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# Moral of the story? Religious dimensions of the secular and the sentimental in American literary education

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY  
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Dissertation

**MORAL OF THE STORY? RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF THE  
SECULAR AND THE SENTIMENTAL IN AMERICAN LITERARY  
EDUCATION**

by

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B.A., Hardin-Simmons University, 2013  
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Doctor of Philosophy

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For my Grandma Chris,  
who couldn't care less that I wrote a dissertation.  
She just wanted to know, "Are you happy?"

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**MORAL OF THE STORY? RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF THE SECULAR  
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Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2023

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**ABSTRACT**

Over the last century, Americans have come to understand literature as a powerful tool for shaping individuals and society. Indeed, this perception of literature animates how Americans have and continue to debate what books to include—or exclude—in secondary school curricula. Texts dealing with issues of race, gender, and sexuality have proven especially controversial. This dissertation examines the claims people make about how reading literature can change readers and society through moral lessons. It offers case studies focused on three books that have been celebrated, banned, and taught in terms of their potential to inform readers' moral and empathetic development: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). This dissertation shows how assumptions about literature's ability to inform a readers' moral and empathetic development can be better understood in relation to the tradition of sentimental literature—a genre and rhetorical mode of storytelling aimed to promote moral and social reform by evoking certain feelings in readers. The case studies illustrate instances when the didactic rhetorical models of sentimental literature appear as a mode of reading and interpretation, which I refer to as sentimental hermeneutics.

Building on studies of religion, literature, and secularism, this dissertation analyzes the religious dimensions that emerge in the ostensibly secular interpretive methods and ‘universal’ moral frameworks used to teach and interpret these texts. Contemporary sentimental hermeneutics are indebted to an historical synthesis between Christian devotional reading practices and sentimental fiction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The novels examined are at various levels of conformity and dissonance with the rhetorical modes and religious foundations of this sentimental tradition. My study shows how the unacknowledged religious lineage of interpretive and moral frameworks commonly used to teach these books enacts certain religious, social, and ontological exclusions. Each case study outlines limits of sentimental hermeneutics and the analysis of *Beloved* offers an alternative framework for readerly empathy. By restoring to view the often-hidden religious histories of these reading strategies, this project pushes readers to parochialize the universalizing claims of these ostensibly secular moral messages: it calls for a form of reading that moves past the exclusions of sentimental hermeneutics.

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## Introduction

“There is some hysteria associated with the idea of reading that is all out of proportion to what in fact happens when one reads,” author Toni Morrison said in a 1982 interview commenting on book banning.<sup>1</sup> Such hysteria has been on display in recent news cycles as challenges to and bans on certain books and topics in educational spaces across the U.S. have increased significantly in the last few years.<sup>2</sup> Most of the targeted materials in these cases deal with topics of racial inequality, LGBTQ+ identity, and sexuality.<sup>3</sup> The challenges to and subsequent defenses of these books often follow a similar pattern. People, most often parents, posit the inappropriateness of vulgar language, mature themes, or unsuitable sexual content in certain books. In public forums—from school board meetings to political campaign ads, increasingly on social media—they express fears that reading certain books can “destroy a child’s innocence and their purity” or cause “psychological harm.”<sup>4</sup> Others respond in defense of the challenged texts, arguing these books should be kept on shelves

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, PEN America’s “Evening of Forbidden Books,” 1982. Retrieved from <https://pen.org/multimedia/toni-morrison-on-censorship-literacy-and-literature/>

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Friedman and Nadine Farid Johnson, “Banned in the USA: Rising School Book Bans Threaten Free Expression and Students’ First Amendment Rights,” accessed August, 17 2022, <https://pen.org/banned-in-the-usa/> This study reflects on research about decisions to ban books in U.S. classrooms between “July 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022.” This study found that, “the scale and force of book banning in local communities is escalating dramatically. In recent years PEN America has typically encountered a handful of such cases each year. The findings in this report demonstrate a profound increase in both the number of books banned and the intense focus on books that relate to communities of color and LGBTQ+ subjects over the past nine months.”

<sup>3</sup> Victoria A. Brownworth, “GOP book bans are targeting Race, LGBTQ+ and U.S. History,” *Philadelphia Gay News*, February 2, 2022. Retrieved from <https://epgn.com/2022/02/02/gop-book-bans-are-targeting-race-lgbt-and-u-s-history/>

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Natanson, “Schools nationwide are quietly removing books from their libraries,” *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2022/03/22/school-librarian-book-bans-challenges/> and Chana Joffe-Walt “The Farce Awakens,” *This American Life* January 7, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/758/talking-while-black>

and in classrooms because they provide opportunities for the representation of minority voices, exploration “of the human condition,” and essential learning about empathy.<sup>5</sup>

Banning books is hardly a new phenomenon. Literature in public education has long been a subject through which people articulate and negotiate civic disagreements. Recent cases about contested literature reflect the polarized political and social environment of the contemporary United States. Ongoing political debates—about whether the U.S. is or ought to be a Christian nation or an exemplar of religious freedom, a multicultural melting pot or a paragon of institutionalized racism—mobilize particular interpretations of U.S. history in public discourse about national identity. Literature, especially literature taught in schools, is now and has historically been mobilized in these debates. Americans celebrate and contest literary fiction in order to assert and attempt to define norms of civic engagement and national identity, history, and belonging.<sup>6</sup>

The historical and contemporary phenomenon of book banning illustrates that books have long been a medium through which people lobby arguments about the power of fictional literature to transform individuals and society. Yet the phenomenon may say more about the role people assume literature plays in the lives of readers than, as Morrison suggests, “what in fact happens when one reads.”<sup>7</sup> In general, scholars agree that we don’t know enough about reading and the brain to say with any certainty that reading innately has

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<sup>5</sup> Natanson, “Schools nationwide are quietly removing books from their libraries.”

<sup>6</sup> Hillary J. Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 4.

<sup>7</sup> This proposition may be true on both sides of the book banning debate. As Toni Morrison suggested in her interview with PEN for “Evening of Forbidden Books,” preventing a child from encountering obscenity in literature—from bad words to sexual content—does not necessarily prevent students from being familiar with that content in the real world. “It’s curious and sometimes humorous,” Morrison explains, “if it weren’t so malignant, that they are not preventing a child’s acquaintance with those words by banning books that contain them.”

the “power to reform readers’ thoughts and behavior in particular ways” or to promote compassion, empathy, and social inclusion in readers.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the assumption that literature is a powerful tool for shaping individuals and society has wide-reaching cultural currency. It’s not uncommon for people to claim that a novel changed their life or for readers to celebrate a book for its ability to change society.<sup>9</sup> President Barack Obama, for instance, said Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* “changed America for the better” by “changing the way we saw each other and...ourselves.”<sup>10</sup> Such a claim suggests that the act of reading can have powerful effects on how people interact with their social environment. Many readers share President Obama’s sentiments that the depiction of the fictional character, Atticus Finch, striving for racial justice in *To Kill a Mockingbird* encourages readers to do the same in their “own lives, communities, and country.”<sup>11</sup> Such claims place enormous power in what author Lisa Ko calls “the individualized/sacrosanct act of ‘reading for empathy’” to address systemic issues such as institutionalized racism and white supremacy. “If only it was so simple,” Ko laments.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ann Jurecic and others argue there is little scientific efficient from the fields of psychology, cognitive, science, or neuroscience to suggest that reading literature naturally engenders or promotes compassion, empathy, and social inclusion in readers. See Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ann Jurecic, “Empathy and the Critic,” *College English*, vol. 74, no. 1 (September 2011), 10-27. Jean Decety and Meghan Meyer, “From Emotion Resonance to Empathic Understanding: A Social Developmental Neuroscience Account,” *Development and Psychopathology*, vol. 20 (2008), 1053-1080. For other critical studies of empathy and the novel see, Theresa A. Kulbaga “Pleasurable Pedagogies: Reading *Lolita* in Tebran and the Rhetoric of Empathy,” *College English* Vol. 70, no. 5 (2008), 506-521 and Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).

<sup>9</sup> Sona Patel, “How To Kill a Mockingbird Changed Their Lives,” *New York Times*, February, 19, 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/19/books/how-to-kill-a-mockingbird-changed-their-lives.html>

<sup>10</sup> Eliza Collins, “Obama pays tribute to Harper Lee,” *Politico*, February, 19, 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/02/obama-harper-lee-219514>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Lisa Ko, Twitter Post, March 19, 2021, 3:42pm, <https://twitter.com/iamlisako/status/1372996845761409030?lang=en>

These examples suggest the pervasive cultural assumption that literature's role in education is about moral guidance and social formation. These assumptions frequently surface in teaching materials, popular interpretations, and conversations about banning certain books. This dissertation offers case studies of three books commonly taught and contested in public education during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries—including Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). All three books have been celebrated, banned, and taught in terms of their potential to inform readers' moral and empathetic development. I analyze the books and some debates and teaching materials about them to examine the common claim that some books—especially books related to social issues such as racial inequality—are *morally* formative for readers. The case studies offer examples of how people have articulated norms of civic engagement and negotiated different understandings of morality and national history through these texts. The project also takes seriously and critically the claims people make about how these books can change readers and society. The primary aim of this project is to examine—through literary and historical analysis—what these books contribute to the debates and pedagogical conversations about morality and empathy that are often had about them. What moral and empathetic frameworks do the books themselves offer to the assumptions about morality and empathy people often bring to reading them?

### ***Sentimental Hermeneutics***

One of the key claims of this dissertation is that assumptions about literature's ability to inform a reader's moral and empathetic development can be better understood through exploring the sentimental literary tradition. Scholars typically discuss sentimental literature as a genre or rhetorical mode of storytelling aimed to promote moral and social reform by



evoking certain feelings in readers.<sup>13</sup> The case studies in this dissertation help illustrate some instances when the didactic rhetorical modes of sentimental literature appear as a way of reading and interpreting texts. Across the case studies, I observe what I call sentimental hermeneutics—an interpretive mode that promotes and seeks personal and social transformation through the act of reading, which frequently emerges in and has shaped how people interpret, celebrate, teach, and contest the three novels at the center of this study.

Sentimental literature is most often discussed as a genre popularized in the United States primarily—but not exclusively—by white, middle-class, women writers in the early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The genre is characterized by rhetorical modes that are pedagogical in nature, that is, meant to “educate the feelings.”<sup>14</sup> Some of the most recognizable novels of sentimental literature from the United States include Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. These and other sentimental books use characteristic rhetorical conventions to 1) position the reader as the recipient of moral lessons; 2) encourage readers to emulate the moral values and transformations of fictional characters; and 3) offer a model of sympathetic identification meant to initiate personal and social reform through the literary practice of imagining oneself as another. These sentimental

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<sup>13</sup> Shirley Samuels states that “During the nineteenth century, women writers in the United States often coupled anti-Enlightenment emphasis on emotion with domestic plots that spoke to the power of feelings to effect right action.” Shirley Samuels, “Sentimentalism and Domestic Fiction” in *Oxford Bibliographies in American Literature*, edited by Jackson R. Bryer, Richard Kopley, and Paul Lauter (New York: Oxford University Press, June 27, 2022, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199827251/obo-9780199827251-0015.xml>)

<sup>14</sup> Gregory Jay, *White Writers, Race Matters: Fictions of Racial Liberalism from Stowe to Stockett* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 49 and Claudia Stokes, *The Altar at Home: Sentimental Literature and Nineteenth-Century American Religion* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 14 and 45.

conventions are defined as both affective and pedagogical, aimed to educate how readers behave through the feelings they experience while reading.<sup>15</sup>

Sentimental writers frequently envisioned goals beyond individual reform, imagining readers might take the moral lessons they learned from literature to effect social change in their own lives and communities.<sup>16</sup> Authors employed sentimental conventions to shine light on particular social issues by using affective imagery—especially suffering—to elicit readers’ emotional responses or sympathies for particular issues of injustice.<sup>17</sup> This narrative strategy is why scholars have frequently categorized sentimental literature under subgenres such as liberal race fiction, protest fiction, and politico-sentimental literature.<sup>18</sup> Sentimental authors imagined that by evoking a reader’s feelings about social issues represented in the text, their fictional stories and characters could motivate readers to do something about those social issues in the real world.<sup>19</sup> This is one reason sentimental forms of narration were so popular during the U.S. abolition movement. Authors of both fiction, such as Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s*

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Barnes’ comments about the relationship between sentimental fiction and edifying authority are helpful for establishing a sense of the relationship between reading sentimental fiction and moral or social edification. As she explains that “By evoking readers’ feelings in order to modify readers’ behavior, sentimental fiction effectively bridges the gap between internal and external authority, rendering the latter—represented by the novel itself—virtually indistinguishable from the reader’s own ‘instincts.’” *States of Sympathy: Seduction and Democracy in the American Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Williamson explored this connection between emotional appeals in sentimental literature, moral edification, and social change: “these texts insist on an outward projection of suffering, one that brings redemption and reform to the individual, which the individual then carries outward into the world in the form of social change.” outward into the world in the form of social change.” *Sentimental Appropriations: Contemporary Sympathy in the Novels of Grace Lumpkin, Josephine Johnson, John Steinbeck, Margaret Walker, Octavia Butler, and Toni Morrison* (PhD Dissertation, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 2011), 36. Retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/210601235.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Samuels, “Sentimentalism and Domestic Fiction.”

<sup>18</sup> Lauren Berlant discusses “politico-sentimental” fiction in her essay “Poor Eliza,” *American Literature*, Vol. 70, No. 3, No More Separate Spheres! (September 1998), 635-668; Gregory Jay uses the term “liberal race fiction” in *White Writers, Race Matters*; and James Baldwin discusses both *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Native Son* as “protest fiction” in his essay “Everybody’s Protest Novel” in *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

<sup>19</sup> Gregory Jay explains “liberal race fiction imagines that changing how we feel about racial injustice will motivate us to do something about it.” *White Writers, Race Matters*, 4.

*Cabin*, and autobiographical accounts from enslaved and formerly enslaved people employed sentimental appeals to the sympathy and “Christian benevolence” of readers to advocate for abolishing slavery.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the sentimental tradition often collapsed notions of morality and affective conversion through didactic elements in the text, which were meant to transform a reader’s affective orientation toward certain social causes and issues.<sup>21</sup>

Ann Douglas was one of the first scholars to take sentimental literature as a serious topic of scholarly inquiry, as many 20<sup>th</sup> century critics dismissed sentimental fiction as “feminine, emotional, overwrought, and ultra-religious.”<sup>22</sup> Douglas too was critical of the ‘feminizing’ qualities of the sentimental tradition in her book *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), but her study established the influential link between “sentimental values” in popular 19<sup>th</sup> century literature and contemporary U.S. culture.<sup>23</sup> More recently, scholars have explored sentimentality as a rhetorical “mode” that is not limited to a distinct body of literature or time period, but instead captures an “imaginative orientation” expressed through rhetorical structures, cues, and conventions.<sup>24</sup> Lauren Berlant, for instance, discusses

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<sup>20</sup> Shirley Samuels, “Sentimentalism and Domestic Fiction.”

<sup>21</sup> Donovan Schaefer discusses how affect “shaped [the] intersection between knowledge, religion, and power” (4) and how the dynamic forces of power and knowledge flow beneath the surface of the “cognitive-linguistic regime that authorizes the rational appraisals of the world.” (29) Affect is central to social orientations and moral appraisals, while the “cognitive linguistic regime” serves to rationalize. Literature thus is a perfect example of language, stories, images, that are being used to orient people by affecting them on an affective level. *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015) See also Sarah Ahmed, “Happy Objects” in *The Affect Theory Reader* ed. By Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Williamson, *Sentimental Appropriations*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977).

<sup>24</sup> See Jennifer A. Williamson, Jennifer Larson, and Ashley Reed, ed., *The Sentimental Mode: Essays in Literature, Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2014); and Joanne Dobson, “Reclaiming Sentimental Literature,” *American Literature* Vol. 69, No. 2 (June 1997), 266 and Shirley Samuels, “Sentimentalism and Domestic Fiction.”

sentimentality as a “mass-cultural discourse,” which frequently emerges in contemporary appeals to public intimacy through affection and identification in U.S. politics.<sup>25</sup>

I build on these and other studies to observe how the sentimental tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century may have also taught Americans a “particular way of reading” that frequently appears in strategies for interpreting literature today, especially books about social problems such as racial inequality.<sup>26</sup> The case studies in this project provide examples of how sentimental hermeneutics appear in popular talking points and teaching materials for the selected books. A brief survey of teaching guides and lessons plans for *Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Beloved* disclose examples of how teachers are tasked to encourage readers to think about the moral development of fictional characters as a way of reflecting on their own moral values. Teachers also sometimes provide prompts and activities that utilize sentimental models of sympathetic identification such as writing journal entries as fictional characters, imaging what they might feel if they were in in a particular character’s situation.

The case studies also evidence how a sentimental hermeneutics informs how people discuss these texts in relation to broader social reform. Much like sentimental writers of the nineteenth century, modern readers, educators, and scholars make claims that these books can bring particular values, moral imaginaries, or empathy into society. President Obama’s comments about how *Mockingbird* “changed America for the better” offer just one example. Other examples appear in defenses of these books lobbied against attempts to ban them, in

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<sup>25</sup> Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” 636 and *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Barnes explores sentimentalism as a “way of reading in” *States of Sympathy*, 4; See also Claudia Stokes, *The Altar at Home*.

popular scholarship and commentary, and in teaching materials that illustrate that it is not uncommon for people to claim reading these books can have powerful effects on how readers imagine themselves, others, national history, and their role in social reform.

The case studies illustrate how a sentimental hermeneutic appears in the popular reception of these books in public education and popular culture. Yet my analysis of the books—which is the focus of this project—suggests the novels are at various levels of conformity and dissonance with the rhetorical modes of the sentimental tradition, which raises questions about the suitability of sentimental strategies for interpreting them. In other words, this project asks whether there may be incongruity between how these books are commonly read—through a sentimental hermeneutic—and the literary details of the texts, which sometimes enact sentimental conventions and sometimes do not.

*Mockingbird* provides a narrative that generally fits within sentimental methods people use to teach and read it. However, there are some details in the novel that suggest Lee had reservations about the possibilities of cultural change through individual moral transformation, reservations which may be lost in sentimental interpretations of the text. *Huckleberry Finn*, by contrast, is decidedly critical of the sentimental tradition and hermeneutic. Twain anticipates people will read his novel with a sentimental interest in morality perhaps because he was writing during a time when sentimental literature was quite popular. He decidedly warns against such interpretations in the novel's epigraph, which instructs his reader against looking for a moral in his story. Popular scholarship and teaching guides that celebrate *Huckleberry Finn's* potential to promote "moral imagination" in readers miss the irony of their insistence on applying a sentimental hermeneutic to a book that

openly critiques it.<sup>27</sup> *Beloved* also critiques sentimental modes of reading and narration—especially sympathetic identification—which again raises questions about the suitability of pedagogical activities used in high school classrooms that employ sentimental strategies simply because *Beloved* deals with empathy. I interpret certain scenes in *Beloved* to suggest Morrison revises sentimental modes of storytelling in ways that may provide a generative alternative to the emphasis on sympathetic identification characteristic of sentimental approaches to literature.

### ***Religious Dimensions of the Ostensibly Universal Moral of the Story***

So why situate this study of literature and reading within the field of religious studies? This project demonstrates that religion offers helpful frameworks for thinking about the selected books particularly as texts commonly taught and contested in public education throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The case studies illustrate that *Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Beloved* have been read and taught on the basis of their efficacy for moral edification, much like Bible reading was used for moral formation in early U.S. public schools.<sup>28</sup> The devotional and sentimental expectations that people frequently bring to these texts suggest that these books have—in different ways and at different times in U.S. history—occupied a status as “secular scripture.”<sup>29</sup> The books can be considered scriptural in

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<sup>27</sup> I explore Lionel Trilling’s discussion of “moral imagination” in my chapter on Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Lionel Trilling, *The Moral Imagination* (New York: New York Review Books, 1950).

<sup>28</sup> James Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America*, Second Edition (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2016), 25. For more on the relationship between bible reading and public education see Catherin Albanese, *America: Religion and Religions*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cenage Learning, 2013), 278. Hilary Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press). Larry Cuban and David Tyack, *Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Steven K. Green, *The Bible, the School, and the Constitution: The Clash that Shaped Modern Church-State Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Casey Cap argued that *To Kill a Mockingbird* has become “a kind of secular scripture, one of only a handful of texts most Americans have in common.” “The Contested Legacy of Atticus Finch,” *The New Yorker*, December

the sense that they are part of what Stephen Prothero has referred to as the “canon of American public life,”—as they contain “words and voices to which Americans return as they ponder the meanings and ends of their country” and attempt “to define and redefine themselves.”<sup>30</sup> They can also be considered scriptural in the sense that people commonly discuss and treat them as “timeless” and “universal” in ways that resemble religious approaches to sacred texts. Yet as often as these books have been discussed for their universality, timelessness, and abilities to contribute to the project of American democracy, analysis of the books discloses that they are situated in particular religious and social frameworks that raise important questions about the status of their moral lessons as secular or universally inclusive.

Appeals to and discussions about morality in U.S. culture almost always involve some aspect of religion despite the fact that religious influences often remain unnoticed and unnamed in these conversations.<sup>31</sup> This project prioritizes religious analysis in order to acknowledge the religious dimensions of moral concerns expressed in the selected books and in discussions, teaching materials, and attempts to ban them. My project joins an ongoing conversation in religious studies about what scholars of U.S. secularism have described as “the uneven separation of church and state” in American life.<sup>32</sup> In their book *Love the Sin*,

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10, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/17/the-contested-legacy-of-atticus-finch> (accessed July, 20, 2022)

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Prothero, *The American Bible: How Our Words Unite, Divide, and Define a Nation* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 3.

<sup>31</sup> Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini explain how “When it comes to morality in American public culture, in the end we’re almost always talking about religion.” *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York University Press), 4.

<sup>32</sup> Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). See also Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, eds., *Secularisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Jonathon Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd, *Race and Secularism in America* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2016). For more on the relationship between church and state in American Public education

Ann Pellegrini and Janet Jakobsen explain that “the dominant framework for morality” in the United States “is not simply ‘religious’ or even ‘Christian,’ but specifically Protestant.”<sup>33</sup> Yet part of what makes the Protestant particularities of moral frameworks so commonly “unstated” and unacknowledged is that their “specific religious lineage is often forgotten.”<sup>34</sup> This project explores how aspects of contemporary assumptions about literary moral edification may be indebted to Christian devotional reading practices in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Acknowledging the religious lineage of sentimental hermeneutics helps surface some of the religious particularities of the moral assumptions people often bring to these books as well as the moral and empathetic frameworks within them. Scholars of religion, literature, and secularism have explored how literature has played an important role in the secularization of American culture, not by being a-religious or all-inclusive, but by “render[ing] dominant forms of Protestant identity continuous with democratic, civil identity” and by diffusing Protestant religious norms and values into American popular culture.<sup>35</sup> My project builds on such studies to explore how the Christian lineage of sentimental hermeneutics may inform a literary tradition around these texts that in yearning for universality, may enact certain forms of exclusion.

The sentimental and sentimentalizing readings that people bring to these books often forgo an understanding of *Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Beloved* as complicated textual

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see Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America?: Culture Wars in Public Schools* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); and for corporate interests see Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, 22.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, quote retrieved from <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691049632/culture-and-redemption>. Also see R. Laurence Moore, “Religion, Secularization, and the Shaping of Culture Industry in Antebellum America,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 41, No. 2 (June 1989), 216-242.



products of their historical moment and instead concentrate on de-historicized, ostensibly universal moral takeaways. Across the case studies in this project, people repeatedly assert that these books express “timeless” or “universal” moral lessons about tolerance and empathy. Such sentimental assertions work to flatten the textured historical, religious, and social specificity of the moral and empathetic frameworks within the books.<sup>36</sup>

For example, popular discussions of *Mockingbird* translate what the book’s author, Harper Lee, herself referred to as its specific “Christian ethic” into universal, secular messages about tolerance and anti-prejudice.<sup>37</sup> My chapter on *Mockingbird* explores how Protestant liberalism plays a central role in the book’s construction of moral lessons about racial inequality. Readers often celebrate Atticus Finch’s moral heroism as he is socially ostracized for defending an innocent Black man in court. Yet popular discussions of the book seldom acknowledge how the novel explicitly links his moral choices to his Christian identity. Taking a religious lens to the moral frameworks in *Mockingbird* also reveals instances when the narrative specifically engages tensions between ecumenical colorblind and segregationist theological positions characteristic of the historical period of the book’s production and publication. I use these examples to demonstrate how moral ideas in the novel are better understood when situated in particular historical, social, and religious

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<sup>36</sup> Morality is always constructed within particular socio-historical contexts and commonly has religious underpinnings. Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue “that Christianity, and often conservative Christianity, functions as the yardstick and measure of what counts as ‘religion and ‘morality’ in America.” *Love the Sin*, 13.

<sup>37</sup> Harper Lee named that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is “Christian in its ethic” a letter to an editor, which I quote at greater length and explore in my chapter on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Claudia Durst Johnson, *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird: A Student Casebook to Issues, the Sources, and Historic Documents* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 215.

contexts—something sentimental interpretations of the book often obscure in their tendency to universalize the particular.<sup>38</sup>

I observe that the religious particularities of the ostensibly universal moral lessons in these texts are pertinent, as opposed to superfluous to discussions about moral edification people often have about them. My analysis of *Mockingbird*, in particular, notes how the unacknowledged religious, racial, and historical specificity of the book's moral lessons may endorse certain ideas about proper religiosity and acceptable frameworks for discussing racial inequality, while suppressing and excluding other relevant religious and ideological perspectives.<sup>39</sup> Such unacknowledged exclusions do not align with the claims to universality and timelessness that people historically have used to promote *Mockingbird*.

The sentimental hermeneutic people employ to seek universal moral lessons in these books also may not be as universal or inclusive as readers may assume. Most readers today do not discuss reading fiction as devotional or frame the self-described life-changing experiences they have with fiction as religious conversion.<sup>40</sup> Yet contemporary assumptions about literature as a moral guide resonate with the religious histories and foundations of the sentimental tradition. These religious dimensions are especially resonant with contemporary and historical claims that books such as *Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Beloved* help

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<sup>38</sup> As Lauren Berlant examines “the mass-cultural processes by which historically specificity is (mis)translated, via the *Uncle Tom* form, into the unchanging space of sentiment beyond history.” “Poor Eliza,” 650.

<sup>39</sup> My phrasing of the final sentence and the idea is building on Tracy Fessenden's assertion that “the uneven separation of church and state in America, far from safeguarding an arena for democratic flourishing, has functioned instead to promote particular forms of religious possibility while containing, suppressing, or excluding others.” *Culture and Redemption*. Quote retrieved from <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691049632/culture-and-redemption>.

<sup>40</sup> Patel, “How *To Kill a Mockingbird* Changed Their Lives.”

students confront and ameliorate social problems such as racial inequality through their converted consciences or empathetic experiences.

During the early and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans developed the sentimental tradition of literature as devotional reading became “an important source of spiritual instruction” across various Protestant denominations in the United States.<sup>41</sup> Claudia Stokes establishes how devotional practices and sentimental literature went hand in hand in this religious movement.<sup>42</sup> As reading was increasingly associated with “self-improvement and moral reform,” the norms of writing and interpreting literature also emphasized moral and religious formation.<sup>43</sup> The most common expressions of these devotional practices were imitative.<sup>44</sup> Literary scenes nudged readers to emulate the moral virtues, charity, and spiritual practices of fictional characters.<sup>45</sup>

The intersection of devotional reading and sentimental literature promoted reading as a potential site for certain types of religious conversion and moral formation. Antebellum Protestant writers across different denominations saw commercial print and reading culture as “an agent of Protestant evangelism” aimed at the “gentle instruction for the secular reader,” which many people believed could be more efficacious for conversion than sermons or tracts.<sup>46</sup> The fact that “moral issues” were even central to “the writing and reception” of

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<sup>41</sup> Stokes, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. For more on the connection between religious movements in the United States and devotional reading see David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Stokes, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>46</sup> R. Laurence Moore has illustrated some of the commercial interests that made the moral emphasis of devotional reading such a mainstay of popular culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century United States. Christian writers found that although fiction was not useful for teaching “dogmatic religion,” fictional texts could spread “cultural

“erotic fiction” speaks to the wide-reaching diffusion of Protestant Christian norms of morality and behavior in U.S. popular culture.<sup>47</sup> Drawing on this evangelical tradition, sentimental writers aimed to express “Christian morality” and “Christ-like” characteristics of “love, sacrifice, and sympathy” through fictional characters, who could “inspire others to adopt those beliefs and behaviors.”<sup>48</sup> These affective, sentimental conversions were especially popular in social reform movements such as abolition. Scenes of enslaved people suffering or in pain were meant to evoke Christian virtues of compassion and sympathy in white readers. The act of sympathetic identification with the ‘suffering other’ was hoped to convert readers’ hearts and minds toward the moral virtues of the abolition movement.<sup>49</sup>

The idea that people seek moral lessons from literature or that reading is or ought to be didactic is not exclusive to the sentimental tradition. Other literary genres frame storytelling as instrumental to informing readers’ behaviors and beliefs. Fables, folktales, myths, and legends have long been told and considered through the lens of moral guidance, for example. One thing that is pronounced in the didacticism of sentimental literature and hermeneutics is that sentimentality synthesizes affect, morality, personal conversion, and

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values that were rooted in Christians’ views about sin and salvation.” R. Laurence Moore, “Religion, Secularization, and the Shaping of the Culture Industry in Antebellum America,” 223.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>48</sup> Williamson, *Sentimental Appropriations*, 37.

