*The Compliance of the Oppressed*

**For many years, literary moguls have antagonized society's discriminatory ideals in their publications.** *To Kill A Mockingbird,* written by Harper Lee, along with *The Help*, written by Kathryn Stockett and directed by Tate Taylor, illustrate these racist beliefs perfectly in their works. They answer the question: **how does racism affect a culture?** In the 1930's to 50's (the time range in which these stories are based) it was a widely accepted norm to consider black people the inferior race.

**In *Mockingbird* and *The Help,* both cultures bear witness to and are victims of racism against African American's in a variety of forms: legal unfairness, fear of repercussions, and social obedience. The fictional town of Maycomb (where *Mockingbird* is based) is adamant to disobey and question their age-old discriminatory customs. However, in The Help, the majority of the town is afraid of the social backlash that could come with sympathizing with a person of color. Overall, both works showcase that society is built upon the compliance of the oppressed. one**

**Historically, legal unfairness has been prevalent in cases where people of color are involved.** In an ideal justice system, a jury would be free of sympathy or prejudice for any party involved in a case. It was unjust then, and still is now, to treat racial identity as a valid piece of evidence in an investigation. The American Constitution states that every man is equal under the law, though such a thing is not true. People are/were often prejudiced against during a trial. Look at the Scottsboro Trials[[1]](#footnote-1) as an example, or the death of Emmett[[2]](#footnote-2) Till. Such situations are similar to the climax of Lee's Mockingbird*,* which tells the story of a young Caucasian girl by the name of Jean Finch growing up in the 1930's; when racial hatred is at an all-time high. The girl's father, Atticus Finch is summoned to defend a black man, named Tom Robinson. Tom allegedly sexually assaulted a young Caucasian female, named Mayella Ewell. The Ewell's are poor family with nothing to lose, not even dignity. Mayella's father pinned the assault on Tom so that he could appear the 'hero,' and reclaim the social status he once lost. Atticus accepts the role, causing a rift in the community: "The only thing we've got is a Black man's word against the Ewell's" (Lee, 117). Atticus tried his absolute best, though the defendant was convicted and sent to prison because of racial bias in the jury, which was all white and male. The jury members were in a bit of trouble; the evidence made it obvious that the defendant was innocent of his allegations. If they chose to convict him, they would have it on their consciences that they sent an innocent man to the gallows for the rest of their lives. However, if they chose to find him not guilty, they would immediately be ostracized from the town for breaking a valued custom: "The only thing that doesn't abide by majority rule is a person's conscience" (Lee, 140). The defendant should not have been convicted because there were untrustworthy witnesses and the evidence presented ruled in his hinderance. Such intricacies of the justice system are not as prevalent in *The Help,* though they do exist. Stockett tells a tale of a young Caucasian female writer by the name of Eugenia living in the South during the 1950's; the end of the Jim Crow era[[3]](#footnote-3) and the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. She decides to publish an anonymous book of stories from 'the help,' a position typical for a Black woman at the time. The book itself causes an outrage and spreads gossip among the town's inhabitants. People quickly turn on one another, while others rapidly try and figure out which testimonial is tied to which maid. The act of these stories being released and widely read opens a raw wound in the town, exposing the reality of working class African- American women's lives. It's a realization that many are not ready to come to terms with: "Maybe I can't send you to jail for what you wrote, but I can send you for being a thief" (Taylor, *The Help*). Hilly Holbrook is the definition of white privilege. Her, along with others in the town, rule over everyone else with an iron fist. Legally, they have the power to sway investigations in entirely different directions. They exercise this in many situations. One would be having a maid arrested on suspicion of stealing, with no evidence supporting the allegation: "Don't fight it, Yule Mae. Don't fight it!" (Taylor, *The Help*). This shows that many black people in the town have accepted their place in society. These two sources show that the American legal system was and still is stacked against minorities.

