The Figure of the Black Criminal in American Literature: A Critical Analysis of Class and Race in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust*

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It is a scenario which has been repeated many times before: an unarmed seventeen-year-old African American boy is gunned down in his own neighborhood while walking home one evening. The apparent motive for the teenager’s murder was that he “looked suspicious.” When confronted by his attacker and in the act of defending himself, he was fatally shot. The tragic nature of this event is that it could realistically be situated at a variety of points in the timeline of American history. The even more tragic element is that this did not occur in the era of Jim Crow laws or during the years of enforced slavery; this event took place in February 2012 in Sanford, Florida, when Trayvon Martin was followed home by Neighborhood Watch enthusiast George Zimmerman, who was subsequently acquitted of Martin’s murder and released without charge.1

When Barack Obama was elected the forty-fourth President of the United States, it was indeed an historic moment, a seemingly fairy-tale ending to centuries of black oppression and institutional racism. But it is obvious that America is not yet able to close this book and look forward to a happy ending where racial equality has been successfully achieved nearly 150 years after emancipation. Trayvon Martin’s murder is a stark

reminder of the undercurrent of racist stereotyping which is still very much alive in the “land of the free.”

It would seem that many critics are divided into two main areas of theoretical approach when it comes to arguing the origins and the contributing factors which have in the past and continue today to fuel racism in modern America. Some argue that it is external influences, such as the failings of government policy, as well as the judicial and education systems, which have made social mobility for the black community much more challenging than for their white counterparts. For others, it is internal factors such as black nihilism, a psychological legacy of slavery and systematic discrimination which perpetuate feelings of alienation from a predominantly white hierarchical social order. Du Bois maintained that this double consciousness of attempting to integrate black identity with a sense of nationalism, could serve as a blessing as well as a curse.\(^2\) But some separatists, like Roy Brooks, would argue that integration is a compromise which is tolerated only if it serves the interests of the white elite:

African American attitudes about skin tone and hairstyles demonstrate the extent to which African Americans associate positive qualities with ‘whiteness’ and negative qualities with ‘blackness.’ In short, limited separatists maintain that black nihilism is a psychological state that results in part from the manner in which blacks are treated in integrated institutions.\(^3\)

**EFFECTS OF THE DEPRESSION YEARS**

The decadent decade of the 1920s turned businessmen into Gods and the privileged white middle classes into individualistic capitalists. Never before had it been so easy to make money on the stock market, obtain credit for white goods and motor cars,


and have disposable income to enjoy leisure pursuits in the electric buzz of the dance halls and the glamour of the movie theatres. These effects were more prominent in urban areas, although farmers, too, were being encouraged to buy large areas of land and new farming equipment as the economy boomed. For the black proletariat, however, very little had changed. Higher paid jobs were reserved for whites and many in the black community lived in fear of violence towards themselves and their families if they complained about their place in society.

As the economy began to slow towards the end of the 1920s and following the stock market crash of 1929, which accelerated a financial crisis that hit rural areas more severely, racial tensions increased as white communities began to fully experience the economic hardships long since endured by their black neighbors. The hierarchical social structure was shifting as sharecroppers fell victim to plummeting prices for farm produce, foreclosures on their farms, and, without government assistance, the very real threat of starvation. Communities had no choice but to band together in the hope that by helping each other, they could survive the harsh conditions. But at a time when people feared the loss of their homes and starvation, resentment and a need for someone to blame was a sinister side effect. For those banding together, outsiders became even more of a threat, outsiders who didn’t deserve a share of what was on offer.

Probably the most disturbing and horrific consequence of racism in the U.S. in this period was the sadistic brutality of lynching. In Lee’s and Faulkner’s novels, mob mentality soon leads to the threat of lynching both Tom and Lucas from their jail cells. This small town vigilante violence was rarely punished, and in many cases, the mobs included prominent, high ranking members of the community. Ossie Davies recalls how
We always knew that the sheriff and his cohorts and some of the police were also members of the Ku Klux Klan. It was open intimidation, part of the political process and there were few people in the white community who raised any objections to it.4

The hanging and sometimes public burning of black men, women and children is portrayed in photographs of the time as some sort of gothic social event, as entertaining as a town picnic, chillingly with young white children openly exposed to this form of punishment and viewing it as apparently totally acceptable. What better way to justify lynching than to create a myth of a black beast that preys on the innocent and must be defeated in order to maintain social control. Foucault’s study of Bentham’s panopticon is a perfect example of the psychological prison. Although legally free, black Americans were living in fear, under constant supervision from the white members of the community, oppressed as much by open demonstrations of violence as by the constant threat of violence. Essentially, segregated communities were prisons without walls.

