



## On Mockingbirds and Finches: Charles Darwin, Eugenics, and the Title of Harper Lee's Most Famous Novel

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"[E]ugenic ideology," observed Rachel Walman, "is ... written all over the pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird*" (Walman). Puzzlingly, however, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to this aspect of the text. With the exception of Walman's short but insightful piece, critics who have discussed eugenics in the novel have done so only in passing.<sup>1</sup> This essay identifies the persistence of the text's eugenic themes, a persistence which, it suggests, points to a hitherto unsuspected possible source for the novel's title and central metaphor: the work of Harper Lee's distant cousin Charles Darwin ([famouskin.com](http://famouskin.com)).

Deriving from the Greek for "well born," eugenics "describes the movement to improve human hereditary by the social control of human breeding" (Thomas 109). The clarity of this definition nevertheless belies the range of positions, practices, and understandings encompassed by the term. During its heyday in the first third of the twentieth century, eugenics took many forms. For some, it was positive in approach, focused upon ensuring that the best bred with the best, while, for others, it was entirely negative, aiming – under the license granted by the Supreme Court's 1927 *Buck v. Bell* decision – to stop the reproduction of those considered to be socially, mentally, and physically inferior. As a pseudo-science, eugenics was confused, contradictory, and infinitely malleable. Scientific, political, and cultural policies predicated upon eugenic theories were supported by progressives and conservatives alike, often for very different reasons (Cohen 321; Thomas 166–167). Organized religion, too, often proved evangelical in its approach to eugenics. A doctrine recreating the Puritan division between the saved and the damned in the form of social policy found particular support from Methodism – the denomination of the Finch family in *To Kill a Mockingbird* – with ministers arguing that selective sterilization offered the only way to avoid the sins of the fathers being visited on their sons (Bruinius 44). Given its cultural ubiquity, it is no surprise that eugenical themes found their way into Harper Lee's fictional recreation of the 1930s Alabama of her childhood. For, not only had Alabama been one of the first southern states to introduce a eugenic sterilization law in 1919, but, in 1935, the year in which the trial in the novel is set, the Alabama State Legislature passed a eugenics bill so egregious that Governor Bibb Graves – a Klan member with eugenic sympathies – sought an advisory opinion from the Alabama Supreme Court concerning its constitutionality (Dorr 33). Among the bill's supporters was Amassa Lee, Harper Lee's father and the ostensible model for Atticus Finch (Stow "Why can't the Finch family" 348).

Although the Atticus Finch of Lee's first-written but later-published novel *Go Set a Watchman* is more explicit in his eugenic commitments than his counterpart in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Monroe; Wamsley), there is some evidence of the latter's eugenic beliefs. Eugenical politics was an anti-immigration politics, with the 1924 Immigration Act restricting entry to the United States by the supposedly inferior peoples from Southern and Eastern Europe. Although missed by many, the Finch family's supposed inability to pronounce the names of the prospects for the 1935 *Crimson Tide* (Lee 126) – a roster with a handful of players whose names indicate their possible immigrant origins – points to Atticus's anti-immigrant eugenic sympathies (Stow "Why can't the Finch family?" 348). The sympathies of Aunt Alexandra, his sister, are more obvious. "I never understood her preoccupation with heredity" observes Scout of Alexandra's focus on good breeding (Lee 148), noting that, according to her aunt, individual behavior could be explained by 'streaks' running through their families. "Everybody in Maycomb," observed Scout, describing Alexandra's theory, "it seemed, had a Streak:

a Drinking Streak, a Gambling Streak, a Mean Streak, a Funny Streak” (Lee 148). Likewise, her strict policing of gender roles might be thought to stem from a commitment to the eugenical valorization of motherhood (Bruinius 136).