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Clark, “The Sacred Rights of the Weak”: Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individuals in Antebellum America,” Vol. 82, No. 2 (September 1995), 478. Scenes of sympathetic identification in literature mimicked the revivalist strategies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelicalism, which made feeling central to spiritual experience. E. Brooks Holifield writes about the increasingly important place of feeling and sympathy in pastoral care in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. See, particularly Chapter 4, “Balance, Gentility, and Self-Culture” in *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1983). Many of these sources note the “cross-pollination” of moral sentimentality across different Protestant denominations at the time. In particular, see David Howe Walker, *The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805-1861* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970). For more on the role of sympathy and moral philosophy in art and society more broadly at this time see also David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

social change in ways that suggest individual reading experiences impact particular systemic social issues.<sup>50</sup>

Dimensions of the sentimental tradition's emphasis on certain kinds of moral, empathetic, and social conversion appear in examples of how people interpret the books at the center of this study. Yet the texts themselves are once again at various levels of congruence and dissonance with the oft unacknowledged religious dimensions of the sentimental hermeneutics used to read them. Of these three texts, *Mockingbird* is the most narratively aligned with the religious foundations of the sentimental tradition. My chapter on *Mockingbird* observes how the novel offers readers literary depictions of precisely the kind of potential for sentimental conversion they often seek. Popular interpretations of *Mockingbird* that trace Scout's conversion from racist to racial liberal align with the narrative's use of religious language such as sin, guilt, blindness, and seeing truth used to frame Scout's journey to racial enlightenment in the book.<sup>51</sup> While aspects of *Mockingbird* align with the religious foundations of sentimental literary conversion, acknowledging the potential failures of conversion in the novel can illuminate places *Mockingbird* may depart from sentimental

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<sup>50</sup> Jennifer L. Brady argues that even in the "antebellum antinovel discourse" there is a distinct "recognition that a large measure of sentimentality's power derives from the way it can circulate through the vehicle of a novel from the private to the public arena—and back—in dynamic, unpredictable, and undeniably thrilling ways. In doing so, these nineteenth-century commentators demonstrate that allowing sentiment a role in the stories we tell about reading can transform those stories." (741-2) Her discussion of the how antinovel commentators wrote to standardize a way of reading sentimental literature also reveals one dimension of the history of sentimental hermeneutics. "Theorizing a Reading Public: Sentimentality and Advice about Novel Reading in the Antebellum United States," *American Literature*, vol. 83, no. 4 (2011), 719-746.

<sup>51</sup> See Eric Sundquist, "Blues for Atticus Finch: Scottsboro, Brown, and Harper Lee," in *The South as An American Problem* edited by Larry J. Griffin and Don H. Doyle (Athens: GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995). Fred Hobson, says that writers used religious language to frame "racial enlightenment," and "sin, guilt, Blindness, and seeing the light." *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 2.

assumptions that conversions in the narrative inevitably translate into “the reader’s converted heart” or social reform.<sup>52</sup>

Sentimental interpretations of *Huckleberry Finn* insist Huck has a moral conversion. I explore the possibility that the affective scene of Huck’s moral epiphany is an interpretative trap for the sentimental reader. The lack of narrative evidence that Huck changes his perspective or behavior suggests a dissonance between the sentimental hope for conversion and the lack of evidence that such a conversion is fully realized in the text. Instead of moral transformation, I suggest Huck strains to imagine and occupy a moral imaginary beyond the acculturating influences of Protestant Christian morality and behavior he is taught at the beginning of the novel. Accordingly, my analysis of *Huckleberry Finn* raises questions about the relationship among sentimental reading, moral acculturation, and colonization in the United States. Such an analysis provides an opportunity to think about the potential limits of sentimental hermeneutics in a multicultural, multireligious setting.

*Beloved*’s critique of sympathetic identification also implies a certain dissonance with the religious foundations of the sentimental hermeneutic. Morrison explained that she wrote *Beloved* with concerns about how enslaved and formerly enslaved people “patterned” their narratives “after the sentimental novel that was in vogue at the time.”<sup>53</sup> *Beloved* examines, critiques, and revises sentimental literary conventions, especially those that encouraged Black narrators to shorten, omit, and ‘forget’ aspects of their “interior lives” to appeal to the “Christian benevolence” of white readers—who imagined their sympathy could play a part

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<sup>52</sup> Jay, *White Writers, Race Matters*, 280.

<sup>53</sup> Toni Morrison, “Sites of Memory” in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction* edited by Carolyn C Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 69.

in redeeming America from the sin of slavery.<sup>54</sup> *Beloved* illustrates that the actual redemptive direction of Christian sympathy is self-reflexive—assuring the reader of their innocence and sinlessness within persistent systems of racial violence and inequality. Exploring this line of critique in *Beloved* allows me to examine the limits of the sentimental hermeneutic for moral and empathetic edification. I suggest the novel outlines a different model of empathy that leaves room for religious and ideological perspectives that are often marginalized in sentimental storytelling and reading.

This project suggests that if we are going to take seriously the idea of moral edification through literature in public education, it is imperative to acknowledge the religious particularities of secular hermeneutics and the moral and empathetic lessons people use these interpretive strategies to seek in these books. In a nation that is multi-religious and multicultural, unacknowledged religious influences within dominant moral frameworks “far from safeguarding an arena for democratic flourishing,” Tracy Fessenden explains “[have] functioned instead to promote particular forms of religious possibility while containing, suppressing, or excluding others.”<sup>55</sup> If we want to use these books to think about morality, empathy, norms of civic engagement, and national belonging—as the case studies illustrate that people so often do—religion is central to understanding what these books in particular and perhaps literature in general contributes to the conversation.

### ***Methods for Analysis***

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 70. Morrison explains that what is “most importantly” missing from slave autobiographies is that “there was no mention of their interior lives.”

<sup>55</sup> Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*. Quote retrieved from <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691049632/culture-and-redemption>

Why analyze these three books and not others? One reason to focus on *Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Beloved* is because they have been taught and contested in public education and bring conversations about history and race into U.S. classrooms by way of their attention to U.S. slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Both their popularity as resources in public education and the ongoing debates about their suitability for classrooms demonstrate that these books have been part of articulating and negotiating norms of civic engagement as well as national identity, history, and belonging.<sup>56</sup> *Mockingbird* and *Huckleberry Finn* began to show up in school curriculum in the 1960s.<sup>57</sup> By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were two of the most taught books in U.S. public education—with *Huckleberry Finn* in 70% and *Mockingbird* in 69% of public schools in 1993.<sup>58</sup> *Beloved*, though less frequently taught in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than the other two, has become increasingly common in school curricula due in part to its popularity on the Advanced Placement Literature exam.<sup>59</sup> The popularity of these books in public schools was galvanized and complicated by the racial tensions represented in them as teaching guides from the 1960s to the present frequently frame these texts as opportunities to teach students moral lessons about tolerance, anti-prejudice, and historical discrimination in the classroom. Yet the books have also been as controversial as they are popular. For as long as *Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Beloved* have been used in public education, they have been contested in and banned from schools

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<sup>56</sup> Moss, *Schooling Citizens*, 4.

<sup>57</sup> Scarvia B. Anderson's *Literature in American High Schools* (Princeton, New Jersey: Cooperative Test Division of Educational Testing Service), 1964.

<sup>58</sup> Arthur N. Applebee, *Literature in the Secondary School: Studies of Curriculum and Instruction in the United States*, (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English), 1993

<sup>59</sup> CrowleyISD Update of Original List by Norma J. Wilkerson, "Titles from Open Response Questions," 2017, <https://www.crowleyisdtx.org/cms/lib5/TX01917780/Centricity/Domain/882/AP%20lit-%201971-2017-Titles%20from%20Open%20Response%20Questions.pdf>



and libraries across the U.S. because of concerns about racial slurs, religious “heresy,” “vulgarity,” and unsuitable sexual content, which the case studies in this project illustrate have been framed in terms of immorality.<sup>60</sup>

Another reason I chose these books is because scholars have categorized and analyzed them *as sentimental*. Such studies have mostly focused on the rhetorical details of the books within the genre of sentimental fiction. Gregory Jay for instance includes both *Huckleberry Finn* and *Mockingbird* in his study of the sub-genre of sentimental fiction that he calls liberal race fiction.<sup>61</sup> While some scholars, such as Lauren Berlant have categorized *Beloved* as “post-sentimental,” others suggest this categorization dismisses the valuable work the novel does with empathy.<sup>62</sup> My approach to these books is not necessarily to categorize them as sentimental or not. Instead, I am interested in how the books are in conversation with aspects of sentimentality, given the sentimental assumptions and methods of interpretation people often bring to them. Moreover, these particular books help illustrate three different literary relationships to the sentimental tradition. While *Mockingbird* is most aligned with the sentimental strategies used to approach it, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Beloved* offer important dissonance with these interpretive strategies in ways that are helpful for thinking about the religious particularities of the sentimental hermeneutic and the moral frameworks represented in these books.

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<sup>60</sup> Nyla Ahrens, *Censorship and the Teacher of English: A Questionnaire Survey of Selected Sample of Secondary School Teachers of English* (New York: Columbia University, 1965). ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, “Banned & Challenged Books,” <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/classics> (Accessed September 5, 2019).

<sup>61</sup> See Jay, *White Writers Race Matters*

<sup>62</sup> For more on the debate about the categorization of *Beloved* in relation to the sentimental tradition, see both Berlant “Poor Eliza” and Ann Jurecic “Empathy and the Critic.”

Sentimental hermeneutics are central to this project's interest in the secularization of American Protestantism through sentimental literary culture. Readers and literary scholars often leave out religion and religious history in their analysis of these texts out of deference to a secularizing narrative common in American literary criticism.<sup>63</sup> For instance, Gregory Jay, like many contemporary literary scholars considers religion to be a central part of his analysis for a nineteenth century text such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Yet for more contemporary books like *Mockingbird*, Jay treats the overt references to and influences of Christianity as less important, which obscures how religion continues to play a significant role in discourses about race, gender, and sexuality in modern literature and society.<sup>64</sup> These scholarly omissions are telling for some of the ways that various forms of American Protestantism have been universalized and secularized through literary studies in general and the literary culture of sentimentality in particular. This project takes these types of omissions as an imperative for an analysis that prioritizes insights from religious studies.

My approach to literary interpretation throughout this project brings religious histories and considerations to analysis of the texts. One way I do this is by surfacing religious details in the books and contextualizing them with insights from religious studies. Such an analysis reveals the significance of religious particularities represented in the books, which sentimental interpretations often overlook or flatten in their emphasis on universal

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<sup>63</sup> Fessenden, "The Problem of the Postsecular," *American Literary History* Vol. 16, Issue 1 (Spring 2014), 154.

<sup>64</sup> Jay does briefly acknowledge the influences of conversion narratives on the racial discourse of *Mockingbird* in an article (published before his book) on Queer Children and racial liberalism. The argument I make here is based on his statement in his book that "literary tastes shifted away from Christian rhetoric" to "secular, naturalistic realism." I disagree and argue with Fessenden that the "secular, naturalistic realism" of modern literature extends and universalizes rather than forgoes Christian rhetoric. Jay, "Queer Children and Representative Men: Harper Lee, Racial Liberalism, and the Dilemma of *To Kill a Mockingbird*," *American Literary History* 27, no. 3 (September 2015), 487-522.

moral takeaways. My analysis suggests that these religious details are foundational to understanding the moral commitments represented in the novels as situated in particular religious, historical, political, and ideological contexts. My approach to literary analysis also draws upon examples of the books' reception in literary criticism, teaching guides, and public commentary. I read these materials in conversation with the books to examine their congruence and dissonance with details and frameworks offered in the texts.

This dissertation thus situates analysis of these books within a longstanding, yet shifting, field of religion and literature, in which scholars explore how literature can be an important source for tracing trends in American religious history and expressions of national religious self-understanding.<sup>65</sup> Tracy Fessenden's *Culture and Redemption*, for instance, traces a history of the role literature has played over a three-century span in the "vaunted" secularization of American culture. This project draws upon recent methodological trends in religion and literature as well as scholarship on American secularism to better understand how religious themes in these books, especially those that express mainline and evangelical Protestant traditions, come to appear as the universally applicable and acceptably secular 'moral of the story.' As Jodi Eichler Levine examines in her analysis of children's literature, the very "existence of religious themes in ostensibly secular texts" challenges the idea that

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<sup>65</sup> In his book, *Hope Draped in Black*, Joseph Winters explains that narratives about history in the United States often follow "a constant trajectory of racial progress" that is related to a religious and philosophical tradition embedded in U.S. culture. He explores different ways of understanding hope and narrative imagination within a Black literary and aesthetic tradition. *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). For other studies on American Literature and religious history and tradition see also *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Jodi Eichler-Levine, *Suffer the Little Children: Uses of the Past in Jewish and African American Children's Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); and Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

there is a binary relationship between ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular.’<sup>66</sup> This method for analysis writes against the secularization narrative so common in literary studies by demonstrating how religion plays an important role in modern literary texts and their contemporary reception.

I write against the secularization narrative common in literary studies to explore how religious practices and discourses continue to have important “material and intellectual effects” on people’s lives, particularly in ways of reading and conceptualizing the universality of moral lessons in literature.<sup>67</sup> My approach to thinking about religion in these case studies aligns with scholars such as Fessenden, Jakobsen, Pellegrini, and John Lardas Modern as we share an interest in studying the religious dimensions of materials and discourses that have not traditionally been analyzed or discussed as religious.<sup>68</sup> I tend to agree with these and other scholars such as Saba Mahmood, Tomoko Masuzawa, and Talal Asad who assert that dominant religious influences in a given society inform notions of religion and secularism in that context.<sup>69</sup> I keep in mind, however, critiques by Charles McCrary and Jeffrey Wheatly that warn against overdetermining the Protestant nature of secularism in the United States.<sup>70</sup> My chapter on *Huckleberry Finn* in particular is meant to explore both the possibilities and

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<sup>66</sup> Eichler-Levine, *Suffer the Little Children*, xvii.

<sup>67</sup> Ribovich, 15. Ribovich’s discussion of secularism in her dissertation was useful for articulating my approach to secularism in this section. *The Production of Judeo-Christianity in New York City Public Schools: Religion, Race, and Moral Education, 1950-1969*, PhD diss. (Princeton University, 2017).

<sup>68</sup> Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*; Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Secularisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>69</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1993) and *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>70</sup> Charles McCrary and Jeffrey Wheatley, “The Protestant Secular in the Study of American Religion: Reappraisal and Suggestions,” *Religion* vol. 47, no. 2 (2017): 256-276.

challenges of thinking and acting beyond the influences of Christian moral frameworks as not to overdetermine the influence of dominant religious forces on people's choices while simultaneously acknowledging how these forces may shape discourses and notions of morality, religion, and secularism, of course, including my own.

One of the major concerns that surfaces in contemporary debates about literature in public education is the importance of literature for helping students engage in empathy as a mode of interpersonal and intercultural understanding. Indeed, this concern about teaching students how to engage in empathy is often central to arguments about the importance of humanities education more broadly. This project's engagement with the topic of readerly empathy begins with the recognition that the relationship between reading and empathy is ambiguous and complicated. What is clear throughout the case studies is that people have turned to these books with optimism about the power of literature to inform readers' understanding of social problems such as racism and prejudice in the United States in ways that do not always leave room for this complexity. Claims that literature can transform readers' perspectives and behaviors are emotionally powerful. I do not aim to dismiss these claims out of a recognition that stories have significant and unpredictable effects in the lives of the people who read them. This project makes the case that these assumptions about morality, social change, and literature are worth interrogating and contextualizing precisely because they are so widely accepted and celebrated.

I analyze the frameworks for empathy in these texts and in the interpretive strategies people have used to read them by tracing details and patterns of narrative and hermeneutic conventions that emerge in the three case studies. I explore how each book provides different frameworks for readerly empathy. I find *Mockingbird* aligns most closely with the

model of sympathetic identification common in sentimental frameworks for empathy, while *Huckleberry Finn* and *Beloved* both critique aspects of this sentimental approach.

My analysis is largely critical of sentimental frameworks for readerly empathy, providing examples of how sentimental approaches tend to universalize certain perspectives, ideologies, and ontologies while excluding others. I explore how *Beloved* offers a framework for empathy that does not lend itself to narrative resolution through identification with another person's pain, trauma, or suffering characteristic of sentimental narrative and hermeneutic conventions. The metaphor of haunting in Morrison's novel advances that the presence of the imagined other is not easily dismissed, controlled, or assimilated into our own ways of understanding or being in the world. This empathetic framework offered in this metaphor of haunting centers the interior life of the imagined other, which resists the sentimental tendency to expand the emotional responses and moral beliefs of the reader. *Beloved's* empathetic framework insists on the lingering presence of the unresolved traumas and difficult realities, which offers readers an opportunity to be present with and practice 'working through' pain, loss, and injustice without the rush to emotional resolution and redemption characteristic of sentimental sympathy.

The distinction between sentimental approaches to readerly empathy and the alternative I explore in *Beloved* matters precisely because people turn to these books to think about and negotiate norms of civic engagement and national identity, history, and belonging. This project highlights the religious dimensions and concerns that emerge in the moral and empathetic frameworks of the novels not to suggest that religion needs to be absent from public literary education in the United States in order for it to be acceptably secular and inclusive. Instead, I make the case that leaving the religious and ideological dimensions of

the moral and empathetic frameworks unexamined, by forgetting them or leaving them out, does not make them more inclusive or universal. If literary fiction can play a role in defining and negotiating norms of civic engagement and national identity, history, and belonging, considering the limitations and possibilities of the frameworks for empathy within these books and in our approaches to reading them is essential for understanding the real worlds we might construct through our engagement with fictional ones.

## Chapter 1: Limitations of Sentimental Hermeneutics in the Case of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

In 1966, W.C. Boshers's teenage son brought home a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) from Lee-Davis High School's library in Mechanicsville, Virginia. Dr. Boshers, who was a trustee on the Hanover County Board of Education, was alarmed by the content of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, specifically its references to rape. He brought his concerns before the Board of Education and proposed a motion to remove the book from libraries across Hanover County. Boshers made his argument on the basis that *Mockingbird* was "immoral" and "improper for children to read."<sup>71</sup> The School Board unanimously voted to remove the book from all Hanover County schools. Two local papers—the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* and *The Richmond News Leader*—reported the Board's decision to remove *Mockingbird*. Residents from across Hanover County wrote to express their opinions about the decision. The newspapers published numerous letters-to-the-editor from local residents. Some residents defended the Board's decision, and others defended what they saw as the book's deserved place in Hanover's public schools. Although residents took different stances on the issue, their letters-to-the-editor, whether applauding or opposing the school board's decision, appealed to one notable aspect: the book's morality.

Residents who wrote in support of Boshers's claim that *Mockingbird* had no place in Hanover schools frequently expressed their belief that public schools played a role in the

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<sup>71</sup> The following quotes from residents' letters-to-the-editor and Harper Lee's article are all cited from historical documents published in Claudia Durst Johnson's Student reading guide about *To Kill a Mockingbird* for classrooms. Claudia Durst Johnson, *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird*, 202.



formation of students' "moral and spiritual character."<sup>72</sup> These residents collapsed a topic in *Mockingbird*—the references to rape—into a sign that the whole book was immoral and therefore represented a threat to society.<sup>73</sup> One resident, Mrs. L. L. Hollins, wrote to "congratulate the Superintendent of Schools, the School Board members, principals and teachers of Hanover County for their efforts and decision in guiding the moral development of our boys and girls" by removing the book.<sup>74</sup> Alternatively, residents who defended *Mockingbird's* place in public schools criticized the other resident's concerns as "provincial" and a result of "ingrown 'morality,'" arguing that the book did, in fact, offer valuable moral lessons.<sup>75</sup> David and Nancy Kilgore explained that *Mockingbird* imparted morality through its "philosophy which says that innocence must be defended; that legal procedures are preferable to mob violence; that in small, southern communities there are heroic people to whom truth and respect for all men are the cornerstone of character."<sup>76</sup>

News of the debates in Hanover reached the book's author, Harper Lee, who wrote her own letter to the *Richmond News-Leader*. In opposition to the school board's decision, Lee questioned the intelligence of the school board members and defended the morality of her novel. "The Hanover County School Board's activities," she wrote, made her "wonder if any of its members can read," because "surely it is plain to the simplest intelligence that 'To Kill a Mockingbird' spells out in words of seldom more than two syllables a code of honor and

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>73</sup> Anthony Petro refers to this type of interpretive collapse as an "aesthetics of literalism," when people interpret the details of a work literally through "a habit of interpretation that says that all symbols are merely representations." See Anthony Petro, "Interview with Anthony Petro" by Kyle Byron and Omar Safadi, *Entangled Worlds*, May 2021, <https://entangledworlds.utoronto.ca/index.php/interview-with-dr-anthony-petro/>

<sup>74</sup> Johnson, *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird*, 208.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 209.

conduct, Christian in its ethic, that is the heritage of all Southerners.”<sup>77</sup> “To hear the novel is ‘immoral,’” she continued, “has made me count the years between now and 1984, for I have yet to come across a better example of doublethink.”<sup>78</sup> Lee’s was the last word at the time on the issue in either newspaper. The Hanover County School Board “backtracked on their decision” just a month later and allowed *Mockingbird* back into Hanover County schools.<sup>79</sup>

The fact that *Mockingbird* was contested in terms of morality, and not its literary merit or historical accuracy, speaks to one of the roles people assign to literature, especially in educational settings. Although Hanover residents *did not* agree about the moral value of *Mockingbird*’s content or the responsibility public schools have to promote or censor literature, the residents *did* agree that literature has the ability to influence the moral character of the students who read it. In other words, Hanover residents’ fears, concerns, and defenses of *Mockingbird* were based on the assumption that literature’s role in education is not limited to, nor perhaps even primarily about, vocabulary lessons, critical analysis, or literary interpretation, but rather moral guidance and social formation.

The public debates about *Mockingbird* in Hanover County, while representative of local concerns, resonate with similar challenges to the novel in public schools across the United States. Since *Mockingbird* was first incorporated into libraries and curricula in the early 1960s, its place in public schools has been debated because of concerns that include “vulgar language, references to sexual activity, and expressions of anti-establishment attitudes.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Bryan Devasher, “1966, Hanover schools stirred Harper Lee’s ire after banning ‘Mockingbird,’” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, February 3, 2015, [https://www.richmond.com/entertainment/in-hanover-schools-stirred-harper-lee-s-ire-after-banning/article\\_a1a1bd04-e2b8-59fb-a551-d2ebdc509f8c.html](https://www.richmond.com/entertainment/in-hanover-schools-stirred-harper-lee-s-ire-after-banning/article_a1a1bd04-e2b8-59fb-a551-d2ebdc509f8c.html)

<sup>80</sup> In her 1965 survey about curricular censorship, Nyla Ahrens found that parents, students, librarians, and department chairs across the U.S. requested that *Mockingbird* be removed from library shelves and required

Additionally, parents, teachers, and students have challenged *Mockingbird* for its use of racial slurs and poor representation of Black characters.<sup>81</sup> Historically, debates about race in the novel were equally concerned about the moral effects the novel's discussion of race had on students. On one side of these debates, parents, teachers, and students defended *Mockingbird* as "a paragon of anti-racist literature."<sup>82</sup> On the other, they argued that the novel's casual use of racial slurs, paternalism, and shallow representation of Black characters make it an example of racist literature rather than its antithesis. The debates about whether the novel was moral or immoral, anti-racist or racist, were focused on the influence the book would have on the moral and social formation of the students who read it.

As the Hanover County case demonstrates, people have contested the moral and social value of *Mockingbird* since its earliest appearances in public school libraries and classrooms. Yet *Mockingbird's* popularity as a resource in classrooms grew exponentially throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>83</sup> A brief analysis of teaching journals and popular reading guides suggests moral concerns have been as central to the way the book has been taught in classrooms as to the aforementioned contests over whether it should have a place in them at

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reading lists. Nyla Ahrens, *Censorship and the Teacher of English: A Questionnaire Survey of Selected Sample of Secondary School Teachers of English* (New York: Columbia University, 1965).

<sup>81</sup> For instance, in 1981 a group of Black parents in Warren, Indiana unsuccessfully tried to ban the book on the basis that it inflicts "psychological damage to the positive integration process" and "represents institutionalized racism under the guise of good literature." For the history of more contemporary challenges see ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, "Banned & Challenged Books," [ala.org](http://www.ala.org), <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/classics> (Accessed September 5, 2019)

<sup>82</sup> Isaac Saney, *Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird*, Bloom's Guides: Comprehensive Research & Study Guides edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism of Infobase Publishing, 2010), 60.

<sup>83</sup> While in 1964, four years after *Mockingbird* was published, the novel was read in 8% of public schools, by 1993 it was among the top ten most assigned books in public school classrooms, registering in 69% of the surveyed schools. Scarvia B. Anderson, *Literature in American High Schools* (Princeton, New Jersey: Cooperative Test Division of Educational Testing Service), 1964 and Arthur N. Applebee, *Literature in the Secondary School: Studies of Curriculum and Instruction in the United States*, (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English), 1993.

all.<sup>84</sup> For example, many educators published articles in the high school edition of *The English Journal* to advocate for the importance of *Mockingbird* in literature programs. Some discussed how the “moral principles” of characters in the novel outweighed concerns about the book’s “demeaning” portrayal of Black characters.<sup>85</sup> Others suggested there could be no “more noble goal” in the “language arts classroom” than “moral education” and counted *Mockingbird* among the texts that could help teachers foster “a new generation of democratic citizens.”<sup>86</sup>

This chapter posits that one reason people have celebrated the potential for *Mockingbird* to provide moral conversion for readers and debated the book in terms of moral edification is because many readers inherit these morally-focused interpretations of the novel from the tradition of sentimental literature. Scholars most often discuss sentimental literature as a genre or rhetorical mode of storytelling aimed to promote moral and social reform by evoking certain feelings in readers.<sup>87</sup> The examples from *Mockingbird*’s popular reception outlined below surface some instances when the didactic rhetorical modes of sentimental literature appear as a way of reading and interpreting the novel. These examples suggest a tendency to forgo an understanding of *Mockingbird* as a complicated textual product of its

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<sup>84</sup> For examples of such materials see ; Michael Macaluso, “Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* Today: Coming to Terms with Race, Racism, and America’s Novel,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Vol. 61, no. 3 (November 2017), 279-287; James A. Phillips “High School English IV: Social Consciousness in the American Novel, 1900-1950,” University of Kansas Extramural Independent Study Center, (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1969); Daniel Sigward, *Teaching Mockingbird: A Facing History and Ourselves Study Guide*, (Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves National Foundation, 2014).

<sup>85</sup> Sandra Stotsky, “Academic Guidelines for Selecting Multiethnic and Multicultural Literature,” *English Journal*, vol. 83, no. 2 (February 1994): 27-34.

<sup>86</sup> Barbara Osburg, “Building a New Generation of Democratic Citizens through Literature,” *English Journal* vol. 89, no. 2 (November 1999), 111-118.

<sup>87</sup> Shirley Samuels, says that “During the nineteenth century, women writers in the United States often coupled anti-Enlightenment emphasis on emotion with domestic plots that spoke to the power of feelings to effect right action.” *Sentimentalism and Domestic Fiction.*”

historical moment and instead concentrate on de- historicized, ostensibly universal moral takeaways.<sup>88</sup> This chapter suggests this tendency, which emerges in how people interpret, celebrate, teach, and contest this book, is symptomatic of what I call a sentimental hermeneutic—an interpretive mode that promotes and seeks personal and social transformation through the act of reading.

Sentimental interpretations of *Mockingbird* among teachers, students, and general readers universalize the historical particularities of the book and focus on moral lessons about empathy, tolerance, and acceptance. Such interpretations frame the novel as a universally applicable coming of age story, in which the protagonist, a young girl named Scout, grows up in Maycomb, a small fictional town in Alabama. The novel's plot spans three summers during which Scout, her brother Jem, and their best friend Dill grow up to see the golden hues of their small-town community dissolve into the stark realities of racism, hypocrisy, and injustice.

Sentimental interpretations of the book that focus on the universal coming of age story often obscure the historical specificity of the novel. Although the novel is set during the height of Jim Crow segregation in the 1930s, it is very much a product of the civil rights era of the 1950s when it was written. *Mockingbird* features the effects of racial segregation, but its themes and messages fit within debates that followed the ruling in the supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which called for the racial integration of public schools in the United States. The book, like the *Brown* decision, comments on the malleable

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<sup>88</sup> Jay, "Queer Children and Representative Men," 490.

minds of young children, projects hope for racial equality onto young people, and places the possibility of racial justice in future social changes.

Some of the fears of inter-racial marriage and sex, which were expressed in resistance to the *Brown* decision, are also at play in the novel.<sup>89</sup> One of the novel's central plotlines narrates the wrongful conviction and murder of a Black man named Tom Robinson, after a white woman, Mayella Ewell, kisses him and then falsely accuses him of raping her. Scout's father, Atticus Finch, unsuccessfully tries to convince a jury of white men to see beyond their racial prejudice to the facts of Tom's innocence. The novel contrasts the tragedy of racial melodrama in the courtroom to the children's playful fear and fascination with their 'ghostly' neighbor, Arthur "Boo" Radley. In the end of the novel, Mayella's father, Bob Ewell, attempts to kill Scout and Jem. Their reclusive neighbor Boo comes out of his house and saves the children by stabbing Ewell with a kitchen knife.

Sentimental interpretations of the novel often focus on moral lessons—most frequently the imperative to look at the world from another person's perspective, the heroism of Atticus's countercultural thinking, and that it is a sin to kill an innocent person because of the color of their skin. Among the purported moral lessons discussed in reading guides and lessons plans about *Mockingbird* is the potential for characters' moral conversions within the novel to translate into "the reader's converted heart."<sup>90</sup> Some teaching guides and online homework help sites celebrate Scout's growth from childhood ignorance to racial

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<sup>89</sup> See Jane Dailey, "The Theology of Massive Resistance: Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred," in *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction* edited by Clive Webb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 151-180.

<sup>90</sup> Jay, *White Writers, Race Matters*, 280.

enlightenment.<sup>91</sup> Others interpret Scout as a synecdoche for the Southern United States as a whole who must grow up and out of their racist ways like this little girl.<sup>92</sup> The online homework help site “LitCharts,” for example, suggests “Miss Maudie and Atticus truly encourage Jem, Scout, and the reader to understand that Maycomb,” as an fictional symbol of the Southern United States, “has the potential to undergo the exact same kind of improvement that the novel suggests individuals can.”<sup>93</sup> Interpretations that highlight Scout’s transformation subsequently cast Scout as the model of growth for readers.<sup>94</sup> They suggest that readers can learn alongside Scout that racial prejudice is immoral and become model citizens themselves—perhaps even able to convince others to change their racist ways, as Scout does in the scene where a group of white men comes to hurt Tom Robinson and Scout encourages them to leave.

