disseminated throughout the world[...] and serves as evidence that America is not what it seems. The result is that today our noblest principles are not only ignored but even ridiculed” (161). Such criticisms underscored how domestic racial injustices undermined the nation’s ideological battle with the Soviet Union, which frequently highlighted these inconsistencies as evidence of American hypocrisy. The U.S. government, recognizing the detrimental impact of racial conflicts on its international image, began to address these issues rhetorically. In 1960, during the presidential campaign John F. Kennedy stated, “The eyes of the world are upon us[...] We should reshape our image abroad by rebuilding our image at home” (Sorensen 183-185). This statement encapsulated the intertwining of domestic and international concerns, which indicates that addressing civil rights was not only a moral imperative but also a strategic necessity in the Cold War context.

The “moral myth” created by *To Kill a Mockingbird* alleviated, to some extent, the conflict between the unpleasant reality and the lofty international image

of the United States, catering to the urgent political needs of the government. Eagleton highlights the intricate relationship between literary works and ideology: “Literature was in several ways a suitable candidate for this ideological enterprise. As a liberal, ‘humanizing’ pursuit, it could provide a potent antidote to political bigotry and ideological extremism” (22). Through American cultural institutions and the mass cultural markets, the moral values of *To Kill a Mockingbird* have been effectively disseminated. In 1961, *To Kill a Mockingbird* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, which is based on the criterion of “excellent fiction by an American writer, preferably reflecting American life,” and closely related to “Americanism” as a symbol of national identity. As a cultural institution, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction plays an important role in the construction of “Americanness”; it acts as a vehicle for expanding the influence of American values through the resonant effect between literature and society (Shi 109-113). After receiving the Pulitzer Prize, the novel was made into a film in the same year. As an important medium of communication for popular culture, film has long been an effective tool for cultural expansion and the transmission of “Americanness.” “The expansion of American popular culture has, for the most part, been non-government and driven by large profits. In practice, however, it is supported by the government and has become inextricably linked to U.S. diplomacy, especially in terms of foreign propaganda” (Wang 226). The adaptation of the novel into a film reinforced its implicit ethical appeal, emotional orientation, and value judgments, embedding ideological messages within a compelling narrative. Henceforth, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a moral myth of the United States, has been disseminated worldwide, contributing to the political objectives of resolving the crisis of Americanness during the Cold War.

Conclusion

Racial inequality is a fundamental issue that touches on the social, political, economic, cultural, and moral fabric of the South (Xiao 80). Harper Lee’s critical attitude toward racial problem is undoubtedly progressive, yet her approach to resolving it remains conservative, for her ethical stance merely reflects the dominant discourse of the upper-middle whites. The seemingly uplifting resolution and moral sublimation of the novel largely obscure the underlying ethical discourse and the racial conflicts. On the one hand, Harper Lee opposes racial discrimination and advocates racial equality; on the other hand, her rewriting reinforces inequality concealed within a façade of moral principles. By rewriting the “Scottsboro Boys” case, Harper Lee turns the real *history* into a *story* that foregrounds class ideology. She attributes the virtues of human goodness to the mainstream white characters,

casting them as “saviors” in resolving racial conflicts, which ultimately reveals the limitations of her class perspective. Moreover, her ethical stance aligned closely with the political climate of the United States during the 1960s, contributing to the novel's canonization. Literary criticism often celebrates the meaning of the moral teachings of novels, yet this affirmation frequently obscures the biases inherent in the author's ethical stance. Under the guise of a “moral Bible,” *To Kill a Mockingbird* has become a tool for American cultural expansion and ideological dissemination abroad.

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