The black criminal stereotype which had been created was that of a prolific rapist of white women, a thief, and a murderer. From the days of slavery there existed the belief that blacks were a sub-human, beast-like species, biologically and intellectually inferior to the white race. With such an ingrained, generational ethos, public lynchings were seen, particularly by southern communities, as a form of unofficially sanctioned justice and a warning to other Afro-Americans who may have been under the impression that they were entitled to equal rights. Rose sees a direct link between poverty and this type of violence:

Poverty and economic fear have been stressed as background factors. It is generally held that the rise of lynchings during and immediately after the


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First World War had much to do with the increased mobility of and competition from Negroes during this period. There is substantial correlation from year to year between low cotton prices and a high number of lynchings. Economic fear is mixed with social fear: a feeling that the Negro is ‘getting out of his place’ and that the white man’s social status is being threatened and is in need of defense.\(^5\)

The construction of the black criminal as a racial stereotype by the dominant white classes legitimised segregation and the enforcement of Jim Crow laws during the Depression era. As Gloster points out

Faulkner illustrates again and again that Beauchamp’s real crime is not the shooting of Vinson Gowrie but his stubborn refusal to be a kowtowing Uncle Tom. It is seriously doubtful, however, that people who bitterly resent manly conduct by a Negro can be safely entrusted with the destiny of the racial group to which he belongs.\(^6\)

In Faulkner’s novels, Lucas’ criminality is a complex mix of prejudices, with the bi-racial element a constant physical reminder to the community of his problematic social positioning. His stubborn refusal of subservience creates a tension which culminates in the townsfolks’ steadfast belief in his guilt when Vinson Gowrie is shot. Chick understands why the town is so resentful, as Lucas’ behavior makes them think: “We got to make him a nigger first. He’s got to admit he’s a nigger. Then maybe we will accept him as he seems to intend to be accepted.”\(^7\) In their minds, as much as he tries to suppress his passionate black blood, the savage racial traits have inevitably come to the surface, and the act of murder conveniently places him back in his rightful position in the racial hierarchy. This is the Foucauldian power structure that makes the white community feel safe and secure; it is more in keeping with their ingrained historical bigotries towards


their black neighbors. Even Lucas’ lawyer shows no sign of impartiality when he advises Lucas to plead guilty at his trial and accept a prison sentence, without even listening to his version of events. Lam explains why the biracial is viewed as such a threat:

The attitudes of both society and individuals towards the multiracial intersect in their treatment of each other. Society feels threatened by the multi-racial’s inherent explosion of its racial order and x/not-x binaries, an explosion which implicitly endangers the entire structure of society and could lead to its destruction if not addressed.8

Chick has been raised in the South and has inherited the racist attitudes of his family. This is evident when he sees nothing wrong in offering payment to Lucas for his hospitality, rather than accepting it as a human gesture of kindness. He is embarrassed and angry that he feels indebted to a person he perceives as inferior. This goes against everything he has been taught, and he is blinded by his indoctrinated prejudices. His intention, therefore, to prove Lucas’ innocence by exhuming Vinson’s body is not initially to expose the injustice of his imprisonment, but is to repay a debt he feels is owed and to reverse the shift in power back in his favor: “So is this what that plate of meat and greens is going to cost me.”9 It is only as the novel progresses that his motives gradually begin to change.

We see in Faulkner’s novel the stark contrast between the treatment of white and black lower-class criminality. The Gowries are renowned for their feral behavior on the outskirts of town, but are effectively left alone by the police authorities to continue their illegal practices undisturbed. It would appear that the fight for black civil rights was seen as a much greater threat to the status quo than the violent behavior of the “white trash.”

