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The Romantic Regionalism of Harper Lee

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When Mark Twain stranded the steamboat Walter Scott on a rocky point in Chapter 13 of Huckleberry Finn, he rounded out an attack on Southern romanticism begun in Life on the Mississippi. There, as every reader knows, he asserted that Sir Walter Scott's novels of knighthood and chivalry had done "measureless harm" by infecting the American South with "the jejune romanticism of an absurd past that is dead." This premise does not stop with Twain. W. J. Cash, writing almost sixty years later, continues the assertion, observing that the South, already nostalgic in the early nineteenth century, "found perhaps the most perfect expression for this part of its spirit in the cardboard medievalism of the Scottish novels." As recently as 1961, W. R. Taylor, in Cavalier and Yankee, several times alludes to Scott as he traces the development of the myth of the planter aristocracy.1

For these three men, and for many like them, Southern romanticism has been a pernicious, backward-looking belief. It has, they imply, mired the South in a stagnant morass of outdated ideas, from which there is little chance of escape. A more hopeful view, however, appears in Harper Lee's novel of Alabama life, To Kill a Mockingbird (1960). Miss Lee is well aware of traditional Southern romanticism and, indeed, agrees that it was and is a pervasive influence in the South; one of the subtlest allusions in the entire novel comes in Chapter 11, as the Finch children read Ivanhoe to the dying but indomitable Southern lady, Mrs. Henry Lafayette Dubose. At the same time, she sees in the New South—the South of 1930–1935—the dawning of a newer and more vital form of romanticism. She does not see this newer romanticism as widespread, nor does she venture any sweeping predictions as to its future. Nevertheless, in To Kill a Mockingbird, Miss Lee presents an Emersonian view of Southern romanticism, suggesting that the South can move from the archaic, imported romanticism of its past toward the more reasonable, pragmatic, and native romanticism of a Ralph Waldo Emerson. If the movement can come to maturity, she implies, the South will have made a major step toward becoming truly regional in its vision.

As Miss Lee unfolds her account of three years in the lives of Atticus, Jem, and Scout Finch, and in the history of Maycomb, Alabama, she makes clear the persistence of the old beliefs. Maycomb, she says, is "an old town,... a tired old town," even "an ancient town." A part of southern Alabama from the time of the first settlements, and isolated and largely untouched by the Civil War, it was, like the South, turned inward upon itself by Reconstruction. Indeed, its history parallels that of the South in so many ways that it emerges as a microcosm of the South. This quality is graphically suggested by the Maycomb County courthouse, which dominates the town square:

The Maycomb County courthouse was faintly reminiscent of Arlington in one respect: the concrete pillars supporting its south roof were too heavy for their light burden. The pillars were all that remained standing when the original courthouse burned in 1856. Another courthouse was built around them. It is better to say, built in spite

of them. But for the south porch, the Maycomb County courthouse was early Victorian, presenting an unoffensive vista when seen from the north. From the other side, however, Greek revival columns clashed with a big nineteenth-century clock tower housing a rusty unreliable instrument, a view indicating a people determined to preserve every physical scrap of the past.¹

Miss Lee's courthouse, inoffensive from the north but architecturally appalling from the south, neatly summarizes Maycomb's reluctance to shed the past. It is, like the South, still largely subject to the traditions of the past.

The microcosmic quality of Maycomb suggested by its courthouse appears in other ways, as well. The town's social structure, for example, is characteristically Southern. Beneath its deceptively placid exterior, Maycomb has a taut, well-developed caste system designed to separate whites from blacks. If Maycomb's caste system is not so openly oppressive as that of John Dollard's "Southern-town" (where "caste has replaced slavery as a means of maintaining the essence of the old status order in the South"²), it still serves the same end—to keep the blacks in their place. The operations of this system are obvious. First Purchase African M. E. Church, for example, "the only church in Maycomb with a steeple and bell," is subjected to minor but consistent desecration: "Negroes worshiped in it on Sundays and white men gambled in it on weekdays" (p. 128). The whites, moreover, clearly expect deferential behavior of the blacks. One of the good ladies of the Methodist missionary circle interrupts her paenans to Christian fellowship to remark, "There's nothing more distracting than a sulky darky... Just ruins your day to have one of 'em in the kitchen" (p. 245). The Finch children, attending church with Calpurnia, their black housekeeper, are confronted with doffed hats and "weekday gestures of respectful attention" (p. 128). And, in the most telling commentary of all upon the pervasive pressures of the caste system, when Calpurnia accompanies Atticus Finch to convey the news of Tom Robinson's death, she must ride in the back seat of the automobile (p. 252).