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<sup>91</sup> See Margot Stern Strom, “Why ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’ Still Resonates Today,” *Facing History and Ourselves* (November 12, 2014), <https://facingtoday.facinghistory.org/why-to-kill-a-mockingbird-still-resonates-today>; PaperOwl’s discussion of Scout’s Character development suggests Scout “matures” from her “ignorance” about racism at the beginning of the novel to a sense of maturity at the end of the novel in which she understand “the world around her with new eyes, she sees things other than herself and views the experiences of others, and how her actions affect them, instead of just what affects her and what she has to do for herself.” “Character Development in To Kill A Mockingbird,” *PapersOwl* (October 24, 2019), <https://papersowl.com/examples/character-development-in-to-kill-a-mockingbird/>

<sup>92</sup> For scholarly commentary on this synecdoche in the text see Holly Blackford is critical of the way the novel frames Scout’s awakening as a kind of “synecdoche” for the racial “awakening” and slumbering of this small Southern town. *Mockingbird Passing: Closeted Traditions and Sexual Curiosities in Harper Lee’s Novel* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 126. Eric Sundquist discusses the way *Mockingbird* draws parallels between character growth and national growth in “Blues for Atticus Finch,” when he writes, “Against the grain of its ineffable goodness, *To Kill a Mockingbird* includes as well this powerful undertow of southern resistance and, in its half-disguise of violent racial realities, inscribes in an equally dangerous children’s story the nightmare of America’s growing up,” “Blues for Atticus Finch: Scottsboro, Brown, and Harper Lee,” 185. Naa Baako Ako-Adjei argues against the way “Poor, Southern whites” are portrayed in the novel as “pliable and redeemable if people like the Finches are given time to correct how they think.” “Why It’s Time Schools Stopped Teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” *Transition*, No. 122, White A\$\$hols (2017), 194.

<sup>93</sup> “Small Town Southern Life: Theme Analysis” *LitCharts* <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/to-kill-a-mockingbird/themes/small-town-southern-life>.

<sup>94</sup> The teaching guide for *To Kill a Mockingbird* published by the curricular organization Facing History and Ourselves makes a similar claim about Scout as a model of growth for students reading the book. See [https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/publications/Teaching\\_Mockingbird\\_1.pdf](https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/publications/Teaching_Mockingbird_1.pdf)

Interpretations of *Mockingbird* that emphasize moral takeaways are predicated on claims that certain characters in the novel *are* moral and *do* change. Yet not everyone agrees with interpretations of Atticus as an exemplary moral hero or that things change in Scout's heart or in the fictional town of Maycomb. Naa Baako Ako-Adjei, for instance, argues that at best Atticus' moral example "plead[s] the case for a very gradualist approach to ending white supremacy" and Eric Sundquist suggests Scout and the other children do not in fact grow up, but instead "remain ever poised for the hypothesis" of social change.<sup>95</sup> There is textual evidence to support interpretations of moral transformations in *Mockingbird*, but there is also plenty of textual evidence to complicate it.

Images of a broken clock, the dilapidated courthouse, and the confederate relics scattered throughout the novel are all symbols of stagnancy in Maycomb.<sup>96</sup> Scout describes Maycomb as "a tired old town" in which "the courthouse sagged in the square" and where "people moved slowly...ambled...shuffled...took their time about everything."<sup>97</sup> Themes of stagnancy and resistance to change help disclose to the reader that racism is entrenched in so many of Maycomb's institutions: churches, schools, the courthouse.<sup>98</sup>

Sentimental interpretations of *Mockingbird* often focus on moral lessons about anti-prejudice and tolerance as a way of resolving the bleak ending in which arguably none of the institutions and very few people in Maycomb change after the conviction and murder of

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<sup>95</sup> Naa BaakoAko-Adjei, 199 and Sundquist, 206. Naa BaakoAko-Adjei also argues that far from advocating social change *Mockingbird* "was apologia for prolonging white supremacy," (200).

<sup>96</sup> There are quite a few references to confederate relics in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. For example, there are "Confederate caps" backstage at the school auditorium (295) and the Maycomb County High School band plays the confederate anthem *Dixie* at the pageant (297). Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002).

<sup>97</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 5-6.

<sup>98</sup> These images and themes provide what Eric Sundquist refers to as "an allegory of the South's own temporality and its public philosophy of race relations: 'Go slow.'" "Blues for Atticus Finch," 186.



Tom Robinson. As the narrator Scout explains, “Maycomb was interested by the news of Tom’s death for perhaps two days.”<sup>99</sup> Depictions of Maycomb as slothful and residents as averse to change contrast with the rapid growth and development of the children—Scout, Jem, and Dill. The hope for change in Maycomb is preserved interpretively in the “converted hearts” of children to change the institutions and people that made Tom Robinson’s “senseless killing” possible and forgettable.<sup>100</sup>

Educators and readers promote the relevance and importance of *Mockingbird* on the basis of such interpretations. The *Facing History and Ourselves* teaching guide, for instance, suggests that the moral growth of characters, whether fully realized in the plot or not, can help readers “apply principles [of moral development] to both the characters in the novel and their own lives.”<sup>101</sup> Whatever stark realities of institutional racism remain unchanged in the world of *Mockingbird* and our own, many readers move forward from the book with the hope that the words and actions of fictional character like Atticus leave a lasting impression on readers to become “a generation of real-life Jems and Scouts.”<sup>102</sup> Such interpretations prioritize literary resolution through the possibility of moral transformation in and outside the novel.

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<sup>99</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 275.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. and Jay, *White Writers, Race Matters*, 280.

<sup>101</sup> Sigward, *Teaching Mockingbird: A Facing History and Ourselves Study Guide*, 12.

[https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/publications/Teaching\\_Mockingbird\\_1.pdf](https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/publications/Teaching_Mockingbird_1.pdf)

<sup>102</sup> Michael Margolick writes, “Atticus Finch, who taught a community and his two young children about justice, decency, and tolerance, and who drove a generation of real-life Jems and Scouts to become lawyers themselves?” “At the Bar; To Attack a Lawyer In ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’: An Iconoclast Takes Aim At A Hero,” *New York Times*, February 28, 1992. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/02/28/movies/bar-attack-lawyer-kill-mockingbird-iconoclast-takes-aim-hero.html>

People often discuss literature in this way, claiming the moral of a story has the potential to change the lives of individual readers and create a better society.<sup>103</sup> Following her death, President Barack Obama made a public statement that Harper Lee “changed America for the better” as her novel showed us “the importance of striving for justice in our own lives, our communities, and our country.”<sup>104</sup> Belief in the power of literature to transform social ills such as racism in the United States is an emotionally powerful claim, one that I do not aim to dismiss out of a recognition that stories have significant and unforeseeable effects on the people who read them. This chapter makes the case that these assumptions about morality, social change, and literature are worth interrogating and contextualizing precisely because they are so widely accepted and celebrated.

### *Sentimental Literary Conventions*

This chapter suggests that many readers inherit these morally-focused interpretations of *Mockingbird* from the tradition of sentimental literature. This literary tradition uses characteristic rhetorical conventions to 1) position the reader as the recipient of moral lessons; 2) encourage readers to emulate the moral values and transformations of fictional characters; and 3) offer a model of sympathetic identification meant to initiate personal and social reform through the literary practice of imagining oneself as another.<sup>105</sup> In many ways, *Mockingbird's* narrative fits within these and other sentimental conventions. This section outlines some instances when *Mockingbird* uses sentimental modes of storytelling in order to

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<sup>103</sup> Patel, “How To Kill a Mockingbird Changed Their Lives.”

<sup>104</sup> Eliza Collins, “Obama pays tribute to Harper Lee.”

<sup>105</sup> Elizabeth Barnes’ comments about the relationship between sentimental fiction and edifying authority are helpful for establishing a sense of the relationship between reading sentimental fiction and moral or social edification. As she explains that “By evoking readers’ feelings in order to modify readers’ behavior, sentimental fiction effectively bridges the gap between internal and external authority, rendering the latter—represented by the novel itself—virtually indistinguishable from the reader’s own ‘instincts.’” *States of Sympathy*, 9.

contextualize how dimensions of these literary conventions also emerge in expectations about and interpretations of the book.

The aforementioned examples illustrate how people center morality in their debates, teaching materials, and discussions of *Mockingbird*. Yet both public conversations and scholarly inquiry about the novel fail to clarify that claims about morality are inextricable from religious ideologies and discourses.<sup>106</sup> My analysis clarifies that if there is a moral to the story, as many readers and educators claim, it is not contextually disengaged, secular, or universal.<sup>107</sup> Acknowledging the religious lineage of these sentimental literary conventions and hermeneutics helps surface some of the religious particularities of the moral assumptions people often bring to this book and sets up my analysis of moral and empathetic frameworks within it.

One avenue for exploring the more ostensibly religious components at the center of moral interpretations of the book is to consider the narrative structure of *Mockingbird* in relation to the conventions of sentimental literature. The genre of sentimental literature began in England but was further developed and popularized in the United States, primarily by white, middle-class, women authors, during the late-18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Novels written in the sentimental mode are often characterized by emotionally provocative appeals about particular social problems. The genre is known for being pedagogical in nature, meant to

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<sup>106</sup> In *Love the Sin*, Pellegrini and Jakobsen name how there are secular moral frameworks and arguments, but they are not as common in the U.S. public sphere. Secular moral frameworks are also not clearly articulated in *Mockingbird's* moral frameworks, which I argue are more connected to Protestant liberal frameworks for morality and religiosity.

<sup>107</sup> For more on the relationship between religion, secularism, and literature see Cady and Fessenden, *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*; Fessenden, "The Secular as Opposed to What?" *New Literary History* vol. 38, no. 4 (2007): 631-637; Michael W. Kaufmann, "The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession," *New Literary History* Vol. 38, No. 4(2007): 607-627.

“educate the feelings,” and for “encouraging readers to emulate the religious diligence depicted” in the text.<sup>108</sup> Some of the most recognizable novels of sentimental literature from the United States include Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868) and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852).

During the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans developed and adapted the sentimental genre as devotional reading became “an important source of spiritual instruction” across various Protestant denominations in the United States.<sup>109</sup> According to Claudia Stokes, devotional practices and sentimental literature went hand in hand in this religious movement.<sup>110</sup> The popularity of devotional reading informed the genre of sentimental literature. As reading was increasingly associated with “self-improvement and moral reform,” the norms for writing and interpreting literature also emphasized moral formation.<sup>111</sup> Devotional books provided opportunities for “emulative reading” in which literary conventions encouraged readers to identify with fictional characters and imitate those characters devotion to particular virtues, charity, or prayer.<sup>112</sup>

The narrative structure of *Mockingbird* provides a helpful example of how sentimental literature positions the reader as the recipient of moral lessons in ways that fit within the devotional dimensions of the sentimental literary tradition.<sup>113</sup> Throughout the book, the adult narrator, Jean Louise, recounts her experiences growing up and facing hard realities about

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<sup>108</sup> Jay, *White Writers, Race Matters*, 14.

<sup>109</sup> Stokes, 15.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. For more on the connection between religious movements in the United States and devotional reading see David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* and Candy Gunther Brown, *Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880*.

<sup>111</sup> Stokes, 13.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>113</sup> As Jay, asserts, “positions the reader as an addressee of moral lessons,” “Queer Children,” 490.

the social norms in her small town. The children of the novel—the narrator’s childhood persona, Scout, her brother Jem, and their best friend Dill—all consistently turn to trusted adults to help them make sense of their experiences. The story is told from Scout’s point of view, which encourages the reader to identify with these children and, as Gregory Jay asserts, “positions the reader as an addressee of moral lessons” in the text.<sup>114</sup>

Literary scholars debate the degree to which Scout and the other children accept or reject the moral lessons of their elders. Yet notably, the two most prominent moral lessons the children learn are central to the reader’s ability to resolve important plot points from the book. Atticus’s lesson to Scout that “you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view” is key to the resolution of the Boo Radley plotline.<sup>115</sup> While Scout, Jem, and Dill fear going near the Radley’s house at the beginning of the novel, in the penultimate scene, Scout stands on Boo’s front porch, seeing her neighborhood and herself anew from Boo’s perspective.

Second, in the titular line from the novel, Atticus instructs Jem, “shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit ‘em, but remember it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.”<sup>116</sup> Miss Maudie—the Finch family neighbor—subsequently explains Atticus’s rationale: “Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don’t eat up people’s gardens, don’t nest in corncribs, they don’t do one thing but sing their hearts out for us.”<sup>117</sup> At different points in the novel characters allude to both Tom and Boo as

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<sup>114</sup> Jay, “Queer Children,” 490.

<sup>115</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 33.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

mockingbirds.<sup>118</sup> This moral lesson helps both the children in the novel and the reader recognize and knit together the plotlines of Tom Robinson's wrongful conviction and murder and Boo Radley's selfless heroism. Thus, the moral lessons offered to the children in the novel are also the lessons through which readers interpret the plot of *Mockingbird*, which further emphasizes the centrality of moral edification in the narrative structure of the book.

*Mockingbird* also depicts characters learning moral lessons from literature in ways that correspond with literary and religious conventions of the sentimental tradition. For example, the child protagonists from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* learned spiritual lessons by reading John Bunyan's Christian allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, just as Scout learns moral lessons from reading.<sup>119</sup> *Mockingbird* thus also positions the reader as the recipient of moral lessons through Scout's relationship to the novel within the novel: *The Grey Ghost*. In the first chapter of *Mockingbird*, Jem wins this children's mystery novel from Dill in a bet. The reader can assume this book circulates among the children because, in the final scene of *Mockingbird*, Scout has already read *The Grey Ghost* when Atticus pulls it off the shelf. In this scene, after Boo Radley has saved Scout and Jem from Bob Ewell's attack, Scout asks Atticus to read to her from this book. In a line that draws a parallel between her experience

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 275 and 317. The character Mr. B.B. Underwood alludes to the title of the book when he writes an article about Tom Robinson's murder by the guards at Enfield Prison Farm. Scout says Underwood "likened Tom's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children" in his article. Scout explicitly refers to Boo Radley as a Mockingbird when Atticus and Heck Tate decide not to share Boo's involvement in Ewell's death. She says, "Well, it's be sort of like shootin' a Mockingbird, wouldn't it?"

<sup>119</sup> Stokes, 14. Stokes explains that John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* "contained scenes of emulative reading" and that "sentimental texts often depicted the benefits of imitating devotional literature." She points out that this type of "readerly imitation is quite literal in Alcott's *Little Women*, in which the March sisters reenact and dramatize scenes from *The Pilgrim's Progress*." Although the children in *Mockingbird* do not directly emulate the story of *The Grey Ghost* they do perform and emulate the story of the town ghost, Boo Radley. Scout also recounts a story where "the class tied Eunice Ann Simpson to a chair and placed her in the furnace room" to emulate the Biblical story of Shadrach. Lee, *Mockingbird*, 133. These type of performances and play suggest another connection to the tradition of emulative reading from sentimental texts and devotional reading culture.

with Maycomb's ghost—Boo—and her interpretation of *The Grey Ghost*, Scout says: “An’ they chased him ‘n’ never could catch him ‘cause they didn’t know what he looked like, an’ Atticus, when they finally saw him, why he hadn’t done any of those things...Atticus, he was real nice.”<sup>120</sup> Scout recounts the moral of *The Grey Ghost* in this statement: sometimes even the people you fear most—the ghosts in the book or in the lore of your hometown—are “real nice.” Atticus reinforces Scout’s moral takeaway from *The Grey Ghost* when he replies, “most people are, Scout, when you finally see them.”<sup>121</sup> *Mockingbird* ends on this moral message from *The Grey Ghost* and accordingly implies that readers can take moral lessons from books such as *Mockingbird* and apply them to their lives as Scout exemplifies in the final pages of the story.

These examples illustrate some ways *Mockingbird* fits within literary conventions of the sentimental tradition. There are also details about the novel that help contextualize how aspects of this sentimental tradition sometimes emerge in approaches to reading the book. For example, the way popular approaches to reading *Mockingbird* tend to universalize its specific ‘Christian ethic’ into a-religious or universal message about tolerance and anti-prejudice have narrative parallels in the history of the sentimental tradition. Sentimental literature in the nineteenth-century makes frequent reference to specific denominational messages, but presents them in a way that makes them seem nondenominational. For instance, from a modern perspective, references to hymns in sentimental novels like *Little Women* may seem like a mundane aspect of religious life from the historical period. However, in historical context these references were intentional “literary endorsements,” challenging

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<sup>120</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 322-323.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

widespread conservative prohibitions about including hymns in congregational worship and promoting a “populist, anti-clerical spirit” that was not widely accepted across Protestant denominations at the time.<sup>122</sup> By placing these otherwise factionalizing references in the innocuous stories of domestic life, sentimental writers “contributed to the public perception of these sectarian beliefs as broadly non-denominational,” Stokes explains.<sup>123</sup> The trend of universalizing particular religious doctrines or ideas parallels how *Mockingbird*’s “Christian ethic,” which Lee herself acknowledged is often universalized into a secular moral tale in sentimental approaches to reading the book.<sup>124</sup> This chapter returns to the particularities of the religious ideas and scenes from *Mockingbird* in later sections to clarify some of the religious details of the ostensibly, universal moral lessons and values offered in the text and how they come to appear as the universal moral of the story.

### ***Sentimental Hermeneutics***

Contextualizing moral readings of *Mockingbird* within the sentimental tradition also helps clarify how historical religious practices like sentimental devotional reading can resurface in presumably secular methods of analysis such as New Criticism. Both historical sentimental forms of devotional reading and New Criticism emphasize the importance of moral ideas in literary interpretation and their potential transformative effect on readers. New Criticism became a dominant mode for interpreting texts in secondary schools throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>125</sup> This approach to interpretation

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<sup>122</sup> Stokes, 67-68.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>124</sup> Johnson, *Understanding To Kill a Mockingbird*, 215.

<sup>125</sup> See James Kelley, “What Teachers (Don’t) Say: A Grounded Theory Approach to Online Discussions of *To Kill a Mockingbird*” in *Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird*, ed. Michael Meyer (Lanham, MDD: Scarecrow Press, 2010) and Gregory Jay, *White Writers, Race Matters*.



deemphasizes historical context in order to highlight the meaning of literature intrinsic to the narrative and emphasizes the importance of moral ideas in literary interpretation.<sup>126</sup> The New Critical method was central to early scholarship about *Mockingbird* in teaching journals in the 1960s and 1970s, where high school teachers wrote about how students could learn moral lessons about racial tolerance through the “twin power of compassion and understanding” by developing empathy for characters in the novel like Tom Robinson and Boo Radley.<sup>127</sup>

Sentimental dimensions of New Criticism have been a mainstay when it comes to teaching *Mockingbird*. In 2009, James Kelley analyzed teacher’s comments in online forums about *Mockingbird*. He found that New Critical methods were central to how teachers responded to students’ questions about the novel, as teachers’ online comments frequently minimized historical elements of the book’s setting and production in favor of details about its characters’ morality.<sup>128</sup> These teachers also used fictional characters like Atticus Finch and Bob Ewell to discuss “moral character in the world” outside the novel.<sup>129</sup> By deemphasizing the novel’s social setting and focusing on the morality of the characters, the continued prevalence of New Criticism in secondary education has contributed to popular

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<sup>126</sup> Some scholars, such as Jennifer A. Williamson, have noted that modern New Critics were typically very critical of sentimental literature. Yet as Suzanne Clark has established that modern critics influenced by New Criticism ultimately didn’t establish an approach to literary interpretation that was separate from their critiques of sentimentality. She writes, “modernism rejected the sentimental, because modernism was sentimental. Modernism was still caught in a gendered dialectic which enclosed literature, making the text the object of a naturalized critical gaze.” *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 7. I have observed in these examples and in my exploration of Lionel Trilling’s scholarship in chapter 2, however, new critical approaches to reading that emphasize reading for what is ‘intrinsic’ to the text and for “moral imagination” actually share some basic techniques and priorities with sentimental hermeneutics. See Jennifer Williamson, ed., *The Sentimental Mode*, 10-12.

<sup>127</sup> Edwin Bruell, “Keen Scalpel on Racial Ills,” *The English Journal*, Vol. 53, No. 9 (Dec. 1964), 660.

<sup>128</sup> Kelley, “What Teachers (Don’t) Say,” 19.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

interpretations of *Mockingbird* that generalize the particularities of the text into a universal story about morality.<sup>130</sup>

Such a moral emphasis in reading practices corresponds to the conversionary aims of Protestant devotional reading. The intersection of devotional reading and sentimental literature promoted reading as a potential site of certain types of religious conversion and formation.<sup>131</sup> Antebellum Protestant writers across different denominations saw commercial print and reading culture as “an agent of Protestant evangelism” aimed at the “gentle instruction for the secular reader,” which many people believed could be more efficacious for conversion than sermons or tracts.<sup>132</sup> Christian writers and clergy in the antebellum period shaped commercial popular culture as “antebellum ministers and their close allies” in the United States distributed “a vast quantity of cheap, even free, print material” from tracts to fiction.<sup>133</sup> Protestant capitalists found that “American fiction, although a poor vehicle to teach dogmatic religion, was an excellent way to distribute cultural values that were rooted in Christians’ views about sin and salvation.”<sup>134</sup> Drawing on this evangelical tradition, sentimental writers aimed to express “Christian morality” and “Christ-like” characteristics of

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<sup>130</sup> Notably, New Critical approaches to interpretation do not focus on moral development of characters to better understand the social, political, religious, and historical conditions that might have shaped these characters lives. In this way, New Criticism as hermeneutic with sentimental parallels emphasizes moral development in the text and promotes moral transformation of readers in ways that might not acknowledge the particularities of the conditions of those moral choices. This gives extraordinary power to the morals offered in the text without outlining their particulars or questioning what specifically they offer readers beyond an ostensibly universally inclusive model for tolerance and anti-prejudice.

<sup>131</sup> See Claudie Stokes, *The Altar at Home*.

<sup>132</sup> R. Laurence Moore has illustrated some of the commercial interests that made the moral emphasis of devotional reading such a mainstay of popular culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century United States. Christian writers found that although fiction was not useful for teaching “dogmatic religion,” fictional texts could spread “cultural values that were rooted in Christians’ views about sin and salvation.” R. Laurence Moore, “Religion, Secularization, and the Shaping of the Culture Industry in Antebellum America,” 223.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

“love, sacrifice, and sympathy” through fictional characters, who could “inspire others to adopt those beliefs and behaviors.”<sup>135</sup> If moral values are loosely defined and uncontextualized in sentimental interpretations of *Mockingbird*, it does not reflect their universality, but instead speaks to the wide-reaching diffusion of Protestant Christian norms of morality and behavior in U.S. popular culture.<sup>136</sup>

In conversations, debates, and teaching materials about *Mockingbird*, people typically do not discuss reading this novel as devotional or frame the self-described life-changing experiences they have with the text as religious conversion.<sup>137</sup> Yet people do discuss how this novel can facilitate “emotional transformation[s]” for readers, “motivat[e] social justice activism,” and serve as a vehicle for addressing racial inequality in American society.<sup>138</sup> This phenomenon speaks to the lingering applications of sentimental hermeneutics for reading literature such as *Mockingbird*. The sentimental focus on moral edification is reflected in popular discussions and teaching guides that encourage readers to emulate characters in the novel and suggest moral lessons in the book can promote civic empathy and racial enlightenment for readers.

These sentimental moral approaches to the novel also reflect a synthesis between sentimental affective conversion and the discourse of racial liberalism. Such a synthesis is reflected in claims that *Mockingbird* can convert readers’ moral perspectives about racial prejudice. A brief discussion of racial liberalism is helpful for understanding why *Mockingbird* has often been read in terms of its moral messages because liberal racial discourse frames

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<sup>135</sup> Williamson, *Sentimental Appropriations*, 37.

<sup>136</sup> Moore, “Religion, Secularization, and the Shaping of the Culture Industry in Antebellum America,” 223.

<sup>137</sup> Patel, “How To Kill a Mockingbird Changed Their Lives.”

<sup>138</sup> Jay, *White Writers, Race Matters*, 24 and 45.

racism as a moral or psychological issue. As a philosophical tradition in the United States, racial liberalism has roots in the abolitionist movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was developed more formally by anthropologists, social scientists, and psychologists in the 1940s-1950s.<sup>139</sup> In opposition to the eugenic explanations of racial difference, racial liberals in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century discussed race as a social construct rather than a biological given. Racial liberalism posited race as socially constructed and racism as moral and psychological. This framework marked a positive shift away from the reigning pseudo-scientific discourse of eugenics. Yet racial liberalism framed racial problems as matters of individual prejudice remedied by moral reform, which fell notably short of acknowledging and addressing the systemic problems at the heart of racism in the United States.<sup>140</sup>

Liberal racial discourse was influential during the era of *Mockingbird's* production, publication, and popularization in public schools. At this time, social reformers argued that becoming blind to race would eliminate the problem of racism.<sup>141</sup> Some of these reformers also suggested literature could be powerful for addressing racism in ways that parallel the conversionary aims of the sentimental tradition I have outlined so far in this dissertation. For

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<sup>139</sup> See Ibram X. Kendi, "Reigning Assimilationists and Defiant Black Power: The Struggle to Define and Regulate Racist Ideas" in *New Perspectives on the Black Intellectual Tradition* edited by Keisha N. Blain, Christopher Cameron, and Ashley D. Farmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 157-174.

<sup>140</sup> For more on the assimilationist ideas, see Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation, 2016); Pat Shipman, *The Evolution of Racism: Human Difference and the Use and Abuse of Science* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994); and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

<sup>141</sup> Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Franz Boas were part of a group of anthropologists who promoted definitions of race through tolerance education in public schools in order to counter popular definitions of race based in eugenics. See Zoë Burkholder's *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race, 1900-1954* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Ruth Benedict, *Race: Science and Politics* (New York: Viking, 1940) and *Patterns of Culture* (New York: Mariner Books, 2005).

example, American anthropologist Ruth Benedict wrote that “English teachers have a strategic position in helping to create a new world able to free itself from the curse of racism.”<sup>142</sup> Benedict posited teachers could use fictional literature to “open [students’] eyes to human dignity and frailty, which is independent of classifications that are based on race and creed and country origin.”<sup>143</sup> “Children thus fortified,” she concluded, “will be inoculated against racism.”<sup>144</sup>

These educators expressed pedagogical optimism in the ability for literature to ‘inoculate’ racism by teaching children not to acknowledge racial differences and imagined students’ emotional experiences with literature were foundational to realizing this liberal racial ideal. This optimism remained influential in U.S. teaching journals and classrooms for decades and continues to emerge in conversations about the impact of reading fictional literature today.<sup>145</sup> *Mockingbird* is just one example of the literary synthesis between racial liberalism and sentimental approaches to reading literature for moral and social formation.

Fred Hobson explores other literary examples in his study of autobiographies by white Southern writers in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and outlines some of the religious particularities of this synthesis in ways that are relevant to the religious details of *Mockingbird*. Hobson’s study explores how the liberal racial discourse in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Southern autobiographies often employed the language of religious conversion such as “sin,’ ‘guilt,’ ‘blindness,’ ‘seeing the light,’ ‘repentance,’ [and] ‘redemption’” in ways that align with the

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<sup>142</sup> Ruth Benedict, “Racism is Vulnerable,” *The English Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 6 (Jun. 1946), 299.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> There has been a shift from the colorblind emphasis of racial liberalism to the anti-racist emphasis of critical race theory, but fiction literature has remained part of the conversations about how to encourage readers and students to develop these colorblind or anti-racist perspectives.

sentimental tradition's historic ties to devotional reading.<sup>146</sup> Hobson argues that racial conversions fit within the framework of explicitly Christian conversions as “willing participants in a harsh, segregated society, confess racial wrongdoings and are ‘converted,’ in varying degrees, from racism to something approaching racial enlightenment.”<sup>147</sup> This conversionary language, which is present throughout *Mockingbird*, draws upon the religious conversions of evangelical Protestant Christianity, but frames the transformation in terms of racial enlightenment.

Many popular interpretations of *Mockingbird* accordingly trace Scout's conversion from racist to racial liberal and offer this transformation as a model for readers.<sup>148</sup> These interpretations promote a sentimental hermeneutic, which focus on the possibility that *Mockingbird* can transform readers' moral and racial perspectives through the readerly practice of identifying with a literary character and their moral virtues and transformations. Such hope for readerly conversion revolves around sentimental modes of sympathetic identification—an expression of sentimental emulative reading, which encourages readers to imagine themselves *as or in the place of* fictional characters. Sympathetic identification is also explicitly endorsed in the narrative of *Mockingbird* when Atticus suggests Scout should try to understand others by “consider[ing] things from [their] point of view” by “climb[ing] into [their] skin and walk[ing] around in it.”<sup>149</sup> Scholars such as Lauren Berlant warn against sympathetic identification, because these sentimental forms of identifying with characters

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<sup>146</sup> Hobson, *But Now I See*, 2.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> See Sundquist, “Blues for Atticus Finch” for more analysis and examples of the interpretive emphasis on conversion.

<sup>149</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 33.

most often ignore “irreducible social differences,” as I will explore further in my analysis of Atticus’s advice to Scout in the next section.<sup>150</sup>

Strategies of sympathetic identification and emulative readerly transformation animate sentimental conventions in *Mockingbird* and are prevalent in sentimental interpretations of the book that prompt readers to emulate Atticus’ moral heroism or Scout’s journey to racial enlightenment. Examining the religious particularities of these moral virtues and transformations helps highlight some of the potential limitations of sentimental conventions represented in the text and in approaches to interpreting it.

While aspects of the novel’s structure and content lend themselves to the moral emphasis of sentimental hermeneutics, this method of interpretation is not the only or even most useful strategy for understanding the moral lessons in *Mockingbird*. In fact, towards the end of the chapter, I explore how sentimental hermeneutics may obscure important interpretive possibilities and suggest *Mockingbird* may express reservations about the possibilities of cultural change through individual moral transformation, which are lost in sentimental interpretations of the text. Instead of following the universalizing tendencies of the sentimental hermeneutic, I outline the historic and religious particularities of moral lessons in *Mockingbird*. In the next section, for instance, I analyze Atticus’s moral heroism as constructed within the religious frameworks of Protestant liberalism. The fact that people seldom acknowledge these religious details in their discussion of Atticus’s heroism speaks to the way that sentimental forms of writing and reading so often universalize religious particularities, which obscures important details about morality in literature. My analysis

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<sup>150</sup> Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” 641.

suggests that Atticus's ostensibly universal moral virtues are not as inclusive or progressive as sentimental approaches to the novel have made them appear.