Arthur “Boo” Radley’s story might similarly be understood in eugenical terms. A member of one of the supposedly better families in Maycomb, the teenage Arthur became involved with a branch of the lower ranked Cunninghams. “Nobody in Maycomb,” Scout observes, “had nerve enough to tell Mr. Radley that his boy was in with the wrong crowd” (Lee 12). In the wake some teenage hijinks, the Cunningham boys were sent to an industrial school, while Arthur’s parents subjected him to home confinement. That the Radley’s refusal to let Arthur become a ward of the state was motivated by eugenic concerns about maintaining their status as a “good” family is suggested by Mr. Radley’s response to Miss Stephanie’s assertion, following an incident in which Arthur stabbed his father in the leg with a pair of scissors, “that a season in Tuscaloosa might be helpful to Boo.” “Mr. Radley,” Miss Stephanie tells Jem, “said no Radley was going to any asylum” (Lee 13). Here, the fear of the family name being associated with mental illness led the Radleys to keep their problems literally in-house (Mukherjee 79). The centrality of eugenic themes to Lee’s text is further suggested by the reference to the asylum in Tuscaloosa, a hotbed of eugenic theories and practices including mass involuntary sterilizations (Larson 139–40). That the author’s eugenic references are deliberate is evidenced by their persistence, ubiquity, and even subtlety. It is perhaps telling that Arthur Radley and the Cunninghams come before the probate judge, a figure who most often deals with issues of inheritance.<sup>2</sup> Lest this seem like an overreach, it might be noted that Walter Cunningham senior’s legal problem is an entailment, also an issue of inheritance; and that Atticus’s children refer to his “last-will-and-testament diction” (Lee 42). Elsewhere we see Mrs. Dubose’s attack on Scout and Jem is presented as an assault on their “family’s moral degeneration, the major premise of which was that half the Finches were in the asylum anyway,” an assertion that Scout depicts, in distinctly eugenic language, as a negative “assessment of the family’s mental hygiene” (Lee 117).

It is, however, the Ewells who most obviously embody the text’s eugenic themes. Drunken, degenerate, quarrelsome, incestuous, and excessively fecund – a trait believed to be associated with the feeble-minded (Bruinius 258) – the Ewells evoked the classic studies of American eugenics such as Richard Dugdale’s *The Jukes*, Henry Goddard’s *The Kallikak Family*, and Charles Davenport and Florence Danielson’s *The Hill Folk*. “They were people,” it is observed, “but they lived liked animals” (Lee 40). The area around their house is said to look “like the playhouse of an insane child” (Lee 195), a description which, in eugenic terms, points to the degeneracy of feeble-mindedness and the associated problems of arrested development. The determinism of eugenics is suggested by a student’s attempt to explain a classmate’s behavior to Scout’s teacher, Miss Caroline, offering: “He’s one of the Ewells, ma’am” (Lee 36). Poverty, the death of Bob Ewell’s wife and the children’s mother, and, indeed, Bob Ewell’s experiences as a war veteran, are never considered as explanations for their circumstances: something that might be considered especially galling in a novel whose most revered figure preaches imaginative empathy for others. Rather, birth is understood to determine destiny.

Although it is difficult to say exactly where Harper Lee stands on eugenics, there is evidence to suggest that even as she employs the concept to capture the time in which her novel was set, her embrace of eugenic explanations is far from wholehearted. This is most evident in her depiction of Dill, a character who is a eugenic nightmare. The offspring of single – and, it is strongly suggested, promiscuous – mother, the most likely illegitimate Dill is a physical runt: upon their first encounter with him, Jem says that the nearly seven year-old Dill he looks about four and half (Lee 8). He is, furthermore, related to Rachel Haverford, the Finches’ neighbor, and as we learn early in the novel that Haverford is “a name synonymous with jackass” (Lee 5). Indeed, Atticus’s first two clients were Haverfords who went to the gallows due to their own stupidity. Effeminate and peculiar, by the eugenic terms of the day, Dill was not the product of good stock, something of which on, some level, he seems to be aware. His opening conversational gambit – “I’m Charles Baker Harris . . . I can read” – is not only the boast of a child, but also an assertion his own worth. Literacy and literacy tests were a key part of the eugenic ideology. Immigrants were subject to such tests to separate out the supposedly good