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9 Faulkner, Intruder in the dust, 67.
communities. Demands for equality were a higher priority menace that needed to be suppressed and contained by the law. The Gowries, who have been ostracized by the townsfolk, are still perceived as social superiors to Lucas, who has apparently led an honest life, paid his bills, and worked hard to provide for his family. This is a similar theme in Lee's novel. Here we see the Ewells portrayed as dirty, foul-mouthed, uneducated brutes, living next to a rubbish dump. The head of the family has never worked and continues to cash his government assistance checks, which he spends on alcohol. His frequent drunken outbursts result in the habitual sexual and physical abuse of his daughter.

Tom Robinson, even though disabled by a work injury, is described as a good man, hardworking and trusted by his employer. Lee makes it clear that the alleged rape of Mayella by Tom, despite the strong evidence in his favor and the physical impossibility of the attack due to his deformed arm, was more damning in the eyes of the all-white jury, than the inference of incest and beatings inflicted by her father. Tom had been marked as a criminal purely because of his skin color. When he gave evidence and admitted he had felt sorry for Mayella and this was the reason he entered her house, he exposed himself unwittingly to further condemnation from the jury. As a black man, the jury saw his behavior not as a demonstration of charity, but as a blatant disregard for his social positioning. He knew he was in an impossible position and panicked when Ewell came home. He ran because he knew lynching was the probable conclusion. Wells-Barnett explains how this system of punishment was justified by the vigilante executioners:

…the question must be asked, what the white man means when he charges the black man with rape. Does he mean the crime which statutes of the states describe as such? Not by any means. With the Southern white man, any misalliance existing between a white woman and a colored man is a
sufficient foundation for the charge of rape. The Southern white man says that it is impossible for a voluntary alliance to exist between a white woman and a colored man, and therefore, the fact of an alliance is a proof of force.10

For both Lucas and Tom, the lynch mob gathers to exercise its own form of justice, ignorant of the fact that both men could possibly be innocent. They have become victims of transference. The South’s repressed fears and anxieties are displaced onto a figure of hate. Anxieties about the failed economy, the abolition of slavery, and in Ewell’s case, his guilt for the treatment of his daughter, are all directed at the stereotypical construct of the black criminal. It is easier to destroy this effigy and give legitimacy to the ideology of segregation and unjustified violence than it is to confront the horrors of the past, the historic mistreatment of slaves, and the racist’s reluctance to grant citizenship rights for all. One could also argue that Lee uses sexual symbolism in an attempt to destabilise the myth of the black rapist. It could be claimed that Tom’s withered arm is a phallic allusion to impotency, with Lee purposely portraying Tom as the emasculated, non-threatening character, incapable of sexual assault. Instead she suggests that rape is not simply a racial crime and intimates that it is in fact Ewell who is the sexual predator in this instance.

A PRISON WITHOUT WALLS

Foucault’s theory of panopticism is a key theme in both novels. For Foucault, power and control are maintained not just through the confinement of prisoners, but through other subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) forms in modern society. Clearly it was evident in the 1930s that the emancipation of slaves at the end of the Civil War had not resulted in total freedom and citizenship rights for all. Although no longer enslaved by landowners, power and oppression were exercised and managed through social

categorization, and in these two novels this was based on class and race. Black Americans were victims of panopticism, effectively a self-imposed prison with no physical walls, but which was able to suppress black communities by creating a sense of constant observation and monitoring. White townsfolk in the Southern states at this time were unofficial police marshals and could apprehend any black citizen they considered to be in breach of the Jim Crow laws. Discipline could also be maintained by restricting the educational and economic development of black Americans and perpetuating the scientific myth of racial inferiority. Foucault argues that
disciplines use procedures of partitioning and verticality; that they introduce, between the different elements at the same level, as solid separations as possible...to this correspond anonymous instruments of power, coextensive with the multiplicity that they regiment, such as hierarchical surveillance, continuous registration, perpetual assessment and classification.¹¹

The dominant class is able to contain and control the black members of society not just through prosecution, punishment and confinement, but though a whole stream of disciplines which legitimize racial inequality. Modernity has led to the creation of rational categories, but these categories benefit only the male, Christian, white classes.