***Embodied Realities of Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Atticus Finch's Universal Perspectives***

Atticus Finch has been at the heart of popular readings of *Mockingbird* that emphasize morality since the novel's publication in 1960. Throughout classroom materials and popular culture, Atticus has been celebrated as a "hero archetype" who teaches the moral lessons necessary for upholding democratic values in an increasingly diverse nation.<sup>151</sup> Literary reading guides created for classrooms such as Harold Bloom's *Literary Themes: The Hero's Journey* refer to Atticus as "the moral center against which everything else in the novel is measured."<sup>152</sup> Many scholars and readers see Atticus as a virtuous lawyer who heroically confronts racism in his hometown by defending an innocent Black man in court.<sup>153</sup> Others argue that Atticus is not a hero at all.<sup>154</sup> In this reading, Atticus not only fails to adequately defend his innocent client, Tom Robinson, but ultimately upholds racist institutions in his community in the process.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Marlisa Santos, "Stand Up, your father's passing?: Atticus Finch as Hero Archetype" in *Bloom's Literary Themes: The Hero's Journey* edited by Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009).

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 207. President Barack Obama also referenced Atticus in his farewell address as "one of the great characters in American fiction" and urged listeners to heed Finch's words: "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." Barack Obama, "President Obama's Farewell Address," 10 January 2017, Obama Whitehouse Archives, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/farewell>

<sup>153</sup> See for example Trevor Cook, "Well, Heck?: Confounding Grace in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*," *Christianity & Literature* vol. 66, no. 4: 656-674 and Claudia Durst Johnson, "The Secret Courts of Men's Hearts: Code and Law in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*," *Studies in American Fiction*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Autumn 1991), 129-139.

<sup>154</sup> See for example Naa Baako Ako-Adjei, "Why It's Time Schools Stopped Teaching *To Kill A Mockingbird*"; Joseph Crespino, "The Strange Career of Atticus Finch," *Southern Cultures* Vol. 6, No. 2 (2000), 9-30.

<sup>155</sup> Steven Lubet, "Reconstructing Atticus Finch," *Michigan Law Review* 97 (1999), 1339-1377 and Malcolm Gladwell, "The Courthouse Ring: Atticus Finch and the limits of Southern Liberalism," *The New Yorker*, August 3, 2009, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/08/10/the-courthouse-ring>.



Debates about Atticus as moral hero or paternalistic racist intensified when Harper Lee's *Go Set a Watchman* was published in 2015.<sup>156</sup> Many readers expressed shock at the scenes in *Go Set a Watchman* in which Atticus openly supports segregation and makes racist comments about how Black Americans “are still in their childhood as a people.”<sup>157</sup> For others *Go Set a Watchman* affirmed their long-standing critique of Atticus's racist worldview.<sup>158</sup> Even after the controversy of *Go Set a Watchman*, Atticus Finch continues to play a starring role as a moral hero in many readers' imaginations. From contemporary revivals such as Aaron Sorkin's 2018 adaptation of *Mockingbird* for Broadway to the steady growth of the name Atticus on the list of most popular baby names in the U.S. since 2004, Atticus's career as a courtroom hero and moral teacher may be in question, but it seems far from over.<sup>159</sup>

One reason scholars argue Atticus has found such a prominent place among classic American heroes from fiction is that he exemplifies and refines the familiar image of the hero popularized during the American Romantic period—a nineteenth century literary and philosophical movement that emphasized individualism, nature, and emotion.<sup>160</sup> Like the literary hero of American Romanticism, Atticus privileges his individual conscience over his social reputation, is rejected by society for taking a moral stance, and triumphs through self-

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<sup>156</sup> Although first advertised as a sequel, *Go Set a Watchman* is now widely understood to be Lee's first draft of *Mockingbird*. See Keith Collins, “See where ‘Go Set a Watchman’ overlaps with ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’ word-for-word,” *Quartz*, July 14, 2015, updated January, 18, 2019, <https://qz.com/452650/harper-lee-revisions/>

<sup>157</sup> Harper Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015).

<sup>158</sup> See Naa Baako Ako-Adjei, “Why It's Time Schools Stopped Teaching *To Kill A Mockingbird*.”

<sup>159</sup> See Vinson Cunningham, “Black and White in ‘Slave Play’ and ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’” *The New Yorker*, 17 December, 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/12/24/black-and-white-in-slave-play-and-to-kill-a-mockingbird>; Elizabeth A. Harris, “The Name Atticus Acquires Unwelcome Association,” *New York Times*, 14 July 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/15/nyregion/the-name-atticus-acquires-an-unwelcome-association.html>; see also Emily Temple, “Why is everyone still naming their babies ‘Atticus?’,” *Lit Hub*, June 7, 2021 <https://lithub.com/why-is-everyone-still-naming-their-babies-atticus/>

<sup>160</sup> Holly Blackford, 45.

reflection rather than socialization.<sup>161</sup> This literary archetype was adapted to the U.S. context from its popularity in Europe by authors such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, who portrayed the hero archetype as self-reliant even at the risk of social ostracism in his essay “Heroism.”<sup>162</sup>

Literary scholars frequently compare Atticus to Emerson due to thematic similarities between Atticus and the archetype of the Romantic hero. They argue that throughout *Mockingbird* Atticus promotes Emersonian principles of transcendence, individual conscience, and discernment of higher moral codes.<sup>163</sup> Atticus’s individualism, nonconformity, and talent, Holly Blackford argues, make him a model of Emerson’s “representative man”—Emerson’s notion that the transcendental ‘one’ expresses itself through the qualities of certain individuals who are subsequently delegated to represent their era or community.<sup>164</sup> Because Atticus’s plot lines revolve around the racial melodrama of the courtroom, scholars such as Joseph Crespino have used comparisons between Atticus and Emerson to explore racial liberalism in *Mockingbird*.<sup>165</sup> These scholars have not, however, analyzed Emerson and Atticus as religious liberals, whose religious beliefs are deeply embedded in both their moral codes and racial philosophies.

This section expands the scholarly comparison between Atticus and Emerson by examining Atticus as a character who reflects *religious* liberalism and exemplifies aspects of

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<sup>161</sup> Blackford, 45.

<sup>162</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Heroism* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1841). Emerson concludes his essay by summarizing an aspect of his self-reliant philosophy with a line on the hero: “...let us each heroically, by Faith in the Divine Love *within*, resolve to renounce all associations, habits, and practices which we have discovered to be detrimental to the completion of our *manhood*.”

<sup>163</sup> See Holly Blackford’s *Mockingbird Passing*; Joseph Crespino’s “The Strange Career of Atticus Finch”; Fred Erisman, “The Romantic Regionalism of Harper Lee,” *The Alabama Review*, 24, no. 2, April 1973, 122-136; Laurie Champion’s “When You Finally See Them”; and Gregory Jay’s “Queer Children and Representative Men.”

<sup>164</sup> Blackford, 15.

<sup>165</sup> Crespino, 28.

Emersonian religious transcendentalism. Such a comparison provides the opportunity to highlight the Protestant particularities of Atticus's moral code and situate them in historical context. This comparison explores how Protestant liberalism plays a central role in the book's construction of moral lessons about racial inequality. Investigating the religious liberalism at the heart of Atticus' moral heroism surfaces how Atticus's religious convictions play a central role in constructing racial differences in the novel. My analysis of Atticus's religious liberalism can also provide a way of understanding how racism is constructed as a moral rather than institutional problem in popular interpretations of *Mockingbird*.

Joseph Crespino and Gregory Jay have challenged the idea of Atticus as a moral hero by outlining the limits of his racial liberalism.<sup>166</sup> This section explores the limits of Atticus's *religious* liberalism to complicate typical moral takeaways from *Mockingbird*. It does so by analyzing how religion and race work together in Atticus's moral code in a way that emulates what Toni Morrison describes as Emerson's "highly problematic construction of the American"—an ostensibly democratic and virtuous identity—"as a new white man."<sup>167</sup> Showing the limits of both religious and racial liberalism provides a helpful foundation for my project-long exploration of how sentimental hermeneutics may suppress certain religious, ideological, and social perspectives by making the religious norms of one perspective appear secular and universal.

This section explores how both Emerson and Atticus have been made into American heroes on the basis of certain kinds of liberal visions. When we press the basis of their shared visions, we see that however forward looking their points of view may seem, their

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid. and Jay, "Queer Children," 508.

<sup>167</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 39.

perspectives depend upon forgetting important aspects of identity and history. Emerson's imagery of the transparent eyeball and Atticus' famous lesson to walk around in someone else's skin also untether experience from the body in ways that claim to provide a universal point of view. Yet both metaphors ultimately reveal experiences that in practice, historically, have been constructed within the particular power and privilege of white and often Protestant men.

My critique of Atticus's "simple trick" of walking around in another person's skin is one way of illustrating the limits of sentimental forms of sympathetic identification, as both strategies have the potential to universalize one perspective at the potential exclusion of others. Without detailed attention to the historical, cultural, and social contexts of both the person empathizing and the person or character they are empathizing with, such activities may minimize rather than illuminate the significance of social and cultural context for interpersonal understanding.<sup>168</sup> Atticus's simple trick, as a model for readerly empathy in this book and the sentimental tradition more broadly, may provide false optimism about empathetic outcomes and possibilities.

If we acknowledge the oft ignored positionalities of their embodied metaphors, Emerson may not be all-seeing nor Atticus outstandingly empathetic. Their access to universal understanding of others is not dependent on their efforts to adapt their ways of seeing or thinking to the perspectives of racial, gendered, and class others, but a naturalizing imperative for these groups to adapt to a normalized religiosity of white, Protestant ways of

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<sup>168</sup> For more on empathy, reading, and interpersonal understanding see Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Kathleen Lundeen "Who has the Right to Feel?: The Ethics of Literary Empathy," *Literature and Ethical Criticism*, vol. 32. No. 2, (Summer 1998), 261-271; Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*.

seeing and being in the world. Exploring the synthesis of religious and racial liberalism in Emerson's and Atticus's respective moral frameworks can help explicate how what may appear in literary metaphors to be enlightened, inclusive points of view may ultimately extend and universalize certain religious, ideological, and ontological possibilities while suppressing others.<sup>169</sup>

### *Emerson and Atticus as Religious Liberals*

Outlining Emerson's religious liberalism helps surface some religious particularities of Atticus's celebrated moral heroism. According to scholars of U.S. religious history such as Matthew Hedstrom, Emerson's "transcendental spirituality" was "foundational" to the development of religious liberalism in the United States—a religious movement within Protestant Christianity that was "intellectually engaged, psychologically oriented, and focused on personal experience."<sup>170</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was a scholar and Congregationalist minister, trained at Harvard Divinity School, who left his ministerial post at Second Church Boston over a disagreement with his congregation. Emerson argued that the congregation should no longer practice the Eucharistic rite because it committed the fetishizing errors of Roman Catholic materialism.<sup>171</sup> Emerson's critiques of Catholic and Protestant ecclesial authority helped make him a leader of the transcendentalist movement, a

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<sup>169</sup> The language in this sentence draws upon Fessenden's idea from *Culture and Redemption*, which I use as a primary academic concern throughout this project that "far from safeguarding an arena for democratic flourishing," Tracy Fessenden explains "[have] functioned instead to promote particular forms of religious possibility while containing, suppressing, or excluding others."

<https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691049632/culture-and-redemption>

<sup>170</sup> Matthew Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 192 and 4.

<sup>171</sup> Tracy Fessenden, "Haunted America: Reading the Spiritual Turn" in *Above the American Renaissance: David S. Reynolds and the Spiritual Imagination in American Literary Studies* edited by Harold K. Bush and Brian Yothers (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 21.

religious movement in New England that celebrated individualism, nature, and anti-institutional self-reliance. Emerson's religious philosophy of transcendentalism emerged during what Horatio Dresser called the "epoch of religious liberalism" in the nineteenth century, when radical forms of Protestantism swept across the revivalist movements of many Protestant denominations and paved the way for increasingly diverse forms of spirituality and religious practice to enter the mainstream.<sup>172</sup>

Emerson's religious liberalism was influenced by other religious traditions, including Hinduism and a variety of mystical traditions, but Protestant Christianity remained central to his religious ideas and practices.<sup>173</sup> Emerson's religious seeking outside the Protestant church was largely "an extension of" and in some ways the "logical conclusion of" Protestant Christian beliefs such as "the individual reading and interpretation of scriptures" and "that one is called to an individual relationship or covenant with Jesus Christ and with God."<sup>174</sup> In other words, Emerson explored religious ideas beyond Protestant Christianity, but his opinions about a religious person's relationship to authority and freedom remained thoroughly Protestant.

Within his extensive and varied body of writing, Emerson portrayed the Romantic hero in "Heroism" and the ideal American man in "The American Scholar" as religious liberals, figures who praised individual seeking and condemned institutional influences in

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<sup>172</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, second edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 23.

<sup>173</sup> For more on Emerson's religious influences see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls*; Arthur Versluis, *American Gurus: From American Transcendentalism to New Age Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Gary Ricketts, "Brahma' Contains Multitudes: Hinduism's Influence on Emerson," *The Transparent Eyeball*, First Series, The Ralph Waldo Emerson Society, Nov. 9, 2020 [emersonsociety.org/the-transparent-eyeball/brhma-contains-multitudes-hinduism-influence-on-emerson/](http://emersonsociety.org/the-transparent-eyeball/brhma-contains-multitudes-hinduism-influence-on-emerson/); Nicholas Friesner, "Emerson's Transcendentalism of Common Life," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* Vol. 100, no. 2 (2017), 143-168.

<sup>174</sup> Versluis, 18 and 25.

ways that were notably anti-Catholic.<sup>175</sup> Emerson’s “representative” American man did important cultural work for normalizing and domesticating Protestant ideas of religious experience in the United States. He did so at a time when increasing religious diversity—the influx of Catholic and Jewish immigrants, new religious movements, and continued fragmentation of Protestant denominations—posed a threat to Protestant cultural unity. Since white racial identity at this time was largely constructed around Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, Emerson built on existing theories of religiously constructed racial difference to suggest white Protestants were uniquely qualified for democratic freedom in a way other religious and racial groups of people were not.<sup>176</sup> Emerson put forth a liberal vision of religion that was unmediated by ecclesial authority, placed hope in a liberal spirituality that would emancipate people’s souls from the constraints of institutional religion, and found universal truth through self-reliant introspection. Emerson was, in short, a critic of religious institutions, who defined his moral code through his individual conscience—a characteristic literary scholars would later use to describe Atticus Finch.

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>176</sup> Emerson advanced this association between Protestantism, religious freedom, and racial difference in a few of his essays and books. Nell Irvin Painter explains that in *English Traits* (1856) Emerson “picked up and amplified a chain of association linking Saxons and Protestants, Protestantism to English church, the English church to the Magna Carta, and the Magna Carta to ‘liberty.’” Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2010), 176. In other words, for Emerson, English people were Saxon which was simultaneously a religious and racial identity—markedly white and Protestant. In *English Traits*, Emerson posited that Americans were “the continuation of the English genius into new conditions, more or less propitious” even as he worked to articulate the differences between the American man and his European counterpart in other essays. Emerson, *English Traits*, Volume V of Emerson’s Complete Works (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1884), 39. As Toni Morrison so aptly explains, Emerson’s “self-conscious” and “highly problematic construction of the American” in his essay “The American Scholar” delineated American identity as “a new white man,” which defines an American as male and white and according to these other sources, most often Protestant. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 39.

Emerson was a complicated figure whose philosophy made up a relatively small part of the broad and diverse tradition of religious liberalism in the United States.<sup>177</sup> Yet outlining aspects of Emerson's particular brand of religious liberalism provides a useful starting place for investigating Atticus' connection to the liberal tradition. In many ways Atticus is a literary model of religious liberalism in *Mockingbird*, beginning with how he exemplifies individualism in his religious life. In the only scene in which Atticus attends church with his family, Scout describes how Atticus "never sat with Aunty, Jem, and me. He liked to be by himself in church."<sup>178</sup> This scene provides a vivid picture of Atticus standing by himself in church singing the hymn "Nearer, my God, to Thee."<sup>179</sup> Atticus' religious practice of drawing 'nearer' to God through standing apart from his family and other social distractions suggests a commitment, like Emerson's, to the individuality of religious experience.

Furthermore, Atticus's desire to help others emancipate themselves from false beliefs mirrors Emerson's emphasis on spiritual emancipation from the corrupting influences of institutional and social biases. Religious liberals such as Emerson believed that one's individual conscience, the emancipated soul of each person, rather than religious doctrine, scripture, or clerical sermonizing, "reflects transcendent truth and immutable cosmic law."<sup>180</sup> When Scout tells Atticus that he must be wrong because "most folks" who disagree with him "seem to think they're right," Atticus responds that while they are "entitled" to their

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<sup>177</sup> See Matthew Hedstrom's *The Rise of Liberal Religion*; William R. Hutchison's *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) and ed., *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America, 1900-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Restless Souls*; Leigh Eric Schmidt and Sally M. Promey's, eds. *American Religious Liberalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); David Chapel's *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>178</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 168.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> Versluis, 24.



point of view, “the one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience.”<sup>181</sup> He goes on to explain that he wouldn’t feel right about his relationship with God if he didn’t follow his individual moral conscience. In this scene, Atticus expresses his commitment to align his conscience with universal truth—for him, God—regardless of social influences. Later in the novel, he asks the jurors to do the same when he implores them to emancipate themselves from false racial prejudices they have been socialized to believe and instead align “the secret courts of [their] hearts” with the higher laws of God.<sup>182</sup>

Atticus also reflects a model of religious liberalism to the extent that he believes his spiritual seeking improves his worldly perception. In one of the most memorable and celebrated moral lessons from the novel, Atticus tells his daughter, “If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. 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.”<sup>183</sup> For Atticus, spiritual seeking and efforts to align one’s individual conscience with God provide an embodied experience of another person’s perspective. That is, Atticus suggests he can transcend the self to better understand others. Congruently, Emerson’s transcendental philosophy proposed the image of the transparent eyeball, a form of disembodied vision that aligns with truth and understanding through perfect perception of the natural world and cosmic order.<sup>184</sup> Just as Emerson’s transparent vision claims to

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<sup>181</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 120.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid. 276. Literary scholar Laurie Champion argues Atticus’s plea to the jury “echoes the Emersonian plea for humanity to harmonize with God.” Champion, “When You Finally See Them,” *Southern Quarterly* Vol. 37, no. 2 (1999), 342.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>184</sup> Shirley Samuels explains that “sentimentality acts in conjunction with the problem of the body and what it embodies, how social, political, racial, and gendered meanings are determined through their differential embodiments.” She says that sentimentalism is “an operation or set of actions within discursive models of affect and identification that effect connections across gender, race, and calls boundaries.” *The Culture of*

allow him to find spiritual unity with nature, Atticus’s “simple trick” claims to allow him to dissolve the boundaries between self and other. This lesson has a Christian ethic at its center. Scout reflects this sentiment later in the novel when she repeats Atticus’s lesson to her, this time making the Christian reference explicit for the reader: “God’s loving folks like you love yourself.”<sup>185</sup>

Comparing Atticus and Emerson on the basis of their religious liberalism provides one way to understand some of the religious particularities of Atticus’ widely celebrated liberal point of view. Atticus may indeed be a model of Emerson’s Romantic hero in the sense that his individual conscience and discernment of higher moral codes are rooted in a Protestant religious liberalism much like Emerson’s. Yet the Christian particularities of Atticus’ heroic qualities are often overlooked in popular readings and scholarship about *Mockingbird*. Such omissions may demonstrate the extent to which figures such as Emerson and other religious liberals helped universalize and de-institutionalize Protestant liberal definitions of religion in the United States. Religious liberals defined religion as a matter of individual conscience in a way that continues to inform politics, legal definitions of religious freedom, and, in this case, cultural assumptions about moral virtues in ostensibly secular texts.<sup>186</sup>

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*Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 5-6.

<sup>185</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 50.

<sup>186</sup> Pellegrini and Jakobsen explore the way that Protestant definitions of the free individual continue to shape the political discourse about sex and sexuality in the United States in *Love the Sin*. Jakobsen continues this work in *The Sex Obsession: Perversity and Possibility in American Politics* (New York: New York University Press, 2020). Tisa Wenger explores the way Protestant and Enlightenment thinking has shaped definitions of religious freedom in the United States in her books *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009) and *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

***Racializing Ingroups and Outgroups of Religious Liberalism in Mockingbird***

The Christian particularities of Atticus' moral heroism are central to popular interpretations of *Mockingbird* even if readers do not often register the religious details. There are places in the novel where Atticus makes explicit remarks about the religious values at the heart of his moral choices. For instance, readers often interpret Atticus as a hero because he privileges his individual conscience over his social reputation. Atticus states that he does so because defending Tom Robinson in court aligns with his religious ideals. As he explains to Scout, "I couldn't go to church and worship God if I didn't try to help this man."<sup>187</sup>

There are also more subtle ways characters in the novel help build a case for Atticus' moral heroism on the basis of his religious liberalism. For instance, Miss Maudie, Scout's neighbor and trusted adult role model, helps Scout understand why "most folks" in Maycomb reject Atticus for defending Tom Robinson in court.<sup>188</sup> In many ways, Miss Maudie is Atticus' female counterpart in the novel, in part because Maudie also distinguishes herself from other Maycomb residents as a religious liberal. Miss Maudie helps Scout—and by proxy the reader—determine right from wrong by drawing moral ingroups and outgroups among the residents of Maycomb. Examining how Miss Maudie defines these categories demonstrates another way Atticus' heroism is constructed on the basis of his religious liberalism, which may not be as universal or inclusive as sentimental interpretations of the novel may suggest.

Scout takes note of how Miss Maudie defines moral ingroups and outgroups when she defends Atticus during the missionary society meeting. In this scene, a number of

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<sup>187</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 120.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

women gather at the Finch family's home for a missionary circle meeting hosted by Atticus' sister Alexandra. The religiously devout Mrs. Merriweather, who is also the town gossip, takes up most of the meeting with diatribes about the religious depravity of Black people—comments to which this chapter will later return in more detail. Mrs. Merriweather follows these statements with a not-so-subtle critique of Atticus for taking on Tom Robinson's case. Miss Maudie makes an immediate “icy” remark of disapproval that inaugurates Mrs. Merriweather's first and only sustained silence during the chapter.<sup>189</sup> Later Miss Maudie explains to Scout that she and Atticus are among the “handful of people” in Maycomb—a moral ingroup—who think freely against the norms of the religiously sanctioned racist culture Mrs. Merriweather offered so casually as a topic of conversation for the ladies of the missionary circle.<sup>190</sup>

Elsewhere in the novel, Miss Maudie discusses the difference between Atticus's religious liberalism and Mr. Radley's religious fundamentalism to help Scout, and presumably the reader, draw conclusions about the moral character of each man. Miss Maudie blames Mr. Radley's religious fundamentalism for Boo's reclusiveness. She argues that “old Mr. Radley,” Boo's father, is “a foot-washing Baptist” who understands “the Bible literally,” believes “anything that's pleasure is a sin,” and that “women are sin by definition.”<sup>191</sup> For Miss Maudie one problem with Mr. Radley's religious beliefs is not his denominational affiliation, because she too identifies as a Baptist, but rather Mr. Radley's relationship to ecclesial authority.

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<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50

Miss Maudie elaborates her disapproval of Mr. Radley's religiosity by comparing him to Atticus. She tells Scout, "Sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whiskey bottle in the hand of—oh, of your father" because even "if Atticus drank until he was drunk he wouldn't be as hard as some men are at their best. There are just some kind of men...who're so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one, and you can look down the street and see the results."<sup>192</sup> In this statement, Miss Maudie draws boundaries between good and bad religion. At different points in the novel both Maudie and Atticus suggest that Mr. Radley's strict religious beliefs imprison his son, Boo, effectively killing his spirit, or as Atticus describes, "making [him] into [a] ghost."<sup>193</sup> According to religious liberals like Miss Maudie and Atticus "good religion" results in spiritual emancipation while "bad religion" produces spiritual imprisonment.

Miss Maudie uses the metaphor of spiritual freedom and imprisonment to differentiate moral ingroups and outgroups in Maycomb. Members of the moral ingroup, such as her and Atticus, are spiritually free while others, such as Mrs. Merriweather and Mr. Radley, are spiritually imprisoned or imprison others with their false beliefs. Maudie's metaphor reflects an historical connection between Protestant Christianity and religious freedom in the United States. Miss Maudie defines proper, authentic, and acceptable religious practice in liberal Protestant terms. According to religious scholars such as Tisa Wenger, Janet Jakobsen, and Ann Pellegrini, definitions of and discourse about religious

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<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 and 51.

freedom in the United States are “grounded in Christian and specifically Protestant ideas of the free individual.”<sup>194</sup>

A brief exploration of some of the historical connections between Protestant Christianity and religious freedom is useful for understanding the association between religious liberalism and spiritual freedom in *Mockingbird* a bit more fully and illuminating how the ostensibly universal, inclusive morality often celebrated in conversations about the novel may have an exclusive underside characteristic of religious liberal frameworks for defining religion.<sup>195</sup> For much of Christian history the church, especially the Catholic church, was the intercessor between the individual and divine power. During the Protestant Reformation, figures like Martin Luther developed what Jakobsen describes as a “specifically Protestant understanding of freedom.”<sup>196</sup> She argues this Protestant definition of spiritual freedom helped inaugurate a shift from religious “communalism to individualism” that has become foundational for “modern conceptions of the autonomous individual.”<sup>197</sup> Protestantism claimed to form “subjects uniquely capable of free moral judgement, enabling them to function as citizens of a free republic” in a way that other forms of religious authority and religious practice did not.<sup>198</sup> During the height of British and American imperial expansion, this discussion of religious freedom became a way of justifying colonization and racialized slavery. In sum, Protestant ideas about freedom were not only central for developing the modern concept of the autonomous individual, but also historically delineated white

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<sup>194</sup> Jakobsen, *The Sex Obsession*, 8.

<sup>195</sup> See my further exploration of this in the final chapter of this project and also the following studies: Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*; Pellegrini and Jakobsen, *Love the Sin*; Wenger, *Religious Freedom and We Have a Religion*.

<sup>196</sup> Jakobsen, *The Sex Obsession*, 48.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.* 48 and 50.

<sup>198</sup> Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, 20.

Protestant men as uniquely imbued with and capable of this kind of spiritual and political freedom in a way racial, religious, and gendered others were not.<sup>199</sup>

When we investigate the religious liberalism at the heart of Atticus' moral heroism, we find that the metaphor of spiritual freedom and imprisonment Miss Maudie and Atticus both use to distinguish themselves from religious conservatives and racists in Maycomb also plays a central role in constructing racial differences in the novel. Atticus is often discussed by readers and fictional characters in the novel as uniquely free and capable of freeing others from spiritual and actual prisons. As a member of the moral ingroup of religious liberals, Miss Maudie applauds Atticus as a representative man for standing up for Christian values in a community unsupportive of his cause. She says, "We're so rarely called on to be Christians, but when we are, we've got men like Atticus to go for us."<sup>200</sup>

One marker of Atticus' religious liberalism is his emphasis on emancipating himself and others from the corrupting influences of institutional and social biases. Atticus does not lead others in explicitly religious conversions, but he does ask the jury to free their minds from the religiously sanctioned racism of their social setting. He encourages this conversion in a way that echoes his famous lesson to Scout about not being able to understand another person's point of view until "you climb into his skin and walk around in it."<sup>201</sup> Atticus implores the white male jurors to resist "the evil assumption" that all Black men "lie," "are immoral," and "are not to be trusted around...women."<sup>202</sup> He instead urges the jurors to

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<sup>199</sup> In *Religious Freedom*, Wenger outlines how "ideals of freedom, reason, and rights of conscience were built around the rational, civilized, white male subject who possessed these attributes and the irrational, primitive, childlike or female 'other' who did not," 9-10.

<sup>200</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 246.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

believe Tom Robinson's truthful testimony—to see the case from his point of view despite the ways it might challenge their own.

Many popular interpretations of this central lesson read the imperative to see beyond one's own experience and understand another person's perspective as a universal lesson in empathy and cross-cultural competency in a way typical of sentimental modes of sympathetic identification, which I explore more fully in the final chapter of this project.<sup>203</sup> When we investigate this moral lesson further, we might also interpret the metaphor of walking around in another person's skin as a way of constructing racial difference by universalizing the white perspective as a benchmark for empathy, proper religiosity, and moral insight. In *Go Set a Watchman*, Atticus frames the white male perspective as the universal benchmark to which others should strive. He states that he believes Black Americans “are still in their childhood as a people” and although they have made significant progress in “adapting themselves to white ways...they're far from it yet.”<sup>204</sup>

While Atticus doesn't make explicit statements like this in *Mockingbird*, this remark resonates with a critical interpretation of Atticus' liberal vision in *Mockingbird* in a few ways. First, at different points in *Mockingbird* Miss Maudie and Atticus both encourage the children to grow out of their “superstitious” belief that Boo Radley is a ghost. Multiple times in the novel, characters attribute these beliefs about Boo and other references to spirits and haunting to rumors from Black people.<sup>205</sup> For instance, when Scout asks Miss Maudie if the

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<sup>203</sup> Obama's farewell address exposed such an interpretation of Atticus' lesson. He suggests “blacks and other minority groups” should apply this lesson to understanding “not only the refugee, or the immigrant, or the rural poor, or the transgender American, but also the middle-aged white guy” and that white Americans should listen “when minority groups voice discontent.” “President Obama's Farewell Address.”

<sup>204</sup> Lee, *Go Set a Watchman*, 246.