Even more indicative of Maycomb's characteristically Southern caste system is the power of the sexual taboo, which has been called "the strongest taboo of the system."³ This is dramatized by the maneuverings during Tom Robinson's trial of allegedly raping Mayella Ewell, a central episode in the novel. Although Tom's infraction of the black man-white woman code is demonstrated to have been false, he is nonetheless condemned. The caste taboo outweighs empirical evidence. As Atticus says later of the jury, "Those are twelve reasonable men in everyday life, Tom's jury, but you saw something come between them and reason... There's something in our world that makes men lose their heads—they couldn't be fair if they tried" (p. 233). Despite the presence of a more than reasonable doubt as to his guilt, despite the discrediting of the Ewells, the chief witnesses for the prosecution, Tom Robinson is condemned. As Atticus points out, the entire prosecution is based upon "the assumption—the evil assumption—that all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, that all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women" (p. 217). Tom's conviction is mute testimony to the strength of that caste-oriented assumption.

Another illustration of Maycomb's archetypal Southernness that is as typical as its caste system is the ubiquitous

¹Harper Lee, To Kill a Mockingbird (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1960), 11, 140-141, 173. Further references to this work will be given in the text.


system of class distinctions among the whites. Miss Lee's characters fall readily into four classes, ranging from the "old aristocracy" represented by Atticus Finch's class-conscious sister, Alexandra, to the poor white trash represented by Bob Ewell and his brood, who have been "the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations" (p. 37). In presenting the interaction of these classes, she gives a textbook demonstration of the traditional social stratification of the American South.6

The upper-class-consciousness so manifest in Aunt Alexandra appears most strongly in her regard for "family", a concern that permeates Part II of To Kill a Mockingbird. Like the small-town aristocrats described in Allison Davis's Deep South, she has a keen appreciation of the "laterally extended kin group."6 Although the complex interrelationships of Maycomb society are generally known to the Finch children, it is Aunt Alexandra who drives home their social significance. After a series of social gaffes by Scout, Aunt Alexandra prevails upon Atticus to lecture the children concerning their status. This he does, in his most inflectionless manner:

'Your aunt has asked me to try and impress upon you and Jean Louise that you are not from run-of-the-mill people, that you are the product of several generations' gentle breeding... and that you should try to live up to your name... She asked me to tell you you must try to behave like the little lady and gentleman that you are. She wants to talk to you about the family and what it's meant to Maycomb County through the years, so you'll have some idea of who you are, so you might be moved to behave accordingly' (pp. 143-44).

In her insistence that family status be preserved, Aunt Alexandra typifies the family-oriented aristocrat of the Old South.

No less well developed is Miss Lee's emphasis upon the subtleties of class distinction. In this, too, she defines Maycomb as a characteristically Southern community.7 It has its upper class, in Aunt Alexandra, in the members of the Missionary Society, and in the town's professional men—Atticus, Dr. Reynolds, Judge Taylor, and so on. It has its middle class, in the numerous faceless and often nameless individuals who flesh out Miss Lee's story—Braxton Underwood, the owner-editor of The Maycomb Tribune, or Mr. Sam Levy, who shamed the Ku Klux Klan in 1920 by proclaiming that "he'd sold 'em the very sheets on their backs" (p. 157). It has its lower class, generically condemned by Aunt Alexandra as "trash," but sympathetically presented in characters like Walter Cunningham, one of the Cunninghams of Old Sarum, a breed of men who "hadn't taken anything from or off of anybody since they migrated to the New World" (p. 235). Finally, it has its dregs, the Ewells, who, though more slovenly than the supposedly slovenliest of the blacks, still possess the redeeming grace of a white skin. These distinctions Aunt Alexandra reveres and protects, as when she remarks, "You can scrub Walter Cunningham till he shines, you can put him in shoes and a new suit, but he'll never be like Jem... Because—he—is—trash" (p. 237). For Aunt Alexandra, the class gap between the Finches and the Cunninghams is one that can never be bridged.