stock from the bad (Bruinius 254), and literacy was often a criterion used to evaluate candidates for eugenic sterilization (Cohen 146). Low literacy rates were considered a cause of poverty rather than the other way round (Currell 3). In the context of Jem's assertion that family background meant "how long your family's been readin' and writin'" (Lee 259), Dill's assertion of his own literacy takes on greater significance as a protest, conscious or not, against his own eugenic categorization, just as his creativity – "a pocket Merlin, whose head teemed with eccentric plans, strange longings, and quaint fancies" (Lee 9) – suggests Lee's rejection of at least some of the eugenic worldview that she depicts. Dill's struggle against the period's dominant ideology is, however, always ongoing, suggesting the hegemony of the eugenic in the period of the novel's setting. When he recounts his alleged success in a "Beautiful Child contest" (Lee 8–9), his likely mendacity belies his supposed victory in a competition meant to celebrate the eugenic: such competitions emerged precisely to promote the healthy family ideal (Bruinius 55). By way of contrast, his claim to have seen a pair of conjoined twins getting off a train in Bay St. Louis (Lee 47) once again associates him with the eugenic: freak shows, the likely home of the peripatetic twins, were thought to demonstrate the dangers of deviance, offering a negative counterpoint to the period's "Fitter Family" competitions (McElaney 216). Much the same can be said about Dill's association with *Dracula*, a film whose plot he recounts for Jem and Scout upon their first meeting. Displaying the supposed dangers of the immigrant, writes Angela Marie Smith, *Dracula* embodied the "themes of reproduction, inheritance, and physical revelation of inner character traits illuminate the eugenic impulse that shaped the horror-film genre in its early days, demonstrating the persistence in popular culture of eugenic imagery and assumptions" (Smith 333). It is, then, probably more than mere coincidence that Dill's recreation of *Dracula* is followed by a discussion of his own paternity. When asked about his father, Dill declares "I haven't got one," to which Scout replies "Is he dead?" Dill's negative response prompts Scout to conclude: "Then if he's not dead you've got one, haven't you?" (Lee 8). It is an exchange in which Dill's supposed eugenic unfitness is doubly reinforced: first, by this incompleteness of his family; and second, by the implication that his father, like *Dracula*, is in some sense undead, and thus, embodies the deviant vampiric that dooms his offspring to an inferiority that threatens the healthy living.

There are multiple other such references to eugenics in the novel, both obvious and subtle, including Jem's sixth-grade's focus on Egypt reflecting a period in which Egyptology was used to bolster eugenic theories about the superiority of Western civilization (Sheppard); Jean Louise's nickname echoing the growth of an organization aimed at cultivating healthy bodies, minds, and families (Hasian 41); Scout's strange assertion about the family's shame concerning their inability to trace their ancestry back to the Battle of Hastings (Lee 3–4), a probable allusion to the notable eugenicists Aubrey Stode and Charles Davenport who, in order to establish their genetic superiority, famously traced their lineages back to the time of William the Conqueror (Bruinius 107, 161); the discussion of the Nazis and their eugenic practices (Lee 281–284; Stow); and even the seemingly innocuous reference to a newspaper story about a flagpole sitter – most likely Richard Blandly – who sat atop a flagpole for 77 nights at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, a fair "which was the first to include eugenics as a matter of course in the classification of the basic sciences" (Laughlin 155).