<sup>205</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 51. Jem, Dill, and Scout discuss “hot steams,” which Jem defines as a warm spot in the road you can feel. He says, “A Hot Steam's somebody who can't get to heaven, just wallows around on



stories people tell about Boo being a havoc-causing ghost are true, Miss Maudie replies, “That is three-fourths colored folks and one-fourth Stephanie Crawford.”<sup>206</sup>

The literary correlation between Black superstition and children’s superstition in *Mockingbird* reflects an historical tool of colonization in which people used claims about religious differences to assert the existence of innate racial ones. Religious historian Sylvester Johnson traces such practices of racializing religious difference back to the 16<sup>th</sup>-century, when Protestants used anti-Catholic claims about the inferiority, superstition, and degeneration of material objects in religious practice to claim ethnic differences between Protestants and Catholics.<sup>207</sup> Protestants later used these religious distinctions to justify colonization and slavery by suggesting that “false beliefs” and material objects in African and Indigenous religious traditions were indicators of innate racial differences that made these groups of people unfit for freedom.<sup>208</sup>

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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.” (41) Scout tells Dill not to believe anything Jem’s said because “Calpurnia says that’s n-----r talk.” (41) Calpurnia associates the supernatural belief in hot steams with Black people. The way that Calpurnia associates and then dismisses the belief in the spirit world of hot steams with Black discourse parallels a scholarly conversation Margarita Simon Guillory, Stephen C. Finley, and Hugh R. Page outline in the introduction to *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*. They explain how the “politics of respectability” effect the way conversations about “esoteric, gnostic, and mystical” beliefs and practices emerge in conversation. (6) They argue “the politics of respectability often exert force on people, and their desire for social inclusion” in order “to conform with more acceptable religious narratives.” (6) *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience: ‘There is a Mystery’...*, edited by Stephen C. Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory, and Hugh R. Page, Jr. (Boston: Brill, 2015). See also Mitch Horowitz, *Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009) and Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjure Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>206</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 51.

<sup>207</sup> Sylvester Johnson explains that “the materialist, fetish theory of religion, more expansively, rendered intelligible and justifiable European conquest wars, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the forced displacement of indigenous people. The power of juxtaposing market rationality to fetish religion [as Dutch West Indian Company executive Willem Bosman did in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century did] was realized through a long history of rendering Black religion as the quintessential manifestation of superstition, delusion, and savagery, properties that coalesced into the racial constitution of the heathen.” (103) *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonial Democracy and Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 100-106

<sup>208</sup> Webb Keane, “Secularism as a Moral Narrative of Modernity,” *Transit: Europäische Revue*, no. 43 (2013), 160.

When Miss Maudie and Atticus correlate Black people with child-like superstition, they justify the idea that children and Black people must be “disciplined, subdued, [and] civilized” into enlightened, rational ways of understanding the world.<sup>209</sup> Notably, in the world of the novel, Scout is eventually civilized and freed from these ‘false beliefs.’ Scout proves her emancipated perspective at the end of the novel when she “finally sees” Boo as a person, dispelling the superstition that he is a ghost. She does so after standing on his porch and seeing from his perspective as Atticus has implored her to do.

By contrast, white Christians in Maycomb discuss Black people as incurably infantile and spiritually depraved. Mrs. Farrow, another woman in the missionary society, for instance, claims that ministering to Black people in Maycomb is “a losing battle” because “we can educate ‘em till we’re blue in the face, we can try till we drop to make Christians out of ‘em.”<sup>210</sup> Her comment ignores that many of the Black characters in *Mockingbird* are churchgoing members of First Purchase African Methodist Episcopal. Miss Maudie may not consider herself part of the same “handful of people” as Mrs. Farrow, but both Maudie’s comment about Black superstition and Miss Farrow’s statement about innate spiritual depravity reveal a similar white Protestant-centric view of authentic religiosity. Notably, Atticus’ “simple trick” is central to Scout’s eventual conversion to this ‘authentic’ form of understanding the world.

Atticus’ “simple trick” is one way he aims to align his individual conscience with God, because for Atticus “God’s loving folks like you love yourself.”<sup>211</sup> Yet Atticus’s

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<sup>209</sup> Melanie Eckford-Prossor, “Colonizing Children: Dramas of Transformation,” *Journal of Narrative Theory* vol. 30, no. 2, (2000), 247.

<sup>210</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 265.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

spiritual vision of walking around in other people's skin constructs the white perspective as a universal perspective by ignoring the embodied realities that may limit the ability for some people to employ this "simple trick" more safely than others.<sup>212</sup> In this way, Atticus's "simple trick" is not dissimilar to Emerson's transparent eyeball, making "a disembodied white male perspective into a universal perspective."<sup>213</sup>

Indeed, Atticus' metaphor ignores the fact that some bodies move with fewer restrictions than others. A white male in the Jim Crow South could enter many places, see from many points of view. By contrast, women were restricted to certain domestic spaces, as seen when Scout asks why women could not serve on juries. Black people could not enter spaces designated for white people. For example, Scout and Jem as white children are able to walk into a Black church with Calpurnia, their Black caregiver, at a time when Black folks could not have safely done the same. By universalizing the embodied abilities of his white male perspective in this metaphor, Atticus suggests that while he can experience other religious, class, gendered, and sexual people clearly, they may only aspire to have such accurate perception. In other words, in both Atticus' "simple trick" and Emerson's transparent eyeball, racial, gendered, and class others must adapt to white, Protestant ways of seeing and being to be emancipated from the limitations of their embodied perspectives and false beliefs.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>213</sup> Renée Bergland suggests Emerson presents the white male perspective "as a transcendent ideal—and a universal, all powerful" ability to see reality Renée Bergland, "The Puritan Eyeball, or, Sexing the Transcendent," in *The Puritan Origins of American Sex: Religion, Sexuality, and National Identity in American Literature* edited by Tracy Fessenden, Nicholas F. Radel, and Magdalena J. Zaborowska (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2001), 96 and 95.

<sup>214</sup> Lee, *Go Set a Watchman*, 246.

In one of the most famous scenes of Atticus's heroism in the novel, Atticus drops his glasses in the road as he picks up his gun and takes a perfect shot at a rabid dog coming down the street. Atticus' ability to see far down the road without the help of his glasses in this scene can be interpreted as a corollary to his metaphorical far-sightedness and intrinsic capacity 'to see' accurately in other parts of the novel. Laurie Champion compares Atticus' vision in *Mockingbird* to Emerson's transparent eyeball, suggesting that Atticus' way of seeing symbolizes "prophetic vision" and echoes "Emerson's idea that we can truly see only with an unconquered eye."<sup>215</sup>

Following Champion's interpretation, there is another analogue between Atticus' and Emerson's metaphors of vision. Namely, Atticus' vision is distinctly oriented toward the future in a way that relates to Emerson's progressive vision of American history. In his essay, "The Young American," Emerson argued that "America is the country of the Future...It has no past: all has an onward and prospective look."<sup>216</sup> Atticus' far-sighted vision of the future is similarly forgetful of the past in a few key scenes in *Mockingbird*. For example, after Alexandra, Atticus' sister, moves in with the family to help with the children during the height of the trial, she tells Atticus that she would like to discuss "the family" with the children so Jem and Scout will "have some idea of who [they] are, so [they] might be moved to behave accordingly."<sup>217</sup> At first, Atticus follows Alexandra's suggestion and begins to

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<sup>215</sup> Champion, 237. Laurie Champion compares Atticus' visual impairment the fact that he wears glasses to Emerson's transparent eyeball. He argues that "When one considers Atticus as acting under Emerson's idea of truly seeing, attention to Atticus's insight as opposed to his visual impairment becomes important." (238) Namely, Champion argues that "Atticus possesses just such a transparent eye—physically blind yet able to focus on meaning beyond literal sight." (239) "When You Finally See Them."

<sup>216</sup> Emerson, "The Young America" in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson, Volume I, Nature, Addresses, and Lectures (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 230.

<sup>217</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 151.

inform Jem and Scout that they are “not from run-of-the-mill people,” but instead “the product of several generations’ gentle breeding.”<sup>218</sup> Jem and Scout are visibly confused and scared by the shift in Atticus’s tone and words, so much so that Scout begins to cry. After a moment, Atticus pauses and changes his mind when Scout asks, “you really want us to do all that? I can’t remember everything Finches are supposed to do.”<sup>219</sup> Atticus responds, “I don’t want you to remember it. Forget it.”<sup>220</sup>

At first it may seem equitable of Atticus to tell his children to forget the details of their family history. Elsewhere, Atticus expresses a vision of class in which “Fine Folks were people who did the best they could with the sense they had” and not, as Aunt Alexandra expresses, measured by “the longer a family had been squatting on one patch of land.”<sup>221</sup> Atticus seems to guide his children toward a more equitable view of class differences in such an interpretation of this scene. However, asking Scout and Jem to forget their family history can also be interpreted as a way of forgetting that the Finch family did not start on equal footing with other families and is complicit in the very inequality Atticus ostensibly seeks to transcend. In this reading, Atticus effectively emancipates himself and his children from the complicated past that afforded them these privileges by telling Jem and Scout to forget it. He also reinforces a vision of himself as a man without a past, able to move beyond the particularities of his privileged perspective.

This scene in *Mockingbird* reflects Emerson’s future-oriented vision of American history, which Fessenden argued can be characterized as “the buried violence of progressive

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 147.

history.”<sup>222</sup> Emerson’s imagined oneness with nature in the metaphor of the transparent eyeball, which described an American landscape and historical setting “smoothly evacuated” of the realities of un-freedom for enslaved people and the historical destruction of Native American sovereignty.<sup>223</sup> Scout provides a vision of Maycomb through historical narrative she presumably inherited from Atticus, which is similarly evacuated. The novel opens with an argument between Scout and Jem about where to start the story. Scout opts for “a broad view,” saying “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?”<sup>224</sup> In this brief question, Scout suggests a vision of history in which Native Americans are violently removed from their land so that her and her family could live in Maycomb. In this “broad view,” Scout also recounts the history of her ancestor Simon Finch, a self-proclaimed Methodist who forgets John Wesley’s “strictures” against slavery and purchases three enslaved people to help establish his “homestead on the banks of the Alabama River.”<sup>225</sup> She states that Simon would have been devastated to hear that the Civil War “left his descendants stripped of everything but their land.”<sup>226</sup>

In *Mockingbird*, the Creeks are ‘run up the creek,’ and the slaveholding history of Finch landing is forgotten to make way for the spiritual emancipation of what Miss Maudie describes as Atticus’s “baby-step” toward racial equality.<sup>227</sup> Far-sighted Atticus looks forward

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<sup>222</sup> Tracy Fessenden, “Haunted America,” 31.

<sup>223</sup> Fessenden, “Haunted America,” 32.

<sup>224</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 3.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. A similar story is enacted in the Maycomb pageant Scout preforms in later in the novel. The pageant tells the story of Colonel Maycomb “who brought disaster to all who rode with him into the Creek Indian Wars,” but “persevered in his efforts to make the region safe for democracy.” (296)

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 246. Miss Maudie explains that she finds hope in the fact that the jury took so long to deliberate Tom’s case because, “I thought to myself, well, we’re making a step—it’s just a baby-step, but it’s a step.”

to a time when white people will grow out of their false beliefs by learning from his perspective of walking around in others' skin. But for now, Atticus and his allies, such as Miss Maudie, are satisfied with the hope of change in the future.<sup>228</sup> The bodies of the disremembered, such as Tom Robinson, are amassed and forgotten as Atticus leads his community in a “baby-step” toward the emancipated future unceasingly suspended—eternally on the horizon.

Religious analysis of Atticus's moral heroism surfaces how Atticus' oft celebrated “simple trick” of imagining yourself in another person's skin can suppress religious, ideological, and ontological perspectives by making his definition of spiritual, religious, and ideological freedom seem universal. His morality is also future-oriented, resolving violent histories and realities—from the history of his family's land to Tom Robinson's murder—through the idea of moral progress. Sentimental interpretations of the novel promote moral takeaways about sympathetic identification as a way of “finally seeing” others and resolve the tragedy of Tom Robinson's murder through hope in Scout and the reader's converted hearts.<sup>229</sup> Such interpretations demonstrate the extent to which Atticus' moral vision in the book aligns with sentimental strategies for reading it. Yet sentimental hermeneutics are not the only way of understanding morality in *Mockingbird*. Analyzing the religious details of Atticus's moral vision and other celebrated moral lessons in the novel can help surface how ostensibly universal and timeless moral takeaways fall radically short of the inclusion and equality people often claim they promote.

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<sup>228</sup> As Fessenden puts it, “the fact of the slaughter in national self-definition offers every dreadful incentive to lift our eyes above the plain of carnage, to fasten our gaze instead on the ‘coming spiritual America,’ ‘Haunted America,’” 35.

<sup>229</sup> See Laurie Champion and “When You Finally See Them”; “Important Quotes Explained,” SparkNotes, <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/mocking/quotes/page/5/>

*Atticus's Lesson that it is A Sin to Kiss a Black Man*

Sentimental interpretations of *Mockingbird* often celebrate the book's moral lessons about tolerance and anti-prejudice. Such interpretations attend less often to the historical complexities of racial tensions within the novel and more frequently highlight quotations that promote colorblind approaches to race and racism in ways that reflect a synthesis of liberal racial discourse and sentimental hermeneutics. This synthesis is essential for emotional resolution in sentimental interpretations of the novel. If racism is a moral problem—as racial liberal frameworks in the novel posit—then the racist beliefs and actions that lead to Tom Robinson's murder can be resolved through converted hearts, specifically those of Scout and the reader. These sentimental moral takeaways translate Scout's sympathetic identification with Tom into colorblind truisms for readers, such as Scout's statement, "there's just one kind of folks. Folks."<sup>230</sup>

There is plenty of textual support for such colorblind readings. For instance, Scout makes fun of Jem for being colorblind when he tries to pair a green tie with a blue suit.<sup>231</sup> Literary scholars use this point to argue that "Jem is also metaphorically colorblind."<sup>232</sup> Popular online homework help sites such as eNotes offer similar claims about Jem's colorblindness. One notes "unlike the jurors, who can't see past Tom Robinson's skin color, Jem puts the facts together himself and decides that Tom could not have committed the crime."<sup>233</sup> Although Jem is the only family member alleged to be visually colorblind, Atticus

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<sup>230</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 259.

<sup>231</sup> As Jem gets dressed to go to church with Calpurnia, he puts together a clashing suit and tie combination. When Calpurnia points it out to Jem she says, "Suit's blue. Can't you tell?" and Scout laughs in response "Hee hee, I howled, Jem's color blind." Lee, *Mockingbird*, 134.

<sup>232</sup> Champion, 250.

<sup>233</sup> On E-Notes, a "certified educator" response to a student question, "is Jem color-blind in *To Kill a Mockingbird*?" reads "Although bad eyes are a curse of the Finches, literally—and optically—Jem is not color-



and Scout also offer examples of racial colorblindness. In addition to Scout saying “there’s just one kind of folks. Folks,” Atticus argues in his closing remarks to the jury that “some negroes lie, some are immoral...but this is a truth that applies to the human race and to no particular race of men.”<sup>234</sup>

The Finch family’s ability to “see past skin color” fits well into the liberal racial discourse popular during the era of *Mockingbird*’s production, publication, and popularization in public schools. This discourse promoted an anti-eugenic understanding of race as social rather than biological, which led some social reformers to suggest that becoming blind to race would eliminate the social problem of racism. For example, American anthropologist Ruth Benedict was part of an educational reform movement that promoted tolerance education in public schools.<sup>235</sup> In an article Benedict published in a popular journal for secondary school educators, Benedict suggested teachers could use fictional literature to “open [students] eyes to human dignity and frailty, which is independent of classifications that are based on race and creed and country origin.”<sup>236</sup> “Children thus fortified,” Benedict concluded, “will be inoculated against racism.”<sup>237</sup>

Pedagogical optimism in the ability for literature to ‘inoculate’ racism through teaching children not to acknowledge racial differences remained influential in U.S. teaching

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blind, though Scout jokingly calls him that (in chapter 12) after Jem makes the fashion mistake of trying to wear a green tie with a blue suit....Metaphorically, however, Jem does prove to be color-blind when it comes to his views of black people and justice for all...” <https://www.enotes.com/homework-help/jem-color-blind-306691>, accessed April 7, 2020.

<sup>234</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 259 and 232.

<sup>235</sup> For more on the tolerance education see Zoë Burkholder’s *Color in the Classroom: How American Schools Taught Race, 1900-1954* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); “From ‘Wops and Dagoes and Hunkies’ to ‘Caucasian’: Changing Racial Discourse in American Classrooms during World War II,” *History of Education Quarterly* vol. 50, no. 3 (2010), p.324-358.

<sup>236</sup> Benedict, “Racism is Vulnerable,” 303.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

journals and classrooms for decades.<sup>238</sup> Black power intellectuals such as Andrew Billingsley and Joyce Ladner immediately responded with studies criticizing colorblind approaches to discussing race and racism.<sup>239</sup> More recently, scholars such as sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva have explained how colorblindness minimizes race as a significant factor in social inequality and serves as a way to avoid addressing racism.<sup>240</sup> Nevertheless, for much of *Mockingbird*'s career in public schools, the persistent popularity of colorblind discourse informed interpretations of the Finch family's colorblind point of view.

Sentimental interpretations and celebrations of *Mockingbird* reflect this type of pedagogical optimism—that, if readers emulate characters' colorblind values, they can transform themselves and society. Such pedagogical optimism has historical precursors in the sentimental tradition, in which sentimental authors have long imagined that by evoking a reader's feelings about social issues represented in the text, their fictional stories and characters could motivate readers to do something about those social issues in the real world.<sup>241</sup> Yet sentimental interpretations of *Mockingbird* often obscure the historical, social, and religious context of moral assertions in the book in ways that create a noticeable gap between readers' sentimental moral takeaways and the social realities of the world, in which they are meant to apply the moral lessons they have received from the text. This section argues

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 303. For examples of teaching guides and discussions of classroom strategies for reading *Mockingbird* in this way see Griselle M. Diaz-Gemmati "And justice for all': Using Writing and Literature to Confront Racism," *The English Journal*, 2000; Social Science Premium Collection, 76-97; Anonymous, "Teacher study guide: *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Then and Now—a 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration," *The English Journal* Vol. 86, No. 4 (April 1997), 1-16.

<sup>239</sup> Ibram X. Kendi argues that "black power intellectuals did not just challenge American racism; they attempted to redefine American racism by redefining the reigning assimilationist ideas as racist." "Reigning Assimilationists and Defiant Black Power: The Struggle to Define and Regulate Racist Ideas," 159.

<sup>240</sup> See Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*.

<sup>241</sup> Jay argues, "liberal race fiction imagines that changing how we feel about racial injustice will motivate us to do something about it." *White Writers, Race Matters*, 4.

that moral ideas in the novel are better understood when situated in the particular historical, social, and religious contexts sentimental interpretations of the book often obscure in their tendency to universalize the particular.<sup>242</sup>

The colorblind vision for racial equality that people celebrate in *Mockingbird* is co-constituted with a religious one. For many readers, the most important moral takeaway from the novel is that it is a *sin* to kill an innocent person based on the color of their skin. The centrality of sin to this moral lesson is important, not only for contextualizing the religious particularities of moral takeaways about race in the novel, but also because it reflects some of the religious tensions of the historical moment in which *Mockingbird* was written. *Mockingbird* reflects the social tensions of the 1950s when the book was written as much if not more than those of its historical setting in the 1930s. Atticus says Tom Robinson's case "is as simple as black and white," because "a white woman kissed a black man."<sup>243</sup> The commotion that ensues around the trial in the fictional town of Maycomb includes theological conflicts which, much like the theological debates surrounding *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), focus largely on interracial sex.

*Mockingbird* includes subtle references to the theological battle over Christian Orthodoxy that ensued when opponents and supporters of Black Civil Rights in the United States both claimed God for their side.<sup>244</sup> This theological dispute was fought between ecumenical, colorblind theology of civil rights supporters, who argued segregation was a sin, and the segregationist theological perspectives of their opponents, who used their

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<sup>242</sup> As Lauren Berlant examines "the mass-cultural processes by which historically specificity is (mis)translated, via the *Uncle Tom* form, into the unchanging space of sentiment beyond history," "Poor Eliza," 650.

<sup>243</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 231.

<sup>244</sup> Jane Dailey, "The Theology of Massive Resistance," 153.

interpretations of the Bible and Christian doctrines to justify their opposition to desegregation.<sup>245</sup> The conflict intensified when the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* sanctioned the integration of public high schools. For many segregationists, the end of segregation threatened increased “miscegenation,” or racial mixing. It was in this “highly sexual context that the battle for divine sanction between supporters and opponents of desegregation took place,” as religious historian Jane Dailey explains.<sup>246</sup>

There is plenty of textual evidence to suggest that characters in *Mockingbird* reflect the debate between colorblind and segregationist theology from U.S. history. A closer look at the tensions between these two theological positions as they are represented in the novel illustrates that while these two points of view are deeply oppositional when it comes to Black civil rights, they find common ground on a shared fear and theological stance against interracial sex. Analyzing how these two ostensibly oppositional perspectives share common ground within the text complicates the traditional moral takeaways about the Finch family as progressive heroes.

Such an analysis also offers an opportunity to explore how what many readers interpret as the novel’s universal morality of colorblind equality is an historically embedded and particular position that fell radically short of its aim toward equal rights.<sup>247</sup> Historically,

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<sup>245</sup> According to Paul Harvey using quotes from the Bible to justify segregationist perspectives was more popular among laypeople than ministers during this time period. See “God and Negroes and Jesus and Sin and Salvation: Racism, Racial Interchange, and Interracialism in Southern Religious History,” in *Religion in the American South: Protestant and Others in History and Culture*, ed. Beth Schweiger and Don Mathews (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>246</sup> Dailey, “The Theology of Massive Resistance,” 160.

<sup>247</sup> In “The Strange Career of Atticus Finch,” Crespino argues that *Mockingbird* is better suited for the history than literature classroom in which teachers can use the book to discuss “that racial liberalism played a part in ending a system of Jim Crow discrimination that had developed in the aftermath of emancipation.” While he says it is important to use the text to acknowledge some of the successes of this movement, he argues teachers ought to contextualize that “the assumptions of American racial liberalism do not function well in

colorblind theology conceded basic points to racist segregationist ideas and maintained important structures of white privilege in appeals to equality. Examining the way *Mockingbird* is in conversation with this historical theological position provides an opportunity to outline how sentimental interpretations of the book that obscure these historical, religious, and social details into universal lessons about tolerance and anti-prejudice are incongruent with the goals of civic inclusion and social transformation people often promote in sentimental readings.

Religious history is central to understanding the context of colorblind moral lessons in *Mockingbird*. Historians of the civil rights era acknowledge the Christian rhetoric of civil rights leaders. Martin Luther King Jr. and other members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) strategically placed Christian rhetoric at the heart of the civil rights movement to gather the support of religious leaders and make the Black freedom struggle a theological and moral fight in addition to a political one.<sup>248</sup> Jane Dailey criticizes how historians often emphasize the ecumenical theology of figures like King, yet they fail to acknowledge that opponents to Black civil rights also employed Christian rhetoric.<sup>249</sup> Dailey

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contemporary America. The job for us today is to reconceptualize the problems of race by recognizing the continuing presence of white racial privilege and devising means of addressing it.” 28.

<sup>248</sup> Dailey notes in “The Theology of Massive Resistance” that MLK Jr. promoted a philosophy in his writing, including “Letter From Birmingham City Jail (1963), “that Christians must embrace the civil rights movement on theological and moral grounds as well as civic ones.” “131. For more on the role religion played in the U.S. Civil Rights movement see Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); and Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>249</sup> She does note that David L. Chapell discusses the role of religious rhetoric among segregationists in both *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* and “Religious Ideas of Segregationists,” *Journal of American Studies* Vol. 32 (1998): 253 and that Paul Harvey also discusses the “theology of segregationism” in “Religion, Race, and the Right in the Baptist South, 1945-1990,” in *Religion and Politics in the White South*, ed. Glenn Feldman (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004).

suggests that, in addition to their deeply held religious beliefs, one reason prominent civil rights leaders made strategic theological appeals was because “the most powerful language supporting segregation...was thoroughly Christian.”<sup>250</sup>

Both the colorblind and segregationist theological positions are present in *Mockingbird*. Atticus, Scout, Jem, and Miss Maudie represent the side of ecumenical, colorblind theology throughout the novel and characters like Mrs. Merriweather and Miss Gates provide their segregationist foils. Mrs. Merriweather offers a version of segregationist theology in her comments during the missionary society gathering at the Finch home a few days after Tom’s trial. In this scene, Mrs. Merriweather asserts that both the Mrunas—a tribe of people “living in that jungle” in Africa—and Tom’s wife Mrs. Robinson live in “sin and squalor” on no other comparative basis except that they are Black.<sup>251</sup> Her comparison fits with an image of racialized depravity central to historic stereotypes that constructed Christian religious practice as enlightened, rational, and spiritually advanced.<sup>252</sup> Additionally, Mrs. Farrow allies with Mrs. Merriweather when she suggests that ministering to Black people in Maycomb was “a losing battle” because, she explains, “we can educate ‘em till we’re blue in the face, we can try till we drop to make Christians out of ‘em, but there’s no lady safe in her bed these nights.”<sup>253</sup> In this line Mrs. Farrow comments on both the false stereotype that Black people are innately depraved of proper religiosity and on the perceived threat Black men pose to the purity of white women. These Christian women’s statements

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<sup>250</sup> Dailey, “The Theology of Massive Resistance,” 169.

<sup>251</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 263 and 264.

<sup>252</sup> See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>253</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 265.

reflect an historical tradition that justified and theorized religious reasons for racial differences and a theological explanation for fearing interracial sex, especially between Black men and white women.

Scout's critical description of her teacher, Miss Gates, demonstrates another instance of segregationist theology in *Mockingbird*. Scout describes a day in class in which Miss Gates gets "red in the face" talking about how Hitler is prejudiced and undemocratic.<sup>254</sup> Miss Gates communicates that she values religion, democracy, and anti-prejudicial attitudes in this discussion with her class. However, Scout later overhears Miss Gates comment after Tom's trial that, "it's time somebody taught em' a lesson, they were getting' way above themselves, an' the next thing they think they can do is marry us."<sup>255</sup> In an attempt to make sense of these contradictory perspectives, Scout asks Jem, "how can you hate Hitler so bad an' then turn around and be ugly about folks right at home?"<sup>256</sup>

Such contradictions were at the heart of segregationist theology. Many segregationist narratives were rooted in a "biblically based history of the world that accounted for all of the significant tragedies of human history, from the Fall and the Flood through the Holocaust."<sup>257</sup> Figures like Charles Carroll promoted this theological version of history. In his widely circulated book, *The Tempter of Eve*, Carroll argued that "miscegenation—or, more commonly, *amalgamation* or *mongrelization*—was the original sin, the root of all corruption in humankind."<sup>258</sup> For segregationists who deplored Hitler's racism, there remained a theological fault line along the issue of interracial sex and marriage, which some saw as a sin

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 282

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 282 and 283.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>257</sup> Dailey, "The Theology of Massive Resistance," 155.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid. See also Charles Carroll, *The Tempter of Eve* (St. Louis: Adamic, 1902).

against God.<sup>259</sup> Segregationists, especially after *Brown*, suggested Christians should “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,”—limited political rights for Black people—“and to God the things that are God’s”—sexual purity and marriage.<sup>260</sup> The historical theological answer to Scout’s question about these contradictory perspectives on racial prejudice is that Miss Gates’ ideas about race may have been motivated by deeply held theological fears of miscegenation as a religious and social sin.<sup>261</sup>

Atticus and Miss Maudie can be interpreted as theological foils to Mrs. Merriweather’s and Miss Gates’s segregationist theological perspectives. Atticus and Miss Maudie personify the racial liberalism highlighted in the previous section. They align with a position crucial to the fight for civil rights. As Joseph Crespino asserts, “racial liberalism played a part in ending a system of Jim Crow discrimination” and “helped provide for equal political participation for African Americans.”<sup>262</sup> However, Atticus and Miss Maudie share some basic theological assumptions about race with their opponents that illustrate what Crespino describes as “the limits of [the white racial liberal’s] vision.”<sup>263</sup> Although these

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<sup>259</sup> Harlan Paul Douglass discusses how Charles Carroll’s perspective was not dominant, but certainly had ideological traction among “tens of thousands” of white Southerners. Harlan Paul Douglass, *Christian Reconstruction in the South* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1909), 114. Another writer who popularized this perspective was Buckner H. Payne wrote in 1867 that “a man can not commit so great an offense against his race, against his country, against his God, in any other way, as to give his daughter in marriage to a negro—a beast—or to take one of their females for his wife.” Buckner H. Payne, *The Negro: What is His Ethnological Status?* (Cincinnati: published for the proprietor, 1867), in John David Smith, *The ‘Ariel’ Controversy: Religion and ‘The Negro Problem’* (New York: Garland, 1993). Dailey notes that Ariel’s perspective “remained current through the middle of the twentieth century, buttressed along the way” by Carroll (Dailey, 155) For more on *The Tempter of Eve* and this segregationist theological interpretation of original sin see Mason Stokes, *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).

<sup>260</sup> Douglas Hudgins quoted in Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 100–101. Dailey also quotes Hudgins in “The Theology of Massive Resistance,” 131.

<sup>261</sup> For more on segregationist religious perspectives see Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) and for a primary source Carey Daniel, “God the original segregationist,” sermon, published by author (1955), [https://usm.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO\\_92ab5478-69b5-4763-ade2-a6a016b5d70c/](https://usm.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/IO_92ab5478-69b5-4763-ade2-a6a016b5d70c/)

<sup>262</sup> Crespino, “The Strange Career of Atticus Finch,” 28.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*



limits do not dismiss the important achievements of those involved in liberal racial movements, they are worth acknowledging to consider the limits of universal moral claims made about these ideas in *Mockingbird*.

In addition to its social and political particularities, there are also religious dimensions to the moral vision offered by characters such as Atticus and Miss Maudie in *Mockingbird*. Just a few moments after Miss Maudie expresses her disapproval of Mrs. Merriweather's racist comments, she tells Aunt Alexandra and Scout that she identifies with Atticus as part of "the handful of people in this town who say that fair play is not marked White Only; the handful of people who say a fair trial is for everybody, not just us; the handful of people with enough humility to think; when they look at a Negro, there but for the Lord's kindness am I."<sup>264</sup> In this statement, Miss Maudie makes an argument for colorblind justice when she says that "fair play," "fair trail" and the common humanity are "for everybody."<sup>265</sup> In the same breath, Miss Maudie suggests that God's "kindness" made her white, which invokes images of divine racial curse and blessing.