The existence of a caste system separating black from white, or of a well-developed regard for kin-group relations, or of a system of class stratification is, of course, not unique. But, from the simultaneous existence of these three systems, and from the way in which they dominate Maycomb attitudes, emerges the significance of Maycomb's antiquity. It is a representation of the Old South, still cling-

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7Davis, et al, 60ff.
ing, as in its courthouse, to every scrap of the past. Left alone, it would remain static, moldering away as surely as John Brown's body. So too, Miss Lee suggests, may the South. This decay, however, can be prevented. In her picture of the New South and the New Southerner, Miss Lee suggests how a decadently romantic tradition can be transformed into a functional romanticism, and how, from this change, can come a revivifying of the South.

The "New South" that Harper Lee advocates is new only by courtesy. In one respect—the degree to which it draws upon the romantic idealism of an Emerson—it is almost as old as the Scottish novels so lacerated by Mark Twain; in another, it is even older, as it at times harks back to the Puritan ideals of the seventeenth century. By the standards of the American South of the first third of the twentieth century, however, it is new, for it flies in the face of much that traditionally characterizes the South. With Emerson, it spurns the past, looking instead to the reality of the present. With him, it places principled action above self-interest, willingly accepting the difficult consequences of a right decision. It recognizes, like both Emerson and the Puritans, the diversity of mankind, yet recognizes also that this diversity is unified by a set of "higher laws" that cannot be ignored. In short, in the several Maycomb townspeople who see through the fog of the past, and who act not from tradition but from principle, Miss Lee presents the possible salvation of the South.

Foremost among these people is Atticus Finch, attorney, the central character of Miss Lee's novel. Though himself a native of Maycomb, a member of one of the oldest families in the area, and "related by blood or marriage to nearly every family in the town," Atticus is not the archetypal Southerner that his sister has become (pp. 9–11). Instead, he is presented as a Southern version of Emersonian man, the individual who vibrates to his own iron string, the one man in the town that the community trusts "to do right," even as they deplore his peculiarities (p. 249). Through him, and through Jem and Scout, the children he is rearing according to his lights, Miss Lee presents her view of the New South.

That Atticus Finch is meant to be an atypical Southerner is plain; Miss Lee establishes this from the beginning, as she reports that Atticus and his brother are the first Finch to leave the family lands and study elsewhere. This atypical quality, however, is developed even further. Like Emerson, Atticus recognizes that his culture is retrospective, groping "among the dry bones of the past . . . [and putting] the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe." He had no hostility toward his past; he is not one of the alienated souls so beloved of Southern Gothicists. He does, though, approach his past and its traditions with a tolerant skepticism. His attitude toward "old family" and "gentle breeding" has already been suggested. A similar skepticism is implied by his repeated observation that "you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (p. 36). He understands the difficulties of Tom Robinson, although Tom Robinson is black; he understands the difficulties of a Walter Cunningham, though Cunningham is—to Aunt Alexandra—"trash"; he understands the pressures being brought to bear upon his children because of his own considered actions. In each instance he acts according to his estimate of the merits of the situation, striving to see that each receives justice. He is, in short, as Edwin Bruell has suggested, "no heroic type but any graceful, restrained, simple

person like one from Attica." Unfettered by the corpse of the past, he is free to live and work as an individual.