**The fear of negative repercussions from defying norms is consistent, yet different in both *Mockingbird* and *The Help.*** In *Mockingbird,* the town is unaware of social change. Fear is an important force in the novel because it is the cause of most people's action. The main theme in the book is a result of fear such as the Tom Robinson case. Ignorance breeds fear, which in turn breeds prejudice. Fear is infectious, and each member of the town is affected by it. Hence, the people in Southern town are sometimes afraid. Afraid of change, ignorance, violence, differences; they are afraid of anything they don't understand. Lee is able to explore fear of negative repercussions in the novel most effectively by seeing how individual characters are affected by it. In particular, Mayella Ewell is influenced and manipulated a lot which is shown by the fact she accuses Tom. She has reason to be afraid, as Atticus implies she was "savagely beaten" by her father. Therefore, not only does she fear being driven out of society but also fears physical or sexual abuse. Atticus is an example of the danger one could be in for having "uncommon" values. He is in danger of being lynched and threatened by Bob Ewell, and his children are attacked because he stands up for what he believes in. Lee is able to show that even in a place where all men should be treated equally, it is people's fears that cloud their judgement. Tom is also feared because they don't understand him. However, when the jury discover that he did things out of the kindness of his own heart and he is a genuinely good person, they become confused. This goes against everything that the town stands for. Similarly, Dolphus Raymond is feared because of ignorance. He even has to pretend to be an alcoholic to diverge the attention of the people of Maycomb, thus protecting his family from racial discrimination. Lee demonstrates through Tom and other characters how fear can cause impulsive actions. Overall, the white citizens of Maycomb are reluctant to question why such racist traditions exist. In *The Help,* the town is aware of change slowly occurring in society, though it is reluctant to accept, conform, or adapt to its existence. It looks at how a white community actively creates and uses abusive methods against its minority citizens: an attempt to stop social change from occurring. The whites have realized that their legacy was coming to an end. *The Help* explores the fear of repercussions upheld by African Americans through workplace violence and domestic abuse. When Yule Mae was arrested based off of suspicion of stealing, the audience can begin to understand how racial bias in the legal and penal systems can be used to inflict pain on minorities, as demonstrated by Hilly Holbrook. The book of testimonials being published is an attempt to stop the fear of violence held by Black citizens by exposing the way they truly feel. Although fear of repercussions is always present in the film, one of its focuses is on the acts of love and kindness that contradict it. These sources differ in how the "superior" culture works to continually supress the "inferior" culture.

**After facing a lifetime of abuse, the audience can begin to understand how suppression, persecution, and isolation from society can reduce a culture to a shell of what it once was.** This is a perfect example of the battles that occur between the white and Black communities in both sources. In *Mockingbird,* the Black citizens of Maycomb have obediently accepted their social standing without complaint. They are systematically reduced to a subservient role: being forced to live near a landfill, having limited opportunities, and having a severe disadvantage in the legal system: "You, Miss Scout Finch, are of the common folk. You must obey the law.' He said that the Ewells were members of an exclusive society made up of Ewells" (Lee, Ch. 3). Even within white communities, there are stark contrasts in how residents obey norms. Or, as demonstrated by the Ewells: they create their own. People are afraid of the unknown. This is what prevents both the white and Black communities from moving forward, socially. For the Black community in *Mockingbird,* all they have known is the subordinate role assigned to them. They are simply trying their best to survive in a culture that wants the opposite. None of the communities ever question or attempt to change the norms for themselves or others. In *Mockingbird,* the reader is able to see how racism can affect a culture through stand-alone situations. What is different in *The Help* is the realization that slowly comes to the minds of the black community: that they are worth more than their town tries to make them believe. While there are no grand acts of rebellion committed, the act of their stories being published sets the maids on a path to self-love and moral growth: "Treelore always said we was gonna have a writer in the family one day. I guess it's gonna be me" (Taylor, *The Help*). With the aid of political activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and Medgar Edwards, those of African American ancestry living in a predominately white community start to internally strip themselves of the subservient role assigned to them. These two sources differ in how events lead to social growth in their towns.

**Society may have been built on the compliance of the oppressed, though it is up to future generations to dismantle these beliefs.** Communities like those in *Mockingbird* and *The Help* encourage minorities to resist oppression. They both express the same views, opinions, values, and morals; though in different ways. Both sources explore a town that experiences change in how Black people are viewed. The African American communities could have thrived, though they were never given such an opportunity.

[[4]](#endnote-1)

1. In 1931, nine Black men were tried and convicted of sexually assaulting two white women on a train. Their ages ranged from 13 to 20 years old. The cases included a lynch mob before the suspects had been indicted, all-white juries, and rushed trials. It is commonly cited as an example of a misuse of justice in the United States legal system. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Till was a 14-year-old boy who was severely beaten and lynched after a white woman alleged that he flirted with her. 10 years ago, she admitted that she lied. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Laws in place to enforce the segregation of black people and white people. They were in effect from 1877 to the 1950's, the beginning of the civil rights movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Harper Lee, To Kill A Mockingbird, 1960, Warner Books Inc.

   Kathryn Stockett, Tate Taylor, The Help, 2011, DreamWorks Studios [↑](#endnote-ref-1)