The rhetoric of racial curse and blessing echoes an historical theological perspective Christians in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries advanced about a passage in Genesis 9. In this Biblical passage, often referred to as "the curse of Ham," Noah curses Canaan for his son Ham's sins.<sup>266</sup> Popular historical interpretations of this passage suggested that Ham's sin caused slavery and white Christians used the racialized interpretation of the story during slavery to justify racially-based enslavement, because Ham's decedents were allegedly marked

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<sup>264</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 270.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> David Mark Whitford, *The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 176.

by their darker skin color. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, white Christians used the same interpretation of this passage to justify segregation. Martin Luther King Jr. stated in a sermon delivered in 1965 that “there are Christians among you who...argue that the Negro is inferior by nature because of Noah’s curse upon the Children of Ham.”<sup>267</sup> King denounced this claim as “blasphemy.”<sup>268</sup> So although Miss Maudie considers herself among “the handful” of white people in Maycomb who support political equality for Black people, her comment also betrays a theological framework for white superiority that categorizes whiteness as a blessing and Blackness as a curse.

Similarly, as another theological foil to Mrs. Merriweather and Miss Gates, Atticus exemplifies ecumenical, colorblind theology while simultaneously demonstrating its ideological limits. Atticus argues that the “case is as simple as black and white” in his closing remarks to the jury.<sup>269</sup> He reminds the jury that there is no physical evidence of rape and that he has called the only existing evidence into question: eye witness testimony from Mayella and Bob Ewell. Atticus argues that Mayella is the one who is guilty, not of a crime, but of breaking “a time-honored code of our society, a code so severe that whoever breaks it is hounded from our midst as unfit to live with.”<sup>270</sup> Atticus admits that he has sympathy for Mayella as a “victim of cruel poverty and ignorance,” yet he “cannot pity her” because “she is white” and “knew full well the enormity of her offense.”<sup>271</sup> Atticus explains that Mayella’s

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<sup>267</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-1> (accessed May 20, 2019)

<sup>268</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Paul’s Letter to American Christians.”

<sup>269</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 231.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

offense was that she “kissed a black man.”<sup>272</sup> In his closing remarks to the jury, Atticus carefully outlines the “time-honored code” against interracial sex and marriage and explains its centrality to the trial.<sup>273</sup> Atticus does not challenge the code or call it into question in his defense of Tom. Instead, he uses this code against Mayella, by suggesting that as a white woman she should have known better than to “tempt a Negro.”<sup>274</sup>

Atticus adamantly disapproves of the Ewells’ lies about Tom Robinson. Yet he seems to sympathize with Bob Ewell’s decision to call the authorities. Atticus says, “he did what any God-fearing, persevering, respectable white man would do under the circumstances—he swore out a warrant” for Tom’s arrest.<sup>275</sup> Here, Atticus not only fails to challenge the “time honored code” against interracial sex, but he also implies that this code aligns with the will of God, as any “God-fearing” man would respond with fear at the sight of his white daughter kissing a Black man. For Atticus, it may be a sin to kill a mockingbird, but it is also a sin for a white woman to kiss a Black man. Interpretations of the novel that celebrate Atticus as a moral exemplar for defending Tom Robinson often overlook this detail in the text.

Atticus fights for Tom’s civil rights on moral and theological grounds in the courtroom, pleading with the jury in the name of God to do their duty. However, he does not challenge the “time-honored code” against interracial sex at the center of the trial. Readers often contrast Atticus and Miss Maudie with Christian “hypocrites” like Mrs.

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Atticus describes the “time-honored code” as “a code so severe that whoever breaks it is hounded from our midst as unfit to live with.” Lee, *Mockingbird*, 231.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid. 232.

Merriweather and Miss Gates.<sup>276</sup> However, given the heroic position readers often assign to Atticus' moral code, it is important to note that by separating legal rights from social rights Atticus, like many white liberals who supported Black civil rights, ultimately “conceded some of the most basic axioms of white-supremacist opponents of Black civil rights.”<sup>277</sup>

These examples from *Mockingbird* illustrate how ecumenical, colorblind and segregationist theology shared some basic principles about interracial sex and the celebrated moral vision ultimately conceded basic tenets of white supremacy. A closer look at the history of this “time-honored code” against interracial sex provides another way of examining the construction of whiteness in *Mockingbird* as it relates to both religion and gender. As Dailey notes, the social structures that maintained a racial hierarchy between Black and white people in the United States throughout slavery were in a precarious state of flux in the United States after slavery was abolished (1865) and Black men were given full representation under the law (1868) and the right to vote (1870). While some white people supported the Black struggle for civil rights at this time, many made a distinction between social and civic rights much like the one exhibited almost a century later in *Mockingbird*. To do so these white men drew upon the doctrine of separate spheres that emerged in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, which imagined two spheres of influence that were “gendered and

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<sup>276</sup> For example, one E-Notes answer by certified educator Tina Bishop, M.A. explains Merriweather's hypocrisy, “Mrs. Merriweather is a hypocrite because she doesn't do anything to help things for anyone but herself, but she feels just fine criticizing those who are doing good things in the community. She didn't like that he helped out a black man rather than disregard him as nothing, like she would have done.” <https://www.enotes.com/homework-help/what-merriweather-harper-lees-kill-Mockingbird-192349> (accessed 3 July 2021)

<sup>277</sup> Dailey, “Is marriage a Civil Right? The Politics of Intimacy in the Jim Crow Era,” in *The Folly of Jim Crow: Rethinking the Segregated South*, edited by Stephanie Cole and Natalie J. Ring (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2012), 199.

complimentary,” one male (public) and one female (private).<sup>278</sup> Such strategies allowed for white men to support Black political power to vote or hold certain offices, but kept marriage to white people off limits to Black people. Dailey explains that white people accordingly constructed the legal and social boundaries of Jim Crow by “sexualiz[ing] ever greater expanses of public space in order to equate political integration with miscegenation and thereby bar African Americans from public life.”<sup>279</sup> The code against interracial sex and marriage separated Black civic and social rights, which helped maintain white privilege after the structures of racial superiority maintained through slavery were legally abolished.

Religious justifications for this code against “miscegenation” made matters of sexual purity synonymous with spiritual purity so that white women’s bodies become an important site of constructing and reproducing whiteness. The most important rule of this historic social and religious code was that white women remained sexually pure. This purity helped construct the racial category of whiteness by imagining the reproducibility of white racial identity through the sexual purity of white women. Comments throughout *Mockingbird* by characters such as Miss Gates and Mrs. Farrow express both the taboo against interracial sex, but also the dangerous myth that white women needed to be protected from the predatory sexual behavior of Black men. Thematically, *Mockingbird* reverses this myth of the Black sexual predator and instead presents the liberal myth that Black men were uninterested in sex with white women when Tom rejects Mayella’s sexual advances.<sup>280</sup> While this part of

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<sup>278</sup> Dailey, “The Limits of Liberalism in the New South: The Politics of Race, Sex, and Patronage in Virginia” in *Jumpin’ Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights*, edited by Jane Dailey, Glenda Gilmore, and Bryant Simon (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 89.

<sup>279</sup> Dailey, “Is Marriage a Civil Right?,” 185.

<sup>280</sup> Jane Dailey argues that there were “two competing political myths regarding black men’s sexual desires” during the civil rights movement. In one myth, segregationists argued that “what the Negro wanted was sex

*Mockingbird* may challenge the protection myth, Atticus and other religious and racial liberals in the book do not challenge the “time-honored code” against interracial sex and, therefore, maintain white privilege even as they make appeals to equality.

The religious dimensions of colorblind morality in *Mockingbird* illustrate important details that might be lost in sentimental readings that universalize such historical religious details into universally applicable moral lessons. Sentimental readings that celebrate the moral ingroup in the book fail to acknowledge how their theological frameworks fell radically short of racial equality. Celebrating these characters as morally progressive provides emotional and literary resolution for bleak realities in the novel and in American history and society. Whatever stark realities of institutional racism remain unchanged in the world of *Mockingbird* and our own, many readers move forward from the book with the hope that the words and actions of fictional characters such as Atticus, Maudie, Scout, and Jem leave a lasting impression on readers. Such interpretations prioritize literary resolution through the possibility of moral transformation in and outside the novel without having to work through the moral contradictions and difficult realities to realize it.

The sentimental push towards emotional and literary resolution which celebrates this moral ingroup defuses the viability of more radical points of view and soothes the potentially disruptive tragedies into hope for moral progress. For example, the celebrated heroes in *Mockingbird* are critical of conservatives in Maycomb like Mrs. Merriweather and Miss Gates. But the moral ingroup of the novel also resists more radical perspectives like the one exhibited in a scene at Calpurnia’s church. In this scene, Calpurnia, a Black woman who

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with white women” and in the other, “white liberals...told themselves...the Negro did *not* want to have sex with white women.” Dailey, “Is Marriage a Civil Right?,” 179 and 197-198.

serves as the Finch family's cook and the closest thing Scout and Jem have to a mother figure, takes Jem and Scout to visit her church while Atticus is away. Lula—a member of Calpurnia's church—questions why Cal would bring Jem and Scout to visit. Lula says, "You ain't got no business bringin' white chillum here—they got their church, got our'n. It is our church, ain't it, Miss Cal?"<sup>281</sup> After hearing Lula's remark, Zeebo—another member of the church—dismisses Lula's "fancy ideas an' haughty ways" to welcome Scout and Jem.<sup>282</sup> In one scholarly interpretation of this scene, Champion contrasts Lula's point of view with Jem's "noble" colorblindness.<sup>283</sup> In this interpretation, as well as in the world of the narrative, Lula is effectively dismissed as 'racist' for suggesting that Black folks should have at least one affinity space in a town hostile to their presence. Lula is subsequently excluded from the moral ingroup of *Mockingbird*.

This example of moral exclusion may appear peripheral to the central moral takeaways of *Mockingbird*. Yet this scene represents one way the celebrated moral ingroup in *Mockingbird* can exclude important perspectives on racial equality by universalizing colorblind ideas about race. This scene demonstrates how a character such as Lula must adapt to the perspective of the moral ingroup or be dismissed. Similarly, sentimental interpretations of the book translate historical, religious, and social details into universal lessons about tolerance and anti-prejudice in ways that obscure important limitations of this ostensibly universal moral perspective.

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<sup>281</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 135.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>283</sup> Champion, 250.

### *Stagnancy and Change*

As religious and racial liberals, Atticus and Miss Maudie oppose some of the tenets of segregationist theology represented in the novel. Yet their moral visions of racial equity collapse in their separation of legal and social rights in ways that fail “to bridge the gap between improvement and equality.”<sup>284</sup> Although Atticus’s defense of Tom brings about what Miss Maudie describes as “a baby-step” towards racial justice, this hope for change is not realized in the world of the novel, but instead projected on children such as Scout and Jem as future-oriented progress. This dimension of the text is one example of the thematic tension between stagnancy and hope for change in *Mockingbird*. Images of a broken clock, the dilapidated courthouse, and the confederate relics scattered throughout the novel are all symbols of stagnancy in Maycomb.<sup>285</sup> Scout describes Maycomb as “a tired old town” in which “the courthouse sagged in the square” and where “people moved slowly...ambled...shuffled...took their time about everything.”<sup>286</sup> Themes of stagnancy and resistance to change help disclose to the reader that racism is entrenched in so many of Maycomb’s institutions: churches, schools, the courthouse.<sup>287</sup>

Exploring the tension between stagnancy and hope for change helps surface how *Mockingbird* can be considered both congruent and incongruent with sentimental hermeneutics. The hope for change, often promoted in sentimental interpretations of the

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<sup>284</sup> Dailey, “Is marriage a Civil Right?,” 200.

<sup>285</sup> There are quite a few references to confederate relics in *Mockingbird* such as “Confederate caps” backstage at the school auditorium (295) the Maycomb County High School band plays the confederate anthem *Dixie* at the pageant (297).

<sup>286</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 5-6.

<sup>287</sup> These images and themes provide what Eric Sundquist refers to as “an allegory of the South’s own temporality and its public philosophy of race relations: ‘Go slow.’” Eric Sundquist, “Blues for Atticus Finch,” 186.



book works to simplify pain, loss, and trauma by imaginatively redeeming difficult realities through the emotional conversions of characters and readers.<sup>288</sup> There are ways in which *Mockingbird* narratively provides such hope for change in comments about Atticus' "baby step" and in moments that suggest Scout grows and changes throughout the story. Yet reading the novel in light of some of the images and moments of stagnancy provides a more tragic interpretation of *Mockingbird* which suggests that elements of the book may resist the sentimental rush to resolve tragedy and trauma through hope for moral progress.

Sentimental interpretations focus on *Mockingbird's* hope for change in ways that resolve stagnancy in the novel through a moral vision that is both future-oriented and characteristic of historical narratives told through the lens of progress. Such interpretations frame Scout as a proxy for historical progress by reading her as a synecdoche for the Southern United States as a whole who must grow up and out of their racist ways like this little girl.<sup>289</sup> In this interpretation, Bob Ewell represents the historical white Southern resistance to racial equality and social progress. When he attacks Jem and Scout, he poses a threat not only to Scout and Jem's lives, but also, symbolically, to the hope for racial justice in the future, which has been narratively projected onto these children.<sup>290</sup> The distance between the novel's setting in the 1930s and publication in 1960 allows readers to imagine that Jean Louise takes the lessons she represents in her narrative and uses them to participate in the civil rights movement. Such interpretations cast Scout as the model of growth for

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<sup>288</sup> Berlant, "Poor Eliza," 648. Berlant states that "the possibility that through the identification with alterity you will never be the same remains the radical threat and the great promise of this affective aesthetic."

<sup>289</sup> Sundquist, "Blues for Atticus Finch," 188.

<sup>290</sup> One teacher wrote an introduction to the book for students that explained, "For generations of Southerners who know nothing but hatred and distaste for Negroes, only the passing of another generation can ameliorate the prejudice." James A. Phillips, "High School English IV," 33.

readers. Her growth provides resolution to the tragic reality of Tom's murder and that little has changed in Maycomb beyond Scout's ostensible racial enlightenment.

Sentimental interpretations of *Mockingbird* most often project hope for racial equality on children, even if it is unclear whether Scout ultimately develops the skills to challenge the social norms of her community or conforms to them.<sup>291</sup> Some scholars are not convinced by the idea that Scout grows or changes in the book.<sup>292</sup> Gregory Jay, for instance, suggests Scout conforms to the very culture she critiques. He qualifies that her conformity may be a survival strategy because her female and possibly queer identity does not afford her the same choices of rebellion that white men, such as Atticus, might have for social resistance.<sup>293</sup>

Analyzing the reference to *The Grey Ghost* in the final pages of the novel helps examine the thematic tensions between conformity and change in *Mockingbird* in another way. After Boo Radley saved Scout and Jem from Bob Ewell's attack, Scout asks Atticus to read to her from *The Grey Ghost*. In a line that draws a parallel between her experience with

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<sup>291</sup> I cut a section from a previous draft of this chapter in which I explore an interpretation of this tension between stagnancy and change through the interpretive possibility that children in *Mockingbird* question the 'time-honored' code against interracial sex and heteronormative patriarchal control over white women's bodies in a way the central adults in the novel do not. Mayella challenges this social code through her desire to kiss Tom Robinson, but ultimately weaponizes her whiteness against Tom after he rejects her in order to reclaim a sense of social privilege not afforded otherwise by her gender identity and socioeconomic status. Holly Blackford, Laura Fine, and Gregory Jay discuss the textual evidence to support that Dill, Scout, and Boo express queer desires that similarly challenge the cis-heteropatriarchy of their social setting. Yet even with this textual evidence that the children question the "time-honored" codes of their parents and community, it's unclear whether they learn to live differently or ultimately reinforce these codes. Even some of their digressions from social norms seem to uphold and reinforce heteronormative ideas about sex, gender, and marriage as well as white supremacy. When Scout 'joins' the world of Southern womanhood by passing out treats, for example, it's unclear whether she accepts cis-heterosexual expectations or, as Holly Blackford suggests, performs a form of "drag" that gives her "social advantage," while maintaining her queer identity and desires. Blackford, 259. Laura Fine, "Gender Conflicts and Their 'Dark' Projections in Coming of Age White Female Southern Novels," *Southern Quarterly* vo.36, no. 4 (Summer 1998), 121-129.

<sup>292</sup> Sundquist also ultimately denounces this interpretation of Scout's growth in the novel and concludes: "the white children of *To Kill a Mockingbird* never grow up. In Scout's retrospective narration, they remain ever poised for the hypothesis of desegregation." "Blues for Atticus Finch," 206.

<sup>293</sup> Jay, "Queer Children, 517.

Maycomb's ghost—Boo—and her interpretation of *The Grey Ghost*, Scout says: “An’ they chased him ‘n’ never could catch him ‘cause they didn’t know what he looked like, an’ Atticus, when they finally saw him, why he hadn’t done any of those things...Atticus, he was real nice.”<sup>294</sup> Scout recounts the moral of *The Grey Ghost*: sometimes even the people you fear most—the ghosts in the book or in the lore your hometown—are “real nice.” Atticus reinforces Scout’s moral takeaway from *The Grey Ghost* when he replies, “most people are, Scout, when you finally see them.”<sup>295</sup>

A sentimental interpretation of this scene provides a moral vision of future-oriented hope for change as emotional and literary resolution for tragedy and trauma. This interpretation aligns with the sentimental literary conventions in this scene, which portray a fictional character learning moral lessons from reading literature in ways sentimental authors historically intended for readers to emulate. In this interpretation, the *Grey Ghost* facilitates Scout’s reflection on her converted heart about Boo. Scout’s empathetic realization helps resolve the trauma and tragedy of the novel narratively through a generalized moral lesson about empathy that implores readers, in President Obama’s summary, to “constantly try, in our lives, to finally see each other.”<sup>296</sup>

In another interpretation of the final scene of the novel, the story of *The Grey Ghost* is so comforting and safe that Scout drifts off to sleep while Atticus reads it and shares her epiphany about it from a state in which she is only half awake. Although Scout finds comfort in the “virtue of melodrama’s predictable and compulsive repetition”—nothing is changed,

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<sup>294</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 322-323.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid. 323.

<sup>296</sup> Eliza Collins, “Obama pays tribute to Harper Lee.”

Scout—and the reader—“wakes up to its landscape of hopelessness.”<sup>297</sup> Such an interpretation of Scout’s response to the empathetic lesson of *The Grey Ghost* would suggest, perhaps too pessimistically, that the interpretive habit of reading for the thrill of virtue and self-serving feeling of moral betterment leaves her, readers, and our world unchanged. This interpretation would acknowledge that Tom’s murder is disruptive, perhaps even narratively unassimilable. It raises questions about what it would be like to imagine a response to the events of the novel in which characters and readers grapple with the tragedy of Tom’s conviction and murder by police in ways that do not use moral progress to resolve this tragedy. Instead of sentimental resolutions which imagine the moral lessons in the novel naturally or inevitably transform characters or readers into social heroes, such an interpretation would hold space for the complex and difficult social realities that remain for Scout, Jem, Tom Robinson’s unnamed children, and for readers at the end of the book and in our own world.

Without narrative and hermeneutic conventions that encourage readers to pause to consider these complex and difficult realities, *Mockingbird*, like *The Grey Ghost*, may ultimately be comforting and safe rather than socially disruptive or transformative, which says as much about the narrative details of the text as the limitations of sentimental hermeneutics. When people use sentimental frameworks to debate *Mockingbird*’s suitability for school age children based on moral edification, their claims about the novel—whether condemnatory or hopeful—reenact central tensions from the book. Community members—whether residents of Maycomb, AL or Hanover, VA—articulate claims about morality. They raise questions

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<sup>297</sup> Blackford, *Mockingbird Passing*, 130.

about the community's moral standards—the morality of defending an innocent Black man on a false rape charge or the morality of allowing children to read a book about it. They reaffirm the community's commitment to creating a moral society without requiring they actually create one.

The literary symbols of stagnancy in Maycomb—the broken clock, the dilapidated courthouse, and the old confederate relics—have real world correlates in places like Hanover, VA. The high school where Boshers' teenage son first picked up his copy of *Mockingbird* in 1966 was named after Confederate general Robert E. Lee and president of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis. Lee-Davis Highschool was first opened as an all-white school in 1959 among the Massive Resistance movement in Virginia which opposed desegregation of public schools after the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown*.<sup>298</sup> When the school was finally integrated in 1969, Black students entered a school in which the mascot was “the confederates,” the marching song “Dixie” was played at pep rallies, and class rings were engraved with the confederate flag.<sup>299</sup> When these newly integrated Black students and other community members asked the principal to change these racist symbols, the principal decided to keep the name—a decision that held for decades despite frequent appeals and lawsuits for revision. Local movements to change the schools name were finally heard in the wake of George Floyd's murder in May 2020. The Hanover County School board voted to rename the school in July of that year after another local movement advocating for the name

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<sup>298</sup> For more on desegregation, especially the spatial ideology of desegregation planning see Ansley T. Erikson's “Desegregation's Architects: Education Parks and the Spatial Ideology of Schooling” *History of Education Quarterly* vol. 56, no. 4 (November 2016), 560-589.

<sup>299</sup> Debbie Truong, “A Virginia Community Steeped in Civil War Lore Grapples with a Desire for Change,” *Washington Post*, March 11, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/a-virginia-community-steeped-in-civil-war-lore-grapples-with-a-desire-for-change/2018/03/11/584a511c-1bd1-11e8-9de1-147dd2df3829\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/a-virginia-community-steeped-in-civil-war-lore-grapples-with-a-desire-for-change/2018/03/11/584a511c-1bd1-11e8-9de1-147dd2df3829_story.html)

change. The school is now called Mechanicsville High School—a change that that took over 50 years to realize.

The Wikipedia page for Mechanicsville High School tells the story of this name change. At the end of a section titled “naming controversy,” it states, “after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, another local movement to change the name of LDHS arose...the Hanover County School board voted to rename Lee-Davis in a 4-3 vote.”<sup>300</sup> It is striking that this decades long record of dissent is resolved narratively after another innocent Black man’s murder by police, suggesting on some level that such a change could serve as a narrative resolution to the tragic, ongoing reality of senseless, racist violence.<sup>301</sup> Precisely because tragedies like this are not easily resolved or assimilated, as Joseph Winters explains, they are often translated into symbolic hope for change such as a new name for a high school or, in the case of *Mockingbird*, a “baby-step” toward racial progress.<sup>302</sup> But this real world narrative, like the one in *Mockingbird*, raises questions about a “kind of excess that cannot be fully incorporated” into renaming a school, one that acknowledges George Floyd’s family and community, in notable similarity to Tom Robinson’s, did not want their loved one to become a symbol for a cause and that narrative progress is not synonymous with justice.

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<sup>300</sup> “Mechanicsville High School,” Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mechanicsville\\_High\\_School](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mechanicsville_High_School)

<sup>301</sup> Thank you to Josh Hasler for helping me make this connection between the narrative resolution in *Mockingbird* and in the case of Mechanicsville High School

<sup>302</sup> As Winters explains, “care and vigilance needs to be directed toward the general eagerness to assimilate this moment, to turn the unsettling quality of the event into slogans, campaigns, and projects that accord with the usual flow of things” when “uprisings and protests are only valid when they abide by goal-oriented schemas, when collective desires, affects, and refusals exhibit a recognizable connection to policy change.” Winters, “Black Lives Matter: Between Novelty and Repetition,” *Berkeley Forum*, June 22, 2020, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/black-lives-matter-between-novelty-and-repetition>

Sentimental narratives and hermeneutics rush to progress, alleviating the discomfort that “awareness of the wounds and damages that mark our social worlds” may evoke in readers through narrative and emotional resolution.<sup>303</sup> This rush to progress does not make time and space to contemplate that “traumas take time to be made sense of, to be worked through, and to be incorporated into memory and language,” as Winters puts it.<sup>304</sup> These narratives of progress often universalize and simplify complicated realities and also place an immense burden on children and the future. For example, Scout reflects as she and Jem fall asleep after the trial, “But things are always better in the morning.”<sup>305</sup> This truism resonates in the final scene of *Mockingbird* when Scout falls asleep to the sound of Atticus reading her the safe, warm melodrama of *The Grey Ghost*. This scene suggests that Scout and the reader may eventually awaken to a better day. A sentimental interpretation of this scene encapsulates how *Mockingbird* condemns “the sorry state of the community” in Maycomb and projects “hope for future glory” onto children like Scout and the millions of young readers who encountered the text in public schools.<sup>306</sup> These children are invested with “the immodest goal: redeem the world” from the scourge of American racism.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 251.

<sup>304</sup> Winters, “Blake Lives Matter: Between Novelty and Repetition.”

<sup>305</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 243.

<sup>306</sup> James Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 45.

<sup>307</sup> The concluding sentences in this paragraph draw a parallel to the American Jeremiad that I explored more fully in a previous draft of this project. Morone argues that the American Jeremiad is one way that people articulated and ritualized morality in the United States, first among the colonial puritans and then in ways that continue to resonate with the currency of moral arguments in politics today. Morone suggests, “In short, the jeremiad begins by holding up communal norms rooted in the scriptures. Then it condemns the sorry state of the community. And finally it works up to the prophetic dream of future glory—even the Second Coming of Jesus...It scolded the people for moral backsliding, dazzled them with their historical duty, and invested their mission with an immodest goal: redeem the world.” Morone, 45. For more on the American Jeremiad see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2012) and David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005).

Sentimental interpretations of *Mockingbird* emphasize the type of future-oriented hope for change and delayed promise so aptly critiqued by James Baldwin: “Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety...There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation. The challenge is in the moment; the time is always now.”<sup>308</sup> Scout and Atticus’ discussion of the *Grey Ghost* in the final scene of *Mockingbird* leaves readers with the sense that fictional worlds can be sites for exploring hope for change in real ones. This chapter’s exploration of the limits of sentimental hermeneutics has made the case that the potential for personal and social transformation requires narratives and hermeneutics that foreground the time and care it takes to work through and respond to injustice rather than relying on moral visions that use the future as a plot device for historical and moral redemption.

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<sup>308</sup> Eric J. Sundquist also ends his chapter on *To Kill a Mockingbird* in *The South as an American Problem* with this quote from Baldwin to illustrate his point that the carefully controlled narration of Tom Robinson’s story Lee subordinates “the social and historical African-American world for which [Tom Robinson] stands, are left without a true voice in their own representation, living still, in every rereading of the novel, under the South’s death sentence and returning us to the admonition of James Baldwin in his essay on Faulkner and desegregation.” “Blues for Atticus Finch,” 206. James Baldwin, “Faulkner and Desegregation,” *Nobody Knows My Name: More notes on Native Son* (New York: Vintage International, 1961), 100 and 106.



**Chapter 2: “Moral Imagination” as Moral Acculturation: *Huckleberry Finn*’s  
Interpretive Trap for the Sentimental Reader**

Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) has been a controversial novel in U.S. culture for many reasons, from its alleged religious irreverence and use of racial slurs to its degrading portrayals of Black characters. Yet the novel remained a mainstay in secondary school classrooms and popular culture throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in part because people persistently asserted its moral value. This chapter explores the history and ideological commitments of using *Huckleberry Finn* for moral education in public schools. I examine how *Huckleberry Finn* both fits into and undermines the sentimental moral narrative people used to justify and defend the book’s place in secondary education.

My last chapter showed the importance of a religious studies analysis in understanding popular interpretation, reception, and ongoing resonance of *Mockingbird* in U.S. culture and education—asking how the sentimental emphasis on moral takeaways can obscure the historical embeddedness of literature and its social meaning. Here, I examine interpretations of *Huckleberry Finn* that celebrate the book’s moral value in order to surface the role sentimental hermeneutics play in the novel’s canonization and popularization in U.S. culture. I analyze *Huckleberry Finn* to consider how the connections among morality, religion, race, and interpretation in the novel have an ironic relationship to the sentimental ways it has been interpreted, contested, and defended in U.S. culture and public education.

Twain’s novel follows thirteen-year-old narrator Huck Finn as he runs away from what he describes as the constricting expectations of his new guardians—the Widow Douglas and her sister Miss Watson. Huck travels down the Mississippi River in search of

freedom from these social demands with a Black man named Jim who seeks freedom from literal enslavement. Throughout the story, Huck expresses uncertainty about whether he is morally wrong to support Jim's journey to emancipation as it goes against the norms he learned from his Antebellum society. Sentimental interpretations of *Huckleberry Finn* often insist Huck has a moral conversion in the scene where he decides to "go to hell" to help Jim escape slavery. In this chapter, I explore the possibility that this affective scene of Huck's moral epiphany is an interpretative trap for the sentimental reader. I suggest the novel's thematic concern about "sivilizing" children raises questions about the potential relationship between morality, acculturation, and colonization in sentimental hermeneutics. Such an analysis provides an opportunity to consider the limits of sentimental hermeneutics within a multicultural, multireligious setting in which the oft overlooked, potentially acculturating influence of Protestant Christian morality may not serve Huck Finn or the reader in the ways sentimental interpretations of the book often assume.