This freedom to act he does not gain easily. Indeed, he, like Emerson's nonconformist, frequently finds himself whipped by the world's displeasure. And yet, like Emerson's ideal man, when faced by this harassment and displeasure, he has "the habit of magnanimity and religion to treat it godlike as a trifle of no concernment." In the development of this habit he is aided by a strong regard for personal principle, even as he recognizes the difficulty that it brings to his life and the lives of his children. This is established early in the novel, with the introduction of the Tom Robinson trial. When the case is brought up by Scout, following a fight at school, Atticus responds, "If I didn't [defend Tom Robinson] I couldn't hold up my head in town, I couldn't represent this county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again.... Scout, simply by the nature of the work, every lawyer gets at least one case in his lifetime that affects him personally. This one's mine, I guess" (p. 83). He returns to this theme later, observing that "This case is something that goes to the essence of a man's conscience—Scout, I couldn't go to church and worship God if I didn't try to help that man." Scout points out that opinion among the townpeople runs counter to this, whereupon Atticus replies, "They're certainly entitled to think that, and they're entitled to full respect for their opinions... but before I can live with other folks I've got to live with myself. The one thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience" (pp. 113–14). No careful ear is needed to hear the echoes of Emerson's "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles." In his heeding both principle and conscience, whatever the cost to himself, Atticus is singularly Emersonian.

The Emersonian quality of Atticus's individualism is emphasized in two additional ways—through his awareness of the clarity of the child's vision (suggesting Emerson's remark that "the sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he... who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood."), and through his belief in the higher laws of life. The first of these appears at least three times throughout the novel. Early in the Tom Robinson sequence, an attempted lynching is thwarted by the sudden appearance of the Finch children, leading Atticus to observe, "So it took an eight-year-old child to bring 'em to their senses, didn't it?... Hmp, maybe we need a police force of children... you children last night made Walter Cunningham stand in my shoes for a minute. That was enough" (p. 168). The view is reinforced by the comments of Dolphus Raymond, the town drunk, who sees in the children's reaction to the trial the unsullied operations of instinct (p. 213). And, thus suggested, it is made explicit by Atticus himself, as, following Tom Robinson's conviction, he tells Jem: "If you had been on that jury, son, and eleven other boys like you, Tom would be a free man.... So far nothing in your life has interfered with your reasoning process." (p. 233). The point could not be more obvious; in the unsophisticated vision of the child is a perception of truth that most older, tradition-bound people have lost. Atticus, like Emerson's lover of nature, has retained it, and can

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9Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Writings, 151.


For truth’s and harmony’s behoof;
The state may follow how it can.\footnote{Emerson, “Ode Inscrbed to W. H. Channing,” in \textit{Writings}, 771.}
Atticus will, indeed, serve law for man, leaving the state—his contemporaries—to follow how it can. He, at least, has absolved him to himself.

Throughout \textit{To Kill a Mockingbird}, Harper Lee presents a dual view of the American South. On the one hand, she sees the South as still in the grip of the traditions and habits so amply documented by Davis, Dollard, and others—caste division along strictly color lines, hierarchical class stratification within castes, and exaggerated regard for kin-group relations within particular classes, especially the upper and middle classes of the white caste. On the other hand, she argues that the South has within itself the potential for progressive change, stimulated by the incorporation of the New England romanticism of an Emerson, and characterized by the pragmatism, principles, and wisdom of Atticus Finch. If, as she suggests, the South can exchange its old romanticism for the new, it can modify its life to bring justice and humanity to all of its inhabitants, black and white alike.

In suggesting the possibility of a shift from the old romanticism to the new, however, Miss Lee goes even further. If her argument is carried to its logical extension, it becomes apparent that she is suggesting that the South, by assimilating native (though extra-regional) ideals, can transcend the confining sectionalism that has dominated it in the past, and develop the breadth of vision characteristic of the truly regional outlook. This outlook, which Lewis Mumford calls a “soundly bottomed regionalism,” is one that “can achieve cosmopolitan breadth without fear of losing its integrity or virtue: it is only a sick and pulling

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regionalism that must continually gaze with enamored eyes upon its own face, praising its warts and pimplles as beauty marks. For a genuine regional tradition lives by two principles. One is, cultivate whatever you have, no matter how poor it is; it is at least your own. The other is, seek elsewhere for what you do not possess; absorb whatever is good wherever you may find it; make it your own.”  