The white characters in these novels are victims of panopticism also, but to a much lesser extent. For example, Mayella is trapped in the family home by a lack of education, poverty, and the powerful presence of her father; Mrs. Dubose is imprisoned by nostalgia for the past and her addiction to morphine, and Boo is subject to the power relation of parent and child. However, Mayella and Mrs Dubose are both eventually able to escape their oppressors and Boo was able to leave the confines of his house and escape.

prosecution for Ewells’ murder. Tom and Lucas are not so fortunate. They are forever
trapped by the color of their skin. Tom dies an innocent man and Lucas, although not
convicted of Vinson’s murder, will never be fully accepted by the townsfolk because of
his refusal to conform.

What makes this time period particularly volatile with regard to race conflicts is
the economic crisis of the Depression and the gradual shifts in class structure. The
arguments as to the cause of the economic collapse were either criticism of the dangers of
capitalism and excess, or it was seen as a result of emancipation, with landowners no
longer able to reap the benefits of cheap labor and dominate the rural market. In the
Southern states, this resentment was further exaggerated as white Americans saw the
economic gap between themselves and their black neighbors begin to shrink. Lucas is the
son of a white landowner and his slaves and inherits his land from his father. Lucas is,
then, on par, economically at least, with many people in the town. He further aggravates
the situation by always appearing in public with a gold toothpick in his mouth, a
prominent status symbol not befitting his race. Here we see the bi-racial clash as he rejects
his black heritage, defiantly integrating himself and rejecting the black stereotype.

Chick’s family is middle class, and money is the key to the opening chapter and
sets up the relationship between him and Lucas. They begin a juvenile game of
transference of monetary power. Their relationship is based on debt and accountability.
The novel ends as it begins, with an exchange of cash when Lucas insists on paying his
lawyer for his services: “Name your expenses at anything within reason and let’s get this
thing settled.”\(^\text{12}\) Vinson’s murder is a result of greed, demonstrating how poverty and

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 236.
desperation inevitably lead to crime and suspicion and how the flames of racism are fanned by extreme hardships.

**POWER AND CLASS**

For Lee, the town of Maycomb is a microcosm of society, displaying various social classes in one small area. Mrs Dubose is an upper class, profoundly racist, historic relic and Miss Maudie and Atticus are middle class. Ironically Atticus’ family wealth is a result of slavery, with his ancestor exchanging religious persecution for capitalism. Lee explains early on in the narrative, however, how Atticus chose to reject his inheritance and move to Maycomb to practice law. His sister looks down on his life choices and views Calpurnia as hired help, rather than as an accepted member of the family. Calpurnia has been like a mother to Scout and Jem, but due to her social status, Aunt Alexandra cannot envisage her as more than an employee.

In this novel, the “white trash” element is the Ewells. They are portrayed as malingerers and bullies. The children rarely attend school and when they do, they are infested with lice and in shabby dirty clothes. Their home is quite literally a rubbish dump and they are blatant racists, although their venom is directed to most people within the community. Atticus describes how “the Ewells had been the disgrace of Maycomb for three generations. None of them had done an honest day’s work in his recollection…They were people, but they lived liked animals.”

The dynamics of society have changed in this period. Class is no longer based on financial merits but is now focused on racial superiority. Bob Ewell, although a tyrant, still sees himself as a class above Tom Robinson. Lee highlights the perception that in order for a white and black relationship to

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exist and be accepted, the white person has to be discredited in some way. Mr Raymond, for example, has to pretend to be alcoholic for the town to be able to accept that he lives with a black woman and has fathered children with her:

I try to give ‘em a reason, you see. It helps folks if they can latch on to a reason...folks can say Dolphus Raymond’s in the clutches of whiskey – that’s why he won’t change his ways. He can’t help himself, that’s why he lives the way he does.\(^{14}\)

In a supposedly modern, rational and moralistic society, power is in the hands of the white middle classes which Foucault would argue permeates every element of culture through a series of fluid, web-like threads.