### ***The Moral Commitments of *Huckleberry Finn's* Canonization***

*Huckleberry Finn* has not always been a controversial cultural symbol, popular in secondary classrooms, or considered part of the canon of U.S. literature. In the late-1940s—over sixty years after the novel was first published—Lionel Trilling and a few other literary critics helped forge a path for *Huckleberry Finn's* canonization.<sup>309</sup> Before the late 1940s, when these scholars turned their attention to *Huckleberry Finn*, the novel appeared infrequently in

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<sup>309</sup> For more on the canonization of *Huckleberry Finn* see Jonathan Arac, *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

school curricula.<sup>310</sup> These literary critics wrote about Twain's novel as a distinctly American "masterpiece" that deserved a central place in the U.S. canon.<sup>311</sup> They promoted the novel's place in the canon by including it in textbook anthologies of American literature.<sup>312</sup> Their efforts were hugely successful, especially in U.S. secondary education. By 1993, *Huckleberry Finn* was assigned in 70% of public schools, making it one of the most assigned novels in the United States at the time.<sup>313</sup>

*Huckleberry Finn* did not become popular in secondary education and U.S. culture merely because scholars included it in textbooks. Scholarly interpretations of Huck's morality also played a critical role in the novel's cultural ascent. Lionel Trilling—a leading voice in literary, cultural, and political criticism during the 20<sup>th</sup> century—was one of Huck's most enthusiastic supporters. He argued—in a way my readers will now recognize as characteristic of sentimental hermeneutics—that what made *Huckleberry Finn* so valuable and "universal" was its potential effect on a reader's "moral imagination."<sup>314</sup> His analysis of the book highlighted the scene in which Huck Finn wrestles with his conscience about whether he should help his Black friend Jim escape slavery. In this scene, Huck frames his moral

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<sup>310</sup> Surveys show that by 1964 *Huckleberry Finn* was assigned in 27% of U.S. public schools. See Scarvia B. Anderson, *Literature in American High Schools* (Princeton, New Jersey: Cooperative Test Division of Educational Testing Service, 1964).

<sup>311</sup> Trilling amplified Ernest Hemingway's famous declaration in 1935 that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." Quoted in Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review of Books, 1950), 117.

<sup>312</sup> Arac, 6.

<sup>313</sup> Arthur N. Applebee, *Literature in the Secondary School: Studies of Curriculum and Instruction in the United States*, (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English), 1993.

<sup>314</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 113 and 107. Trilling discusses moral imagination briefly in his chapter on *Huckleberry Finn*, but also defines use of the term further in his chapter on "Manners, Morals, and the Novel" when he explains, "For our time the most effective agent of the moral imagination has been the novel of the last two hundred years. It was never, either aesthetically or morally, a perfect form and its faults and failures can be quickly enumerated. But its greatness and its practical usefulness lay in its unremitting work of involving the reader himself in the moral life, inviting him to put his own motives under examination, suggesting that reality is not as his conventional education has led him to see it." *The Liberal Imagination*, 222. He discusses Huck's insight into his culture similarly in his analysis of *Huckleberry Finn*.

conundrum as a religious choice between heaven and hell. Huck's moral reasoning is grounded in the Christian framework he was taught by his caretakers at the beginning of the novel. This moral framework has historical parallels in the Antebellum sermons that framed slavery as a moral institution and reassured white people they could treat Black people as property.<sup>315</sup> After a "trembling" battle with his conscience, Huck decides to "go to hell" to help Jim.<sup>316</sup> For Trilling, the triumphant moral takeaway from this scene is that Huck's "subversive" morality encourages readers to reconsider their own morals.<sup>317</sup> Trilling argued that the novel could help readers across generations consider if their moral assumptions, like Huck's, were "not merely the engrained customary beliefs" of their respective social setting.<sup>318</sup> Trilling thus saw Huck as an antidote to social indoctrination and acculturation.

Trilling's emphasis on Huck's subversive morality became a cultural touchstone in popular readings and defenses of the novel for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many educational materials guided readers towards sentimental interpretations of the novel as a model of anti-prejudice education. Teaching guides promoted Huck's morality as a way to dismiss accusations that *Huckleberry Finn* was racist. A sample reading guide from the early 2000s, for instance, tells readers that the reason *Huckleberry Finn* "has been debated, attacked, and censored" is because it provides a realistic picture of race.<sup>319</sup> Instead of outlining some of the unsavory representations of racism in the novel, or discussing the novel's frequent use of

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<sup>315</sup> Tracy Fessenden, argues that "Twain's own revolt against a white Christian culture where church bulletin boards advertised slave auctions and where sermons licensed their listeners to hold other human beings as bondage." *Culture and Redemption*, 138.

<sup>316</sup> Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 228.

<sup>317</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 112.

<sup>318</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 113.

<sup>319</sup> Young Minds Inspired, *Mark Twain Classroom Activities* (accessed September 11, 2022) <https://ymiclassroom.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/marktwainhighschool.pdf>

racial epithets, the lesson plan points students directly to Huck's ability to "question everything he has been taught about Black people and slavery."<sup>320</sup> This educational guide, echoing popular sentimental interpretations of the novel, cites Huck's moral imagination as an antidote to the racial problems of both antebellum slavery and the contemporary controversy about the novel. What Trilling argued was so important about Huck for readers was his ability to question everything others had taught him. Trilling and reading guides that followed his interpretation of the novel were hopeful that with Huck's example other children could do the same.

One reason Trilling's interpretation of Huck's morality became so influential in cultural defenses and lesson plans was because it drew upon and complimented ideological trends in cultural discourse and educational reforms about moral edification in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century United States. Trilling's interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn* was part of a larger intellectual project in which he made the case that literature stimulates the reader's "moral imagination" in a way that helps the reader identify moral reality beyond what "conventional education" has taught them to see.<sup>321</sup>

Trilling's claim that literature was uniquely capable of promoting self-knowledge and moral awareness fit well into the emerging discourse about the place of moral values in public education. In the late-1940s and early 1950s there was a growing conversation in secondary schools about the importance of teaching morality.<sup>322</sup> During this time national

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid. *Mark Twain Classroom Activities*.

<sup>321</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 222.

<sup>322</sup> Leslie Beth Ribovich provides a helpful summary of this moment in education in which the National Education Association advocated for moral and spiritual education through statements and pamphlets and the American Association of School Administrators voted on a resolution about "teaching moral and spiritual values in public schools." Ribovich, *The Production of Judeo-Christianity in New York City Public Schools*.

organizations, including the National Education Association and the American Association of School Administrators, distributed pamphlets and voted on resolutions that advocated for “teaching moral and spiritual values in public schools.”<sup>323</sup> Trilling suggested Huck could be a literary partner in this task.

Yet as administrators and teachers implemented moral and spiritual education programs across the United States in the 1950s, people disagreed about what religious or cultural values were appropriate to teach in public schools.<sup>324</sup> Trilling and other educators saw *Huckleberry Finn* as a way of engaging ‘universal’ moral questions about right and wrong. Trilling saw his interpretation of the book as a way to open up possibilities for engaging students’ moral imaginations in public school classrooms without imparting religiously particular moral ideologies or conventions. The idea that teachers could use novels to help students develop their own sense of right and wrong remains a common concept in pedagogy for literature classrooms.<sup>325</sup> Yet historical and contemporary discussions of the moral value of literature, informed by sentimental hermeneutics, seldom acknowledge the religious particularities of these ostensibly ‘universal’ moral values.

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<sup>323</sup> Ribovich provides a helpful summary of this moment in education in which the National Education Association advocated for moral and spiritual education through statements and pamphlets and the American Association of School Administrators voted on a resolution about “teaching moral and spiritual values” in public schools.

<sup>324</sup> Ribovich concludes that many of these moral and spiritual education programs offered a vision of morality and spirituality that aligned with the emerging ideology of Judeo-Christian values in the United States. In her particular case study, she illustrates that many people viewed these American moral values “as part of white culture” and that “vision of inclusion had actually...systematically excluded” many religious and racial backgrounds. Ribovich, 273. For more on the emerging ideology of Judeo-Christian values in the United States see Kevin M. Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) and for more on the way that Americans have negotiated and struggled to agree on shared values in public education see Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America?: Culture Wars in Public Schools* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002)

<sup>325</sup> See Karen Bohlin, *Teaching Character Education Through Literature: Awakening the Moral Imagination in Secondary Classrooms* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

Trilling's discussion of *Huckleberry Finn* was no exception. The moral emphasis of Trilling's interpretation of the novel also drew upon and complimented cultural and educational efforts to discuss racial inequality in the United States as a "moral issue."<sup>326</sup> During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, educational reformers promoted and distributed materials that corrected eugenic definitions of racial difference with a more socially constructed definition of race.<sup>327</sup> The liberal racial discourse that accompanied these definitions of race and racism framed racial prejudice as a moral and psychological problem rather than a social, institutional, or systemic one.

Trilling brought sentimental moral-literary and racial-liberal discourses together in his interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn* in ways that are similar to the synthesis between these discourses I explored in the previous chapter. He celebrated how Huck used his individual moral imagination to see beyond the dehumanizing racial hierarchy of his antebellum setting. Since the liberal racial discourse framed racism as a problem of individual prejudice, Huck provided a model for white racial liberals. Huck's moral decision to go to hell to help his friend Jim could symbolize, against cultural indoctrination, that all people are biologically equal. Notably, however, this predominantly white-centric racial discourse left room for racist arguments about cultural inferiority and did not address systemic and institutional forms of racism. Yet mid-20<sup>th</sup> century scholars brought moral-literary and racial liberal

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<sup>326</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), xiv.

<sup>327</sup> See Ibram X. Kendi, "Reigning Assimilationists and Defiant Black Power," Ruth Benedict, "Racism is Vulnerable," *The English Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 6 (Jun. 1946) 299-303; Robert W. Sussman, *The Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

discourses together optimistically by suggesting that *Huckleberry Finn* could spark a moral imaginary capable of freeing readers from racial prejudices.

Many scholars and critics have challenged Trilling's influential interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn*'s moral worth. As early as 1953, Leo Marx accused Trilling of "turning away from a moral issue" by praising *Huckleberry Finn* despite the novel's questionable ending, in which Huck delays Jim's freedom in a torturous game with his friend Tom Sawyer.<sup>328</sup> Other scholars argued that Huck's failure to translate his moral conversion into anti-racist action reflects a realistic picture of the how white Americans have consistently denied Black Americans civil and economic rights despite the language of racial equality.<sup>329</sup>

Even amidst these critiques, Trilling's sentimental emphasis on Huck's universal morality played an influential role in the novel's popular reception. However, the following case—in which Justin Kaplan and John Wallace defend and contest *Huckleberry Finn*—helps surface some of the ironies that Trilling's interpretation of Huck's subversive morality became a predominant way of interpreting the book. The case illustrates—as my analysis of the novel also explores later in this chapter—that Trilling's sentimental interpretation endorses a dominant moral framework, which has sometimes been used to dismiss moral imaginaries that do not align with sentimental assumptions about the book's universal morality.

In 1984, Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Justin Kaplan delivered a lecture about Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Kaplan's lecture was planned to coincide with

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<sup>328</sup> Leo Marx, "Mr. Elliot, Mr. Trilling, and Huckleberry Finn," *The American Scholar*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Autumn 1953), 423-440.

<sup>329</sup> Laurence Holland, "A 'Raft of Trouble': Word and Deed in Huckleberry Finn" in *American Realism: New Essays* ed. Eric Sundquist (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1982) 66-81.



two important events: the American Library Society's Banned Book Week—inaugurated just two years prior in 1982—and the centennial of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*'s publication in 1884. In the lecture, Kaplan, a white American writer best known for his biographies of Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain's given name) and Walt Whitman, traced a century of attempts to censor Twain's controversial novel. He named challenges to the book from as early as 1885, when the Concord Public Library in Massachusetts banned *Huckleberry Finn* as “trash.”<sup>330</sup> He also addressed more contemporary challenges, such as in 1982, when John H. Wallace—a Black public school administrator from Twain Middle School in Fairfax, Virginia—called the novel a “grotesque example of racism” and warned of its negative impact on Black children.<sup>331</sup>

Kaplan defended the novel against such critiques on the basis of the book's moral worth, much like Trilling before him. Kaplan interpreted *Huckleberry Finn* as “a savage indictment of a society that accepted slavery as a way of life” and found it ironic that people criticized it for “racism.”<sup>332</sup> He argued that if readers are uncomfortable with *Huckleberry Finn*, it is because the novel's protagonists, Huck and Jim, are “too good for us...too loyal, too passionate,” and, most importantly, “too moral.”<sup>333</sup> He doubted that “anyone of any color” who missed this moral message “had actually read *Huckleberry Finn*, instead of merely reading or hearing about it.”<sup>334</sup> According to Kaplan, no reader who had “allowed himself or

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<sup>330</sup> Justin Kaplan, “Born to Trouble: One Hundred Years of Huckleberry Finn,” A lecture sponsored by the Florida Center for the Book and presented at the Broward County Library, Fort Lauderdale Florida on September 11, 1984, published by The Center of the Book, Viewpoint Series, no. 13, (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1985), 11.

<sup>331</sup> Kaplan, “Born to Trouble” Lecture, 18.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid. 17-18.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 18.

herself even the barest minimum of intelligent response to its underlying spirit and intention, could accuse it of being ‘racist’ because some of its characters use offensive racial epithets.”<sup>335</sup> Kaplan’s primary defense of “Mark Twain’s century-old masterpiece” against a century of censorship was primarily interpretive: if people don’t understand *Huckleberry Finn*’s moral message and the book’s unmatched “commitment to truth-telling,” then those people cannot have read the book or, worse, they read it incorrectly.<sup>336</sup>

John H. Wallace—the Black administrator Kaplan challenged most directly in his lecture—had, in fact, read *Huckleberry Finn*. He first read the book as a freshman in high school, when he felt “embarrassed and humiliated” as his classmates read it out loud and “wincing” every time they repeated racial slurs from the novel.<sup>337</sup> Years later, Wallace became a public school administrator and expressed his long-held concern that *Huckleberry Finn* had a negative effect on Black children.<sup>338</sup> Where Kaplan and other literary critics read moral satire, Wallace read dehumanizing stereotypes that rendered the affective quality of said moral lessons moot. In Wallace’s words, “anytime a book says black people are not human, blacks are not as intelligent as white people—that would be satirical if the majority of people in America didn’t already believe that. They believed it 100 years ago. They believe it today. So, to a black kid, it’s not funny.”<sup>339</sup> Wallace rejected prevailing claims that Huck’s frequent use

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 23 and 19.

<sup>337</sup> Molly Moore, “Behind the Attack On ‘Huck Finn’: One Angry Educator,” *The Washington Post*, April 21, 1982, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1982/04/21/behind-the-attack-on-huck-finn-one-angry-educator/ec7dfba8-2d1d-4323-9944-eda708f636c7/> (accessed September 14, 2022)

<sup>338</sup> For more on Wallace’s critique of *Huckleberry Finn* see John H. Wallace, “The Case Against Huck Finn,” *Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* edited by James S. Leonard, Thomas A Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 16-24.

<sup>339</sup> E.R. Shipp, “A Century Later, Huck’s Still Stirring Up Trouble,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 1985 <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/04/us/a-century-later-huck-s-still-stirring-up-trouble.html> (accessed September 14, 2022)

of the n-word and descriptions of Black characters as unintelligent should be understood as an historical artifact of the society in which both Huck and the author Twain were raised. For Wallace, these aspects of the text perpetuated racist sentiments when racism is far from an issue of the past.<sup>340</sup>

Most 20<sup>th</sup> century debates about *Huckleberry Finn* were developed along similar lines. For people who defended the book, such as Kaplan, *Huckleberry Finn* symbolized an exemplary piece of American literature and offered a moral vision of anti-prejudice. For others, such as John Wallace, the novel symbolized and reproduced the enduring presence of racist ideology in the American literary canon, public education, and U.S. culture. Wallace's concern was not primarily about the racist words and representations in the text, but about the persistent, dehumanizing meaning of these words and stereotypes within the social context in which the book is read and interpreted. Wallace's critique of *Huckleberry Finn*'s use in classrooms highlights how reading and interpretation always take place in socially embedded contexts. According to Wallace, the social context in which these racial slurs are read is not one in which these words are historical artifacts of dehumanization, but words and representations that continue to have harmful effects because of their place in our racist society.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> Wallace published an edition of *Huckleberry Finn* that removed the n-word, the word "hell," and depictions of Black people "as inhuman, dishonest, or unintelligent." His introduction to the "adapted" novel suggested that even this edition, "should not be used with children" and recommended that *Huckleberry Finn* should be "listed as racist and excluded from the classroom" when at all possible. It is also noteworthy that Wallace included *To Kill a Mockingbird* among a brief list of books he considered racist and unsuitable for the classroom. John H. Wallace, "Recommendations" in *Ethics, Literature, and Theory: An Introductory Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, edited by Stephen K. George (New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers: 2005), 272.

<sup>341</sup> Thank you to Ellie Ash who encouraged me to make this point clearer in this section through her feedback after a dissertation workshop.

This and other scholarly conversations and public debates about *Huckleberry Finn* throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrate that whether Huck was a moral hero, a cautionary tale, or a racist, people were concerned about how Huck's presence in public education and popular culture would inform readers' moral imaginations, especially about race and racism. Ironically, what Trilling celebrated as *Huckleberry Finn*'s potential to engage students' moral imaginations through universal rather than religiously or culturally specific moral conventions became the very type of "engrained customary belief" he said Huck could help readers question. When Kaplan accused Wallace of reading *Huckleberry Finn* incorrectly, he used this "engrained" interpretation of the novel to suggest that his interpretive strategy was moral and that Wallace's was not. This example surfaces one way the ostensibly universal emphasis of sentimental hermeneutics may obscure the religious, historical, and social particularities of sentimental moral frameworks in ways that endorse some moral perspectives while suggesting other should assimilate to these ways of reading or be dismissed.

### ***Triumph or Tragedy: Moral Acculturation in Huckleberry Finn***

Given that questions about morality and moral imagination have played such central roles in *Huckleberry Finn*'s canonization and contestation, it's worth considering that moral acculturation is also a central theme of the novel. *Huckleberry Finn* is a story about how Huck who tries to run away from the civilizing norms of his social context in the Antebellum United States. The novel depicts and raises questions about the process of social, moral, and racial acculturation through Huck's informal education.<sup>342</sup> The plot centers Huck's struggle

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<sup>342</sup> Most commonly, acculturation is used to describe cross-cultural contact, where one chooses to and/or is forced to assimilate into a dominant culture. Acculturation can also be used to describe how all people are

to free his conscience from the acculturating and colonizing threats of society. Most popular readings of *Huckleberry Finn*, akin to Lionel Trilling's, emphasize the triumph of Huck's moral imagination over these acculturating threats.<sup>343</sup> Such interpretations suggest that Huck successfully subverts the religious and racist values he has learned from his culture by choosing to go to hell to help free his friend Jim. I argue that the novel provides a less straightforwardly optimistic view of Huck's ability to think or act beyond the norms and values of his social context. My analysis examines details from the novel that lend themselves to a more tragic reading of Huck's moral struggle. This more tragic interpretation provides an opportunity to examine the relationships among moral acculturation, religious freedom, whiteness, and colonization in the book. My analysis helps surface some of the ironies at play in aforementioned moral commitments of *Huckleberry Finn*'s canonization, highlighting how sentimental interpretations may flatten the complexity Huck's moral crisis and miss the novel's invitation to consider the potential limits of sentimental moral reading habits.

Prior to the events of the novel, the titular character and narrator, Huckleberry Finn, grew up on the outskirts of town with his negligent, abusive father Pap. When Huck introduces himself at the beginning of the book, he lives with temporary guardians, the Widow Douglas and her sister Miss Watson. Both women try to "sivilize" Huck into

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socialized into or acquire culture. I think about acculturation in both of these ways in this chapter to explore the relationship between socialization and colonization in *Huckleberry Finn*. I draw upon Melanie Eckford-Prossor's study "Colonizing Children" in which she posits that thinking about how "the adult demands inscribed onto the very real bodies of children are essentially behavioral...children are to be disciplined, subdued, and civilized—studied for clues about their behavior and their society the way ethnographers study 'natives.'" "Colonizing Children," 247.

<sup>343</sup> Trilling positioned himself as part of a modernist movement in literary criticism, which was critical of sentimentality. Yet as Suzanne Clark explores in *Sentimental Modernism* how modernist critics could not fully "reject the sentimental, because modernism was sentimental. Modernism was still caught in a gendered dialectic which enclosed literature, making the text the object of a naturalized critical gaze." Williamson, *The Sentimental Mode*, 7.

“respectable” Christian society.<sup>344</sup> They teach him proper dining manners, Bible stories, how to pray for “spiritual gifts,” and to spell, read, and write.<sup>345</sup> The Widow and Miss Watson also teach Huck that one’s behavior and beliefs have eternal consequences earning them a place in heaven or hell.

The beginning of the novel depicts how children, especially marginalized children, are civilized and acculturated in ways that are raced, classed, gendered, and religiously informed. Huck frequently expresses his discontent at these civilizing lessons: the new clothes make him “feel all cramped up;” he doesn’t understand why the widow keeps “bothering about Moses” and other Bible characters when they are “no use to anybody;” and he sees “no advantage” to prayer or going to “the good place,” so decides not to “try for it.”<sup>346</sup> By the middle of the first chapter, his guardians’ attempts to “sivilize” Huck make him feel “so lonesome” he wishes he “was dead.”<sup>347</sup>

Huck’s moral and behavioral acculturation occupies a notable portion of the first few chapters of the novel. These scenes suggest that “adult demands” have colonizing effects on the beliefs, bodies, and behavior of children—a point to which this chapter will later return in more textual and historical detail.<sup>348</sup> The sisters’ civilizing lessons are “behavioral”—having to do with “clothes,” “manners,” “physical actions,” and “bodily functions.”<sup>349</sup> Their lessons also have lasting psychological effects. They inform Huck’s conscience and what he believes is right and wrong.

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<sup>344</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 9.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>348</sup> Eckford-Prossor, 247.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*

After a few months, Huck admits that he has grown to like the ways of his guardians “a little bit,” but his father, Pap—who is marked as poor, uneducated, and violent—resurfaces and kidnaps Huck before he can get too comfortable in his new life.<sup>350</sup> The rest of the novel follows Huck’s attempt to escape the social obligations and acculturative threats of his social setting. Huck fakes his own death and runs away from his abusive father on a raft headed down the Mississippi River. Early in his journey, Huck runs into Jim—an enslaved man Huck knew from his time living with the widow and Miss Watson. Jim has run away from Miss Watson to emancipate himself in the free state of Illinois. Huck and Jim travel down the river together and form a relationship through their many adventures and missteps.

Huck consistently struggles to free his conscience of the feeling that he is doing something wrong by accompanying Jim on his journey to emancipation. Huck’s conscience frequently reminds him of the social obligations and civilizing lessons he has tried to leave behind. The scenes in which Huck wrestles with his conscience illustrate how the racial and religious logic of his social setting—represented most directly by Miss Watson in the novel—has a lasting impact on Huck’s sense of right and wrong, especially when it comes to Jim’s freedom.

The oft cited go to hell scene illustrates the lasting effects of moral acculturation on Huck’s conscience. In this scene, Huck tells the reader, “Something inside of me kept saying, ‘There was the Sunday school, you could have gone to it; and if you’d a done it they’d a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I’d been acting about that n----- goes to everlasting

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<sup>350</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 24.

fire.”<sup>351</sup> What is both comical and curious about Huck’s certainty about his damnation and regrets about skipping Sunday school is that he *already knows* the lesson he was never officially taught. Huck’s conscience represents what he learned from the widow and Miss Watson.<sup>352</sup> Namely, that people go to heaven or hell based on their beliefs and behavior and that Black people are property, because Miss Watson enslaved Jim. Huck puts the religious framework of heaven and hell and the racial framework of Jim’s enslavement together in his moral decision. Huck believes that helping an enslaved person escape slavery is a sin worthy of eternal damnation because he would be “stealing” someone’s property.<sup>353</sup> In the interpretive framework he has acquired from Miss Watson’s religious and racial lessons, Huck decides he must “got to hell” to “steal Jim out of slavery.”<sup>354</sup>

The go to hell scene is often celebrated as Huck’s triumphant subversion of the racist logic of antebellum Christianity. Yet read within the novel’s thematic concern with moral acculturation, we might notice that Huck does not abandon or subvert the dehumanizing logic sanctioned by Miss Watson’s religious beliefs. Instead, he uses it to make his decision. Therefore, while Trilling’s interpretation of this scene suggests that Huck’s choice to go to hell demonstrates a moral imaginary beyond the engrained values of his racist culture, Huck’s decision to go to hell actually *fits within* rather than *moves beyond* those values. The narrative plot that follows Huck’s decision to go to hell also depicts Huck’s failure to *act*

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>352</sup> Tracy Fessenden argues that the go to hell scene is “Twain’s revolt against a white Christian culture where church bulletin boards advertised slave auctions and where sermons licensed their listeners to hold other human beings as bondage.” *Culture and Redemption*, 138.

<sup>353</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 228.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.



on his decision to help free Jim.<sup>355</sup> Indeed, in the final chapters of the novel, Huck participates in a game with his friend Tom Sawyer that further delays Jim's emancipation.

Trilling helped canonize and popularize *Huckleberry Finn* in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century with an argument about how Huck could help readers question whether their moral assumptions, especially racist assumptions, like Huck's, were "not merely the engrained customary beliefs" of their respective social setting.<sup>356</sup> Such an interpretation may read Huck's decision as a critique of institutional religion, a refusal to accept the terms of the white Christian moral framework that sanctioned slavery.<sup>357</sup> But when we highlight that Huck's decision to go to hell is still very much working within a Christian moral framework of heaven and hell, this scene raises important questions about the possibilities and challenges of exploring moral arguments outside of the dominant religious and racializing social frameworks that are often embedded in cultural and social institutions, especially education.<sup>358</sup>

Notably, Trilling's argument places the efficacy of this moral subversion not in Huck's thoughts or actions in the text, but in the reader's interpretation of them. In this way, Trilling goes beyond an account of *Huckleberry Finn*'s moral imaginary based on its content

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<sup>355</sup> Leo Marx makes a similar critique of Huck Finn's failure to act in his essay "Mr. Elliot, Mr. Trilling, and Huckleberry Finn."

<sup>356</sup> Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 113.

<sup>357</sup> Fessenden explores dimensions of this argument in her chapter on *Huckleberry Finn* in *Culture and Redemption*. She says that Twain [later] "came uneasily (and unevenly) to question the emancipatory power of unbelief." (139) I suggest that Fessenden's discussion of this theme in others' of Twain's work can be put in conversation with Bercovitch's interpretation of this humorous 'prank' on the reader to suggest that there may be something of this doubting this "emancipatory view of secularization" in this scene. (139) See Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 138-140.

<sup>358</sup> Again, Pellegrini and Jakobsen discuss how appeals to and even legal discussions about morality in U.S. culture almost always involve some aspect of religion despite the fact that religious influences often remain unnoticed and unnamed in these conversations. In their words, "When it comes to morality in American public culture, in the end we're almost always talking about religion." (4) Highlighting possibilities (alongside challenges) of exploring moral argument outside of the Christian framework is important, as not to overdetermine the influence of dominant religious forces. For more on the importance of this balance see McCrary and Wheatley, "The Protestant Secular in the Study of American Religion: Reappraisal and Suggestions."

and argues something more specific about the importance of reading and interpretation, which reflects conventions of sentimental hermeneutics worth exploring. Trilling saw his interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn* as a way to open up possibilities for engaging students' moral imaginations in public school classrooms without imparting religiously particular moral ideologies or conventions. It's ironic then that Trilling leaves out the religious details and histories that are so central to Huck's moral choices in the novel and in the sentimental conventions of his interpretive recommendation for readers. In the next section, I outline some of the religious particularities of Huck's moral assumptions and the religious histories of sentimental hermeneutics in order to surface some of the ironies and limits of Trilling's sentimental interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn*.

### ***The Religious Histories of Moral and Sentimental Hermeneutics***

The notion that literature plays a crucial role in moral education, especially on the topic of race, has a long history in the United States that predates both *Huckleberry Finn*'s publication in 1884 and its canonization in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Mark Twain himself expressed interest in how literature influenced people's moral virtues. In 1871, Twain published an essay in which he argued that much of American artistic culture was marked by Christian values. In Twain's words, "nine-tenths of all kindness and forbearance and Christian charity and generosity in the hearts of the American people to-day, got there by being filtered down from their fountain-head, the gospel of Christ, through dramas and tragedies and comedies on the stage and through the despised novel...and NOT from the

drowsy pulpit.”<sup>359</sup> Twain’s essay observed that literature played a unique role in U.S. society as a source of religious moral education.

Unlike Trilling, however, Twain named the particular religious inflections of the moral values represented in 19<sup>th</sup> century art and literature. As Twain suggested, the relationship between literature and Christian moral education emerged from a particular history of Protestant Christian print culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As printed communication revolutionized and democratized institutional authority, literature became an essential part of “the continuation and development of American Protestantism” outside and beyond the assumed boundaries of the institutional church.<sup>360</sup> In addition to mass producing Protestant Bibles and religious tracts, ministers and publishers emphasized the transformative possibilities of reading other forms of literature, such as memoirs and fiction.<sup>361</sup> While fictional literature was not necessarily useful for teaching “dogmatic religion,” much of the literature from this period, as Twain suggested, promoted Protestant Christian ideas about sin, salvation, and morality.<sup>362</sup>

Devotional reading practices across various Protestant denominations in the U.S. also contributed to the increasing association between reading, “self-improvement and moral reform” even beyond sacred or explicitly religious texts<sup>363</sup> As R. Laurence Moore notes, morality became such a central part of popular reading culture that “moral issues” were even

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<sup>359</sup> Mark Twain, *What is Man? And Other Philosophical Writings* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1973), 53.

<sup>360</sup> Rachel B. Griffis, “Reformation Leads to Self-Reliance: The Protestantism of Transcendentalism,” *Religions* 8:30, 2017, 103. For more on the development of Christian print culture see R. Laurence Moore, “Religion, Secularization, and the Shaping of the Culture Industry in Antebellum America,” 217.

<sup>361</sup> Moore, 227.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>363</sup> Stokes, 15 and 13.

central to “the writing and reception” of “the growing body of sensational and erotic fiction” in U.S. culture.<sup>364</sup> The content and reading habits of Protestant Christian print culture promoted the idea that reading and writing were an important part of religious moral education and an evangelical investment in creating a moral society. This brief history also represents the important role literature and devotional reading played in the wide-reaching diffusion of Protestant Christian norms of morality and behavior in U.S. popular culture Twain observed in his essay.<sup>365</sup>

*Huckleberry Finn*'s mid-20<sup>th</sup> century canonization through the work of Trilling and others also drew upon and perpetuated a long-held belief about the role of literature in U.S. culture and education as a method to form moral citizens. The idea that literature could educate people's morals was embedded in early forms of public education. Common schools in the 19<sup>th</sup> century used literature to impart “undenominational” Protestant morals and values.<sup>366</sup> As Tisa Wenger argues, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century “most Americans assumed that school prayers, Christian morality, and the Bible were essential to the education of a civilized and moral citizenry.”<sup>367</sup> Although the Bible was the most prominent text in formal moral education in common schools, books such as *The New England Primer* also played an

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<sup>364</sup> Moore, 223. For more on Christian Print and Reading Culture see Claudia Stokes, *The Altar at Home: Sentimental Literature and Nineteenth-Century American Religion* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Fraser, *Between Church and State*, 32.