If the South can relinquish its narcissistic regard for the warts and pimplles of its past, it can take its place among the regions of the nation and the world.

Miss Lee sees such a development as a distinct possibility. Maycomb, in the past isolated and insulated, untouched by even the Civil War, is no longer detached from the outside world. It is, as Miss Lee suggests through the Finch brothers’ going elsewhere to study, beginning to seek for what it does not possess. (This quest, however, is no panacea, as Miss Less implies with the character of the pathetically inept Miss Caroline Fisher, the first-grade teacher from North Alabama, who introduces the “Dewey Decimal System” to revolutionize the Maycomb County School System (pp. 22–25).) Moreover, Maycomb is being forced to respond to events touching the nation and the world. The Depression is a real thing, affecting the lives of white and black alike; the merchants of Maycomb are touched by the fall of the National Recovery Act; and Hitler’s rise to power and his persecution of the Jews make the power of Nazism apparent even to the comfortable Christians of the town (pp. 11–12, 27, 257–64). Maycomb, in short, like the South it represents, is becoming at last a part of the United States; what affects the nation affects it, and the influence of external events can no longer be ignored.

The organic links of Maycomb with the world at large extend even further, as Miss Lee goes on to point out the relationship between what happens in Maycomb and the entirety of human experience. The novel opens and closes on a significant note—that life in Maycomb, despite its Southern particularity, is an integral part of human history. This broadly regional vision appears in the first paragraphs of the novel, as the narrator, the mature Scout, reflects upon the events leading up to the death of Bob Ewell:

I maintain that the Ewells started it all, but Jem, who was four years my senior, said it started long before that. He said it began the summer Dill came to us, when Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out.

I said if he wanted to take a broad view of the thing, it really began with Andrew Jackson. If General Jackson hadn’t run the Creeks up the creek, Simon Finch would never have paddled up the Alabama, and where would we be if he hadn’t? We were far too old to settle an argument with a fist-fight, so we consulted Atticus. Our father said we were both right. (p. 9)

The theme of this passage—that events of long ago and far away can have consequences in the present—is echoed at the novel’s end. Tom Robinson is dead, Bob Ewell is dead, Boo Radley has emerged and submerged, and Scout, aged nine, is returning home. The view from the Radley porch evokes a flood of memories, which, for the first time, fall into a coherent pattern for her: the complex interaction of three years of children’s play and adult tragedy is revealed in a single, spontaneous moment of intuitive perception. “Just standing on the Radley porch was enough,” she says. “As I made my way home, I felt very old... As I made my way home, I thought what a thing to tell Jem tomorrow... As I made my way home, I thought Jem and I would get grown but there wasn’t much else left for us to learn, except possibly algebra” (p. 294). She has learned, with Emerson, that “to the young

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mind every thing is individual. . . . By and by, it finds how to join two things and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand; and so, tyrannized over by its own unifying instinct, it goes on tying things together . . . [discovering] that these objects are not chaotic, and are not foreign, but have a law which is also a law of the human mind.”

When the oneness of the world dawns upon a person, truly all that remains is algebra.

Miss Lee’s convictions could not be more explicit. The South, embodied here in Maycomb and its residents, can no longer stand alone and apart. It must recognize and accept its place in national and international life, and it must accept the consequences for doing so. It must recognize and accept that adjustments must come, that other ways of looking at things are perhaps better than the traditional ones. Like Emerson’s individual, it must be no longer hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. If, to a perceptive and thoughtful observer, the old ways have lost their value, new ones must be found to supplant them; if, on the other hand, the old ways stand up to the skeptical eye, they should by all means be preserved. This Atticus Finch has done, and this he is teaching his children to do. By extension, the South must do the same, cultivating the good that it possesses, but looking elsewhere for the good that it lacks. Only in this way can it escape the stifling provincialism that has characterized its past, and take its place as a functioning region among human regions. If the South can learn this fundamental lesson, seeking its unique place in relation to human experience, national experience, and world experience, all that will remain for it, too, will be algebra.

15Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in Writings, 47.