Foucault’s theory of hierarchical power is further demonstrated by religious discourse and the legitimacy religion has utilized to justify enforced slavery, white supremacy, and racist ideologies. Religion perpetuates racism and preached segregation long before laws were introduced in 1876. Van Deburg argues that in the earliest version of the Bible, the devil, who was the enemy of God, was in fact relatively ambiguous in color. It wasn’t until the end of the sixth century that more detailed descriptions were being added by Christians to the biblical text:

...they described a devil-like being: ‘Black, sharp-faced, with long beard, hair to the feet, fiery eyes, breathing flame, spiky wings like a hedgehog, bound with fiery chains.’ Already it seems, the die was cast. Estranged from goodness and light, the Evil One most often has been presented to us as having black skin or wearing dark-coloured clothing.\(^{15}\)

It was necessary to construct blacks as sub-human, unworthy of equal citizenship and basically incarnations of the devil, in order to rationalize colonization. This also

\(^{14}\) Ibid, 204-205  
offered an explanation for the contradiction of white Christians dutifully attending
church every Sunday but treating their black neighbors like animals and showing no
remorse for their unprovoked, violent behaviour against them. Christians used the bible
to completely vindicate themselves of sin by interpreting the story of the curse of Ham as
a clear sign that God himself condoned human bondage, as maintained by Goldenberg:

Black and slave were inextricably joined in the Christian mind. Over and
over again, one finds Black enslavement justified with the reference to the
biblical story of the curse of eternal servitude pronounced against Ham,
considered to be the father of Black Africa.16

Van Deburg supports this contention. He explains how:

...long before the average European had an opportunity even to see an
African, this informal ecumenical alliance of racial theorists had pieced
together an odd but compelling portrait of a morally corrupt, sexually
deviant, and divinely accursed Hamitic race.17

White Christian moral obligation therefore became a mission to civilize and
dominate blacks because it was God’s will. Even after emancipation, these mythical
character traits had already become accepted as fact.

Both novels are full of contradictions between good and evil. The Gowries, who
flout the law and behave like animals, were also described as a family “who love
brawling and fear God and believe in Hell.”18 They do not respect humanity but have a
warped sense of religious tradition and respect for the dead, which is demonstrated in the
graveyard scene. Although the family does not lead a virtuous life, Vinson is still buried
in the grounds of the church, demonstrating its enduring power over even the lawless

16 David M Goldenberg, The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
(Jews, Christians and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World. (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press,
17 Van Deburg, Hoodlums: Black Villains and Social Bandits in American Life, 15.
18 Faulkner, Intruder in the dust, 144
outsiders of the community. The Gowrie-led mob even delays its lynching of Lucas because “…it would be Sunday in three hours now and they didn’t want to have to hurry, bolt through the business in order to finish it by midnight and not violate the Sabbath.”19 Vinson is, in fact, buried and exhumed twice, which could be symbolic of how evil deeds cannot remain buried and forgotten. Inevitably they will rise to the surface and haunt the present. Savoy suggests that “the gothic tendency in American culture is organized around the imperative to repetition, the return of what is unsuccessfully repressed.”20 Fowler argues that Faulkner’s use of burial and disinterment are symbolic of racial binaries created in the struggle for power.21 Therefore, I would suggest that the theme of burial and exhumation could be applied to a variety of binaries in the text, notably justice/injustice, white/black, truth/myth and freedom/oppression.

The church is still an important part of the community, and the building itself is described by Faulkner as being in a good state of repair even in impoverished times. The two enduring institutions in both novels are the church and the town prison. The prison is the accepted place for sinners and criminals and the church for the spiritually pure and law-abiding townsfolk. This concept is inverted, however, by racism. Innocent men in both novels are locked up in the county jail and the guilty sinners attending church, or in Vinson’s case, buried on sacred ground. For Foucault these institutions are further examples of social forms of control. In his studies of discipline, punishment, and madness, he argues that those who do not fit the accepted social mold and refuse to conform to the hierarchies of power are deemed criminal and/or insane. Prison presents

19 Ibid, 34.
itself as a place whose aim is to rehabilitate, but it could be argued the actual purpose is simply to assimilate prisoners to behave in a way that is agreeable to those in power. Citizens who refuse to conform are categorized as deviants and locked away where they are no longer a threat. Religious discourse works in a similar way. It maintains its control through fear - fear of god’s wrath and of the eternal torture of hell for those who do not obey its doctrines.