The accuracy of Lee's recreation of eugenical discourse in the novel, is further suggested by the absence of any discussion of racial eugenics. For although race is the fault line running through the text, in the period of the novel's setting the supposed inferiority of African Americans was such that it did not need to be established in eugenical terms (Wray 73). Rather, eugenics simply called for the racial dividing lines to be properly policed (Cohen 58). In the Alabama of Lee's childhood, for example, eugenic sterilization was not extended to Blacks; rather, the mechanisms of separation were the state's 1901 anti-miscegenation law and cultural prejudice, even though, as we see in the fictional case of Dolphus Raymond, this was a prejudice that was selectively enforced (Stow "The other Finch family"). "As for feeble-minded African Americans," notes Gregory Michael Dorr, "the state had institutions for them: the convict lease system and the chain gang" (Dorr 33). Eugenics was, to be sure, deeply racist in its worldview, but its white supremacy was largely focused on ensuring that the white

race maintained its superior status through proper breeding rather than by delineating differences between the races (Cohen 57–58; Wray 76).

Given the persistence, subtlety, and accuracy of Harper Lee’s recreation of the eugenical culture and politics of her childhood in 1930s Alabama, it is plausible to suggest that the theme was deliberately embraced by the author in her text. Indeed, it may be that the most subtle and most compelling evidence of her commitment to the discourse is to be found in both the novel’s title and its most famous aphorism. In order to establish this claim it is first necessary to say something about Charles Darwin and his complicated connection to eugenics. While there are undoubtedly aspects of Darwin’s writing that suggest sympathy for what would later come to be called eugenics (Cohen 48), there is much that suggests he would have rejected central tenets of the good breeding approach. Nevertheless, it is clear that both he and “Social Darwinism” – a doctrine he did not create or espouse but with which he was forever associated – became synonymous with eugenical discourse in the popular imagination, in part, perhaps, because of the breadth of his writing (Paul 214). As Thomas Leonard observes, there was “something in Darwin for everyone” (Leonard 89; see also 107). His influence on the discussions of better breeding was extensive, even when his work was being tortured to justify positions for which he would have had no sympathy. Harper Lee became familiar with Darwin’s work while attending a summer program at Oxford University in 1948 (Shields 108). She was, however, enrolled as a literature student and there is nothing to suggest that her understanding of Darwin and his work was anything more than superficial. It would be no surprise, therefore, if she were among those who saw Darwin and eugenics as being synonymous. If she did not, it is perhaps possible that she employed the popular association of Darwin with the supposed science of better breeding to tie her novel ever more closely to eugenics. In either case, the title of her novel and the surname of its central family suggest a potentially playful allusion to Darwin’s work.

It has been widely noted that Lee seems to have taken the name she gave to the family at the heart of *To Kill a Mockingbird* from her mother’s side of the family: Finch was her mother’s maiden name (Shields 34). Her reasons for choosing the avian breed that gives the book its title and key aphorism are, however, less clear cut. Certainly Atticus Finch’s preference for mockingbirds over bluejays seems to be entirely arbitrary. Both are aggressive pests that attack humans, and while some find the mockingbird’s song pleasurable, others are irritated by its nocturnal warbling (Stow “Scout’s visions of sin” 17). Lee’s reasons for choosing mockingbirds may, then, be more literary and allusive than ornithological, aimed at reinforcing her eugenical theme rather capturing avian behavior with any degree of veracity. That allusion was, perhaps, to Darwin’s developing of his theory of evolution, a process that was predicated upon two sets of bird samples: mockingbirds and finches (Mukherjee 34).

In the absence of evidence for the pervasiveness of the eugenical theme in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, it might be argued that to suggest a direct connection between Charles Darwin and Lee’s novel is too great a hermeneutical leap, that the parallel might best be marked down to an interesting coincidence. Given, however, the – considerable – evidence for the ubiquity and pervasiveness of that theme in Lee’s novel, it might be plausible to suggest that this all too perfect parallel is a deliberate allusion by an author whose text is seeded with references, both large and small, obvious and subtle, to the eugenical politics and discourse of her childhood.

## Notes

1. The most extensive discussion appear in McElaney (219-225). Gladwell (63), Marcus; Miller (193) all make mention of eugenics in their discussion of the novel. Nancy Isenberg’s brief mention of eugenics refers to the 1962 movie rather than the novel (254).
2. Most probably because the case ultimately involved the custody of minors. I am grateful to Stacey Kern-Scheerer for this suggestion.

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