The children’s visit to Calpurnia’s church is a key moment when readers are introduced to the practices of a black church, possibly for the first time. This scene humanizes the black community and shows the generous spirit and close-knit sentiment of the parishioners. The reader discovers the harsh realities of the effect Tom’s incarceration is having on his wife and children and how his community helps to raise money to support her when employers refuse to hire her. This is a demonstration of a more genuine Christian spirit. Religion in the black church appears to have a different focus from white Christianity. It seems to provide comfort because it promises a better world in the afterlife where everyone is truly equal in god’s eyes. Death and heaven are an escape from a punitive existence on earth. However, the bible has also been used to justify oppression, interpreted and revised throughout history by the church hierarchy to promote whites as spiritually superior and blacks as their subordinates. By following the word of God, black Christians are encouraged not to question their social positioning on earth as this would be blasphemy. They accept passively the idea that their suffering is God’s will and they will receive their reward in heaven. The religious ideology promoted in the black church is no different from that taught in the white church. As Scout remarks of Reverend Sykes:
His sermon was a forthright denunciation of sin, an austere declaration of the motto on the wall behind him...Jem and I had heard the same sermon Sunday after Sunday, with only one exception. Reverend Sykes used his pulpit more freely to express his views on individual lapses from grace.\textsuperscript{22}

**HOPE FOR THE FUTURE**

Faulkner’s and Lee’s narratives are *bildungsroman*, showing the difficult transition from child to adolescent and how the cost of this transformation is the loss of innocence. The children achieve autonomy as they are exposed to the ruthless human cost of segregation. The authors make it clear that white Southerners have a debt to pay and need to accept accountability for their actions, both on a social and economic level. In such tough times, the whole community should be working together as they are suffering the same economic hardships. Lee describes the extreme poverty of many of the children in Scout’s class, some without shoes, some unable to afford to bring a lunch to school, but there are glimmers of compassion among the townspeople. They express gratitude and appreciation in gestures rather than monetary terms. The Cunninghams pay Atticus for his legal services with produce from their farm, and Atticus is genuinely touched by the gifts left on his porch by the friends and family of Tom Robinson at the end of the trial: “Atticus’s eyes filled with tears. He did not speak for a moment. ‘Tell them I’m very grateful,’ he said. ‘Tell them – tell them they must never do this again. Times are too hard…’”\textsuperscript{23} But hope for the future is really in the hands of the children. Scout’s father and Chick’s uncle accept that change is necessary but do not believe it is something that will happen in their lifetime. It is the children who question the motives of mob mentality. They do not understand the gruesome nature of this form of justice. Unlike the

\textsuperscript{22} Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 125-126.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 217.
generations before them, nostalgia and the significance and pride of family lineage are not relevant in the modern world. Faulkner was a gradualist and firmly believed racism was a Southern problem which could only be resolved if the North stopped interfering. The older generation is too brainwashed by a racist past to be trusted to instigate change. It is up to the younger generation to acknowledge the mistakes of the past and try to change things. Chick’s uncle remarks: “…we must do it, we alone without help or interference or even (thank you) advice since only we can if Lucas’ equality is to be anything more than its own prisoner inside an impregnable barricade of the direct heirs of the victory of 1861-5.”

The influence of parents and family is crucial to the process of achieving social change. Lee is perhaps suggesting that parents should be educating their children to be respectful and tolerant, just like Atticus. She demonstrates how religion and the education system were severely flawed. In Foucauldian terms, these institutions are simply tools used to categorize and separate the population to effectively maintain control. Ironically Scout’s teacher was appalled by events in Germany with the persecution of the Jews and yet was blind to what was happening in her own country.

Another key scene is when Scout innocently manages to defuse the lynch mob outside the jailhouse. She has more of an impact on the mob than Atticus and the sheriff:

“‘So it took an eight year old child to bring ‘em to their senses didn’t it?’ said Atticus. ‘That proves something – that a gang of wild animals can be stopped, simply because they’re still human. Hmp, maybe we need a police force of children….’”

Atticus tries to instil in his children the ability to empathize with other people and imagine what it would be like to walk in their shoes. He recognizes the challenges ahead for black Americans in their fight for civil rights. Although he fights for Tom in court, he knows he is not going to win and that the law is flawed. But, he believes that every individual has a responsibility to stand up for what they believe in in a non-violent way to try and achieve change. He would appear to also be a gradualist, very much echoing the sentiments and ideals of Martin Luther King in his rejection of violence and faith in the judiciary.

Southern American history and the gothic are perfect partners. The symbolic exhumation of the repressed past is a constant thread which runs through both novels. The Radley house serves as the haunted mansion, with the white spectral “Boo” wandering the corridors and only supposedly appearing at night to spy on his neighbors. Boo represents the damaging effects of trying to hide from problems and ignore the breakdown in social morality. When Boo leaves the confines of his “prison,” he makes a difference to the lives of others. Faulkner and Lee suggest that everyone, black or white, has a responsibility to society and one another. Fear of the unknown is the biggest obstacle to overcome. Hogle argues that American Gothic is

where the past constantly inhabits the present, where progress generates an almost unbearable anxiety about its costs, and where an insatiable appetite for spectacles of grotesque violence is part of the texture of everyday reality.26

Mrs. Dubose and the Radley home are ghouls from the past and have no place in modern America. They are subtly ridiculed by Lee in the childish games of Scout, Jem,
and Dill and the fantastic gothic legends they re-tell each other. The town have encouraged the creation of supernatural mythology surrounding the black community. In this way, they compound the stereotype of the black heathen, ungodly and devil-like and thereby add legitimacy to the Jim Crow laws. Black men especially become phantoms and boogeymen who inhabit the night:

‘Haven’t you ever walked along a lonesome road at night and passed by a hot place?’ Jem asked Dill. ‘A Hot Steam’s somebody who can’t get to heaven, just wallows around on lonesome roads an’ if you walk through him, when you die you’ll be one too, an’ you’ll go around at night suckin’ people’s breath.’

However, as the children mature, they become more rational and realise the truth behind the stories. Reality is far more terrifying.

It seems incredible that in modern society, with its boasts of progressivism and tolerance, that racist ideology still exists so long after slavery was abolished and with a black president in place as the most powerful political leader in the world. The murder of Trayvon Martin is a perfect example of how black criminality has been warped beyond recognition as a label for those living in poverty with a lack of educational opportunities and with no tangible hopes for the future.

Foucault’s theories of the link between knowledge and power would suggest that equality and freedom are pure fantasy. He argues that the bourgeoisie simply maintains hierarchical control through social, racial, and economic categorization in a panoptic prison. Brooks agrees with this theory as he views black oppression as the catalyst for criminality because of a lack of opportunities in white society. The basis for this oppressive regime, Deburg suggests, dates back many centuries, and the myth of black
inferiority is kept alive by religious discourse. I would argue that there is a direct link between capitalism and racism, and as Rose explained, economic factors had an effect on the frequency of lynching in the southern states in the early part of the twentieth century. I would suggest that it is anxiety and repressed fear that have created the gothic monster of racism. It is a common trend that when people are fearful of the future, they turn to nostalgic romanticism and develop strong feelings of nationalism to cope with these emotions. Hitler’s success was based on the same model. Repressed fear is transferred onto a figure of hate, and in 1930s America, this figure was the black criminal. Racial superiority takes precedence over morality and in Faulkner’s and Lee’s novels it is also placed above social class.

Lee and Faulkner both appeared to accept that the fight for equality would be a lengthy process, one that could be handled by the South without external interference. Indeed, has it not been proven that the trepidation of the white nationalists of the 1930s, who viewed integration as a threat to the accepted social order, was completely unfounded when we consider the advances in civil rights in the present day? For Faulkner, in order to move forward, it is necessary for Americans to accept the mistakes of the past and attempt to redress those mistakes through social reform. Both novelists view the younger generation as the key to change. Generational prejudices can be eradicated if parents and schools teach their children tolerance and respect. Lee maintains that humanity still exists, even in some small form, in the most aggressive of bigots. This may seem a rather simplistic solution, however. Certainly government legislation and educational institutions, as well as familial influences, all play their part in improving conditions for black Americans. But, as suggested by Foucault, is it not true that total equality is a myth? Whether we are black or white, wealthy or poor, we are still ruled
predominantly by the bourgeois white elite and the binary of superior/inferior seems an impossible chain to break. Therefore, I would suggest that racial tolerance should start from the bottom of the hierarchical order. We have a responsibility as a member of a civilized society to demand and enact change. Power does not have to be exclusive to those at the top.