<sup>367</sup> Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, 31-32.

important role.<sup>368</sup> Early educational movements institutionalized the “Protestant belief in the perfectibility of human society” in which children were the imagined site of social change.

Literature in common schools became an important part of this hope for social perfectibility. The moral values represented in educational literature normed the requirements for moral and actual citizenship.<sup>369</sup> In other words, toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, education, literacy, and literature played an essential role in assimilation. Education was sometimes a violent and coercive part of the American colonial project, in which religious and racial minorities such as Catholic and Jewish immigrants, newly emancipated Black Americans, and Native Americans, were forced into the norms of white Protestant Christian society.<sup>370</sup>

In light of the historical relationship between Protestant Christian morality, literature, and public education, it makes sense that Trilling and other 20<sup>th</sup> century literary critics emphasized *Huckleberry Finn*'s potential for moral formation. Indeed, his insistence that *Huckleberry Finn* could help students question and develop their own moral assumptions can be understood as Trilling's hermeneutic inheritance of 19<sup>th</sup> century sentimental reading culture and educational reform movements in which literature, moral feelings, race, and citizenship were inseparably intertwined.

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<sup>368</sup> See Daniel A. Cohen, “The Origin and Development of the *New England Primer*,” *Children's Literature* 5 (1976), 52-57.

<sup>369</sup> Allison Speicher, *Schooling Readers: Reading Common Schools in Nineteenth Century American Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2016), 9.

<sup>370</sup> See Hilary J. Moss, *Schooling Citizens*; William J. Reese, *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to 'No Child Left Behind* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); David Tyack, *Seeking Common Ground: Public Schools in a Diverse Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Michael Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968); James D. Anderson, *No Sacrifice Too Great: The History of African American Education from Slavery to the Twenty-First Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009); and Clif Stratton, *Education for Empire: American Schools, Race, and the Paths of Good Citizenship* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

It is ironic, however, that Trilling celebrated *Huckleberry Finn's* ability to help readers acknowledge and question their moral assumptions, when Trilling did not acknowledge or question the religiously informed moral values that informed his own interpretation of the novel's moral worth. This ironic oversight is especially important when considering scholarly claims that *Huckleberry Finn* promotes anti-prejudice as a moral value, because race, religion, and morality were historically intertwined in Protestant devotional reading and sentimental literature. The notion that fictional literature could mold moral citizens made literature an important part of social and educational movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century United States. In particular, the genre of sentimental literature, which made emotionally provocative appeals about particular social problems, played an important role in the movement to abolish slavery in the United States.

Sentimental literature exhibits how race, religious sentiment, and morality were closely interlinked in Protestant print and reading in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is just one example of an historical trend in which sentimental literature was employed to “educate the feelings” and transform people's ideas about race through religious sentiments.<sup>371</sup> Books about race in this sentimental genre were written with the belief that structural social change takes place first by changing people's hearts to recognize the horror of injustice in racial inequity. As an outgrowth of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Christian reading culture, the historical popularity of sentimental fiction and the sentimental hermeneutics used to read it continued to emerge in interpretive methods throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> Jay, *White Writers, Race Matters*, 49.

<sup>372</sup> See my exploration of New Criticism in the previous chapter.

Given the historical relationship among literature, morality, and race in which moral feelings evoked in fiction literature are meant to spark social change, it makes sense that these sentimental modes of reading have been central to popular interpretations of *Huckleberry Finn*. *Huckleberry Finn*'s mid-20<sup>th</sup> century canonization drew upon and perpetuated a long-held belief about the role of literature in U.S. culture and education was to form moral citizens and fuel social movements about racial equality. Trilling's interpretation complimented and fortified the belief that morality is central to educating citizens and that literature is particularly useful for cultivating positive moral sentiments or feelings against culturally sanctioned racial prejudice. When we think about the way *Huckleberry Finn* has been canonized and celebrated as both quintessentially moral and American, it is important to consider how these interpretations of the novel fit into the history of Protestant Christian moral education in the United States as well as the colonizing history of this ostensibly universal moral hermeneutic.

### *Limits of Sentimental Reading*

Many scholars, including Trilling, argue that moral feelings provide opportunities for Huck and the reader to transform their hearts and potentially their society by re-examining their moral assumptions. These arguments demonstrate the continued influence of sentimental literature and Protestant reading culture on modern hermeneutics. Yet my analysis of *Huckleberry Finn* surfaces how Twain's novel raises questions about the efficacy of sentiment and the ability for literature to play an interventionist role in moral or social problems. *Huckleberry Finn* provides a self-consciously complicated representation of the type of sentimentality that Trilling and others suggest readers use to interpret the novel. Against sentimental interpretations of *Huckleberry Finn* that insist Huck has a moral conversion, I

explore the possibility that the affective scene of Huck's moral epiphany is an interpretative trap for the sentimental reader.

Popular interpretations of *Huckleberry Finn* often classify the novel as part of the sentimental genre, because they make the case that the novel "educate[s] the feelings" by situating the reader as the recipient of moral lessons depicted in the text.<sup>373</sup> *Huckleberry Finn* does provide plenty of appeals to sentiment and opportunities for the reader to engage moral questions. For example, in one narrative episode, Huck learns a lesson from his sympathy for Jim's feelings. Towards the beginning of the novel, Huck and Jim are separated on the Mississippi river by a heavy fog. When Huck finally finds Jim, he decides to play a trick on him by suggesting that Jim dreamt the whole incident. When Jim finds evidence that Huck has been lying, he tells him how disappointed he is in Huck for deceiving him, because Jim had been heartbroken and worried about Huck during their separation. Huck "feels" mean after this incident and vows to not "do him no more mean tricks" because of the way it made Jim feel scared and anxious.<sup>374</sup>

Similarly, in what Toni Morrison calls "one of the most moving remembrances in American literature," Huck again learns a moral lesson from his sympathy for a story Jim shares with him about his daughter. Jim tells Huck how much he misses his wife and children.<sup>375</sup> Jim confesses to Huck that he once treated his daughter Elizabeth "so ornery" because he didn't realize that she was "deef en dumb."<sup>376</sup> Jim emphasized his strong feelings of remorse, affection, and gentleness after he realized his daughter could not hear him. A

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<sup>373</sup> Jay, *White Writers, Race Matters*, 49.

<sup>374</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 98.

<sup>375</sup> Toni Morrison, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Mark Twain: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, edited by Shelly Fisher Fishkin (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996), 157.

<sup>376</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 168.



few pages later, Huck applies the affective lessons he learned from Jim. Huck uses this same sentimental moral reasoning to help a family that falls victim to the manipulative tricks of Huck and Jim's unwelcome companions the Duke and King. Huck emulates the same feelings Jim taught him and uses these feelings to take caring action in the way Jim modeled in both his interactions with Huck and the story about his daughter. Following this pattern, Huck also uses these moral feelings to help him make his decision about going to hell.

For all of these moments in the text in which Huck learns from sympathizing with other people's moral feelings, there are as many scenes where Twain's characters, including Huck, use sentimental appeals to emotion to exploit and hurt others. At the beginning of the novel, Huck's negligent, abusive father, Pap, convinces a judge that he planned to change his drunken ways. As Huck explains, "he talked to him about temperance and such things till the old man cried, and said he'd been a fool, and fooled away his life; but now he was agoing to turn over a new leaf and be a man nobody wouldn't be ashamed of, and he hoped the judge would help him and not look down on him."<sup>377</sup> Pap brings the judge to tears. In fact, Huck uses the word "cried" five times in this scene to describe the judge's and the judge's wife's reactions to Pap's emotional appeal.<sup>378</sup> By the end of Pap's performance, "the judge said it was the holiest time on record."<sup>379</sup> But just moments after this scene, Pap sneaks out the window and gets drunk again.<sup>380</sup> The new judge learns, as others had warned him, that Pap's emotional appeals are manipulative.

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<sup>377</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 31.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

The “rascallions” the Duke and King also know how to use their words to provoke sentimental reactions, first from a camp meeting and then from a grieving family in order to steal their money. These scenes demonstrate distrust in the power of sentimentality in the novel, at least in the hands of white wordsmiths. As Gregg Camfield argues, there are plenty of scenes in *Huckleberry Finn* that suggest “sentimentality could be the key not to truth and virtue but to deceit and vice.”<sup>381</sup> When sentimental interpretations insist on the triumph of Huck’s moral feelings, they overlook the dubious undertow in the book’s representation of moral sentiment.

It is not just the novel’s villains, such as Pap, Duke, and King, who abuse sentimental feelings in their pursuit of money, freedom, and power. Huck also uses sentimental strategies throughout the novel to deceive others and get what he wants. Huck lies and uses his words and emotional performances to provoke sympathy from people, especially when he needs something. Given Huck’s self-proclaimed strategies of sentimental deception, it is worth acknowledging, as scholars like Sacvan Bercovith have, that Huck is the narrator of the story. If Huck is as skilled as Pap at faking reform to get what he wants, such deceptive potential raises questions about his role as narrator. Could Huck be using sentiment to deceive the reader too? Just as Pap deceptively convinced the judge of his reform, has Huck falsely convinced the reader of his?

Although popular sentimental interpretations of the novel usually emphasize Huck’s moral reform, at least in the moment of the go to hell scene, there is not much textual evidence to support Huck’s change of conscience. Just like Pap, Huck does not really change

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<sup>381</sup> Gregg Camfield, “Sentimental Liberalism and the Problem of Race in *Huckleberry Finn*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 46, no. 1 (June 1991), 105.

his actions or ideas throughout the novel. Even after his alleged moral epiphany, Huck still considers it wrong to help Jim emancipate himself. He is easily swayed by Tom to delay Jim's freedom and he continues to dehumanize Black people in his speech and actions.<sup>382</sup> It is important to note, as Toni Morrison does, that there are ways in which Huck does change how he understands his place within his racist society by becoming more vocal, even in subtle ways, about the dehumanization of slavery.<sup>383</sup> However, it is possible that the sentimental reader's eagerness to read Huck's moral transformation may ultimately say more about the reader and sentimental hermeneutics than it does about Huck.

### *The Acculturative Trap of Moral Interpretation*

One way to read Huck's moral conversion in the go to hell scene is as a prompt to reflect on sentimental interpretive habits. Sacvan Bercovitch's essay, "Deadpan Huck: Or, What's Funny About Interpretation," supports such an interpretation. The funny thing about *Huckleberry Finn*, according Bercovitch, is that Huck pulls one over on his readers. Bercovitch suggests that "*Huck doesn't develop so that we can be conned into believing that he does.*"<sup>384</sup> One of the first parts of the novel that points to this "interpretive trap" or prank on the reader is the epigraph, which reads:

Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted;  
persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting

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<sup>382</sup> For more on how Huck does not change his behaviors or perspective in *Huckleberry Finn* see Leo Marx, "Mr. Elliot, Mr. Trilling, and Huckleberry Finn," and Laurence Holland, "A 'Raft of Trouble.'"

<sup>383</sup> See Morrison, "Introduction," in *Oxford Huckleberry Finn*.

<sup>384</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, "Deadpan Huck: Or, What's Funny About Interpretation," *The Kenyon Review*, vol. 24, no. 3 (Summer-Autumn, 2002), 115.

to find a plot in it will be shot. BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR PER G.G.  
CHIEF OF ORDANCE.<sup>385</sup>

According to Bercovitch, “instead of forbidding interpretation,” the epigraph calls “attention” and makes the reader’s interpretation the true “subject of the story.”<sup>386</sup>

Bercovitch argues that this epigraph should make the reader self-conscious of how they might attempt to moralize Huck’s story.

The fact that the epigraph explicitly instructs the reader against looking for a moral in the story, may indicate that Twain anticipated people might read his novel with a sentimental interest in morality. Indeed, Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* during a time when sentimental literature was quite popular and the epigraph may highlight his distaste for the popularity of sentimentality in literary culture. Thus, popular scholarship and teaching guides that celebrate *Huckleberry Finn*’s potential to promote “moral imagination” in readers miss the irony of their insistence on applying a sentimental hermeneutic to a book that openly critiques it.

The epigraph points to one way *Huckleberry Finn* sets an interpretive trap for the sentimental reader and there are other narrative details to support it. If we consider Huck’s role as narrator, the reader’s eagerness to interpret Huck’s moral conversion can provide an insightful way of understanding the relationship between moral acculturation and sentimental interpretation in *Huckleberry Finn*. Namely, if we understand interpretation as a central theme of the story, the novel provides commentary about the influence of Protestant commitments on 19<sup>th</sup> century sentimental hermeneutics and the alleged socially

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<sup>385</sup> *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, epigraph.

<sup>386</sup> Bercovitch, “Deadpan Huck,” 91-92.

transformative effects of sentimental literature. If the novel does indeed have something critical to say about these modes of interpretation, it is ironic that these effects of devotional reading and sentimental literature have continued to be so influential in the novel's 20<sup>th</sup> century canonization and cultural assent.

There are a few other aspects of the text that call attention to the reader's interpretive habits beyond the epigraph. On the opening page Huck explicitly says that he is the author of the book, not Mark Twain. The child author raises questions about the moral authority of the author within the world of the text when Huck is portrayed as in need of formal and moral education. Can the reader trust Huck's "moral," "motive," and "plot"?

Huck's troublemaking friend Tom Sawyer may represent one way in which the text first acknowledges and pokes fun at sentimental influences on readers' interpretive habits. Throughout the story Tom uses books as a guide for his life decisions. For instance, in a scene where Huck, Tom, and their friends decide the requirements for initiation into their club, Tom says, consistent with his established interest in making his life like the adventure books, "I've seen it in books; and so of course that's what we've got to do."<sup>387</sup> Tom's comment suggests that he uses books as his moral and behavioral guide. His comment aligns with the sentimental vision of fiction literature as morally formative. Furthermore, Tom asks when someone challenges his argument to use fiction books as his authority, "Don't you reckon that the people that made the books knows what's the correct thing to do? Do you reckon *you* can learn 'em anything?"<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>387</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 17.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

This scene can be read as a set up for the novel's interpretive joke. When Tom asks rhetorical questions about the authority of the author—whether the author knows what is right and whether Ben Rogers, a child, can teach an author anything—Tom points to another ironic aspect of the text. In the case of *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is the ‘person that made the book,’ the author. Thus, this scene subtly poses two questions to the reader: do you think Huck “knows what’s the correct thing to do? Do you reckon *you* can learn ‘em anything?”<sup>389</sup>

The answer to the question about whether Huck “knows the correct thing to do” is no. Huck admits throughout the book that he never knows what to do; he consistently struggles to make sense of what is right and wrong. The answer to the second question about whether the reader “can learn [Huck] anything” is yes. Through a dialectic process of interpretation, the reader teaches Huck lots of lessons. The reader interprets the correct words out of his grammatical mistakes and their interpretation of the go to hell scene corrects Huck’s misunderstanding that he is morally right, when he believes he is morally bankrupt.

Additionally, the reader knows that Twain rather than Huck is the actual author of the story. However, through his child narrator, Twain implies that perhaps the reader should also doubt *his* authority. This layered rhetorical strategy is Nietzschean. These scenes seem to question, as Nietzsche did, “the sanctification of morality, the theologization of the author, and various other metaphysical concepts, including the willing subject, truth, causality,

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

morality, the soul, and indeed language itself.”<sup>390</sup> By employing Huck as narrator, Twain explores and undermines the assumption that fiction literature can claim moral authority. The rhetorical strategies in *Huckleberry Finn* are notably critical of turning the author into a theologian. These details suggest that Twain may have been skeptical of using fiction for moral formation in the way that was becoming so popular in his day through sentimental literature and reading.

One of the most noteworthy components of how *Huckleberry Finn* accomplishes its interpretive trick is the historical distance between the reader and the events of the novel. The novel was published 20 years after the Civil War, so the novel’s immediate intended audience was a readership living decades beyond the legal institution of slavery in the United States. The historical distance allows the reader to ‘learn’ Huck one of the most central lessons in the novel, that he is actually morally correct to help Jim. Notably, the moral clarity and the sentimental reaction that the go to hell scene attempts to provoke from the reader is largely made possible by the historical distance between the fictional and authorial setting. Readers are able to “gain moral self-satisfaction in articulating, the values that Huck couldn’t,” as Jonathan Arac explains.<sup>391</sup> By warning the reader in the epigraph against such morally preoccupied readings, the novel seems to question and maybe even criticize the self-satisfaction a reader may get from looking back at the moral failures of history with the moral superiority of historical retrospect.

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<sup>390</sup> Matthew Chrulew, “Genealogies of the Secular” in *Religion after Secularization in Australia* ed. by Timothy Stanley (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 141.

<sup>391</sup> Arac, 62.

Read in this way, *Huckleberry Finn* may indeed provide readers the opportunity to question their moral assumptions, just not in the way Trilling and other popular interpretations of the novel suggest. *Huckleberry Finn* raises questions about a reader's ability to think beyond the moral assumptions and interpretive habits they have inherited from their culture. The reader like Huck uses the moral framework of sentimental interpretation they have learned to understand Huck's decision to go to hell. This reading of the scene does not foreclose the possibility of interpreting or thinking differently, but it suggests *Huckleberry Finn* is less optimistic about literature as the affective solution to the dangers of moral acculturation and the possibilities of social change than popular interpretations of the novel suggest.

The epigraph, the child narrator, and Huck's deceptive emotional appeals all raise questions about how sentimental interpretive habits, especially the desire to see and experience moral transformation through reading, may be part of a racializing, colonizing, acculturative process rather than a pathway beyond it. Just as Huck extends rather than subverts the racist logic of his moral assumptions in his alleged moral transformation, the go to hell scene can be interpreted to suggest that the sentimental reader extends theirs too even as they feel self-satisfied by their distance from the racism of slavery in Huck's society. In this interpretation, the novel emphasizes Huck's struggle to escape the colonizing realities of his culture. Reading the book as a commentary on sentimental interpretation suggests that perhaps these reading habit too are part of the colonizing process, which readers root for Huck to leave behind.

***Religious Freedom, Whiteness, and the Difference between Dissent and Descent***



Huck imagines that there are a few ways to escape the attempts to “sivilize” him. He imagines physical escape, including running away, staying on a raft suspended between the two shores of civilization, and also dying. Huck frequently comments in moments where he feels social responsibility for others or the “sivilizing” tug on his conscience that he wishes he “was dead.”<sup>392</sup> Huck tries out these various physical forms of escape. Although he never actually kills himself, Huck does fake his death to ensure that he can run away from society unfollowed. Huck also imagines the time alone with Jim on the raft as an escape from the social obligations and acculturative threat of civilization. Lastly, at the end of the novel, when Tom’s Aunt Sally plans to “adopt” and “sivilize” Huck like the widow and Miss Watson did before, Huck says he “can’t stand it” and decides he has to “light out for the Territory.”<sup>393</sup> When the whole civilizing process threatens to happen again, Huck says “I’ve been there before” and imagines that “Indian Territory” is the only frontier left where he can find individual freedom from the civilizing demands of his ‘sivilizing’ society.

Each of Huck’s attempts to escape acculturation showcase and expose colonizing dimensions in Huck’s portrayal of American culture. Reading Huck’s attempts to escape acculturation as representative rather than separate from colonization can be a way of exploring the “civilizational assemblages of race and empire” and their relationship to the concept of childhood in the novel.<sup>394</sup> Analyzing *Huckleberry Finn* with this concern about civilizing children brings more depth to our exploration of moral acculturation and

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<sup>392</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 11.

<sup>393</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>394</sup> Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, 141.

illuminates how religion and race work in inseparable ways in the process of colonization and its afterlives.<sup>395</sup>

The fact that Huck imagines life with Jim, an enslaved Black man, and the “Indian Territory” as two forms of physical escape from his “sivilizing” experience evidences how the concept of childhood “coexists with colonizing discourses.”<sup>396</sup> The beginning of the novel outlines how adults in Huck’s life assume he needs to be “molded,” “disciplined,” “subdued,” and “civilized.”<sup>397</sup> Melanie Eckford-Prossor argues that these assumptions about the need to “sivilize” children are “very similar to those made about natives” and other marginalized groups of people who did not fit within the white Protestant norms and values of U.S. culture.<sup>398</sup>

The fact that Huck imagines his escape from this acculturative threat on the raft with Jim shows how Huck’s relationship with Jim extends rather than ends Huck’s relationship to the acculturative norms and values he learned from the Widow and Miss Watson. Namely, Huck treats Jim as an infantilized human subject he can control. Toni Morrison points out that Huck could not have had the same relationship with a white adult man. She argues that Huck desires a father who can be an “adviser,” a “trustworthy companion,” and that “he can control,” and “no white man could serve all three functions.”<sup>399</sup> Huck could not have had this relationship with a white adult, because Huck would have been subject to their control

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<sup>395</sup> I draw this language of “afterlives” from Brian Connolly and Marisa Fuentes who discuss how “the archives of slavery and the oppressive power structures they represent and reproduce, left uninterrogated, contributes to a system of racial denigration that has persisted in slavery’s afterlife.” “Introduction: From Archives of Slavery to Liberated Futures?” *History of the Present: A Journal of Critical History*, vol. 6, no. 2, (Fall 2016), 115.

<sup>396</sup> Eckford-Prossor, 239.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>399</sup> Morrison, “Introduction,” 157.

as he is with the Duke and the King. Huck is able to imagine freedom from his own colonization through a relationship of control over Jim. So once again, Huck's imagined escape from the acculturative threat of society extends the logic and realities of white supremacy and Protestant dominance rather than transcends them.

In one scene, Huck and Jim debate the meaning of the biblical story of King Solomon. Huck says the widow taught him that Solomon was "the wisest man" and Jim argues that Solomon was a fool for chopping a child in two.<sup>400</sup> Huck tells Jim that he has missed the point of the story and Jim argues that "de *real* pint is down furdur—it's down deeper. It lays in de way Sollermun was raised."<sup>401</sup> Jim argues against Huck that Solomon didn't know how to value a child's life. At the end of their disagreement, Huck says "I see it warn't no use wasting words—you can't learn a n\*gg\*r to argue."<sup>402</sup> In this scene, Huck tries to teach Jim the things he was taught by the Widow Douglas: the correct way to interpret Solomon as wise. But Jim rejects this interpretation, so Huck imagines it is a waste of time to try to teach, instruct, or "sivilize" Jim. This scene is just one example in which although Jim is an adult, one who cares for him faithfully and well, Huck does not feel that he can be taught or controlled by Jim. Instead, Huck tries to teach and control Jim in the way he has been taught and controlled. Huck maintains feelings of racial and religious superiority he has learned from his society's racial hierarchy even as he tries to escape the influences of that culture.

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<sup>400</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 89.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

The same is true for Huck imagined freedom in “Indian Territory.” Huck imagines autonomy and personal freedom living among Native Americans. Yet if Huck’s treatment of Jim is any indicator, Huck’s imagined freedom in “Indian Territory” will encroach upon Native American freedom. Thus, Huck’s imagined physical escapes from his social acculturation are places where he can use his privileged identity to colonize others. These two imagined possibilities demonstrate what Toni Morrison calls the “parasitical nature of white freedom.”<sup>403</sup> Huck is free in places where he has the privilege to be the colonizer and not the colonized. In this way, *Huckleberry Finn* is truly an American story in the sense that white freedom is an imagined and lived reality made possible by the enslavement and dispossession of Black and Indigenous people.

Huck’s relationship with Jim and the occasional reference to Native Americans on the periphery of the story gestures towards the double timeframe of the novel and the paralleled concerns of these two timeframes. The fictional timeframe of antebellum U.S. is critical of the religious justification for slavery which is why sentimental interpretations celebrate that Huck challenges moral justifications for slavery in his decision to go to hell. The authorial timeframe, which is decades after the U.S. Civil War, is concerned with the moral and religious justification for “sivilizing” religious and racial “outsiders” into white Christian norms of proper religiosity in the name of individual and national freedom. During the time period in which Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, the U.S. government dissolved Native American tribal sovereignty and governed tribes under colonial subjugation. U.S. citizens sanctioned the physical and cultural genocide against Native Americans by the

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<sup>403</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 54.

religious and racial belief that Indigenous people were not prepared for freedom, so they needed to be civilized into U.S. culture. Protestant missionaries were at the forefront of acculturating Native Americans.<sup>404</sup> Similar racist arguments and assimilating policies were directed at Black Americans in post-Civil War United States. Abolitionist missionaries constructed schools for emancipated people and aimed to “civilize” those students with Christian values.<sup>405</sup>

The role of religion and assimilationist racism in moral education is an important thematic component in *Huckleberry Finn*. The same religious authority and assimilationist racist ideas that are used in Huck’s moral acculturation were also applied in real world settings to disenfranchise racialized and religious ‘others.’ In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. also exported these colonizing ideologies into imperial power abroad. In 1905, Twain expressed his indictment of the religious justifications for U.S. imperialism and colonialism in a satirical poem titled “The War Prayer.”

These same issues are present in *Huckleberry Finn*, although they are less straightforwardly critical and more ambiguously named. Huck’s individual freedom is still part of the colonizing culture he aims to escape. He cannot imagine sustained freedom from his colonizing culture without colonizing others. When imagined in relationship to the United States’ colonial and imperial conquests, Huck’s desire for a physical escape as a

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<sup>404</sup> See Francis Paul Prucha, *The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1888-1912* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979); Carol Devens, *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and George E. Tinker, *Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). For the history of Native American pedagogical resistance to these colonizing and acculturating efforts see Lomawaima, K. Tsianina and Tera L. McCarty, *“To Remain an Indian”: Lessons in Democracy from a Century of Native American Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

<sup>405</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 237.

colonizing practice can be understood anew. He can imagine no physical escape from the U.S. colonial and imperial structures that did not threaten to dominate and colonize others into dominant Christian norms and values.

Many scholars and readers celebrate the racial harmony that Huck and Jim find on the river between the two shores of their racist society, but do not acknowledge how Huck continues to racialize and infantilize Jim during their travels. As showcased in Trilling's interpretation, many celebrate Huck's choice to go to hell as his successful escape from his racist society. These interpretations do not acknowledge the complicated way Huck relates to his religious and racial identities in this scene. Huck's concerted effort to find an ideological escape to free his mind and spirit from this colonizing society is illustrated in his choice to go to hell. Yet this decision shows some of the limits of unbelief for freeing oneself from the religious heritage of a society built on racialization and colonization.

Huck's moral decision is framed in terms of sin, in which the choice to uphold the racist system of slavery by telling Miss Watson that Jim ran away is characterized as religiously virtuous and the choice to help Jim emancipate himself is framed as a religious sin worthy of hell. At first, Huck decides to write a letter to Miss Watson, which he says makes him feel "good and all washed clean of sin."<sup>406</sup> However, after reflecting on his friendship with Jim and his concern for Jim's happiness he decides to help Jim escape and says "all right, then, I'll go to hell" as he destroys the letter he wrote to Miss Watson.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 227.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

Race and religion are intertwined in this scene in two notable ways.<sup>408</sup> First, the religious framework of Huck's decision about whether to help return or free Jim illustrates some of the historical ways in which the institution of racialized slavery was intertwined with a framework of religious freedom. In this scene, Huck imagines that his spiritual freedom, his salvation, is dependent on Jim's enslavement and his spiritual damnation is necessary for Jim's freedom. This religious and racial logic demonstrates what Toni Morrison calls "the parasitical nature of white freedom."<sup>409</sup> Put another way, as Tracy Fessenden explains, there is an "American quest for individual freedom pursued from an equally American foundation of slavery and dispossession."<sup>410</sup> At precisely the moment Huck claims personal responsibility in his relationship with Jim, he consciously asserts his individual difference or distance from the religious and racializing institutions that have justified and enslaved Jim in the first place.

Second, Huck uses a religious strategy to negotiate his own racial identity. In this scene, Huck not only redefines his religious identity by choosing to go to hell. He also tries to renegotiate his whiteness. Within Huck's moral framework, returning Jim to Miss Watson would "wash" him "clean of sin," clearing the mire caked on his skin from running away with Jim, figuratively and literally making him more clearly white. Huck's decision to continue the journey with Jim, however, makes him dirty and sinful, figuratively and literally

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<sup>408</sup> Judith Weisenfeld's work emphasizes the agency of individual religious subjects within larger racializing structures through what she calls religio-racial identification. She examines how in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century members of the Moorish Science Temple, Father Divine's Peace Mission Movement, and the Nation of Islam mobilized their religious narratives and practices to resist racial hierarchies and challenge conventional categories of race in the U.S. My discussion of how Huck negotiates his racial identity through religious strategies is based on Weisenfeld's work in *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity During the Great Migration* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

<sup>409</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 54.

<sup>410</sup> Fessenden, "Haunted America," 30.

darkening his white skin because of his religious decision. Though Huck's decision calls into question the white and Black binary of racial hierarchy, it could also be interpreted as a form of blackface, which ultimately reinscribes the very racial hierarchies Huck attempts to dissolve. Read in this way, Huck's choice to go to hell may be understood as an attempt to free himself not only of his Protestant Christian identity, but also his whiteness. While many readers celebrate Huck's desire and decision to distance himself from the white Christian values he learned from Miss Watson, it is also worth examining how this imagined ability to stand outside of cultural inheritance is part of a broader assemblage of religious freedom, whiteness, and colonization in the novel.

The Protestant framework of religious freedom imagines religious identity as a matter of consent rather than one of descent or cultural heritage.<sup>411</sup> The Protestant inflected definition of religious freedom, assumes that a person can “stand apart” from religious belief, practice, and culture in order to “evaluate” and interpret it.<sup>412</sup> The way religion and race are intertwined in this scene suggests that Huck imagines his whiteness as a matter of consent, rather than descent. By choosing to go to hell, Huck withholds his consent from both his religious and racial identities. This voluntary perspective on Huck's religious and racial identity is contrasted with others, like Jim and the Native Americans who are always on the periphery of the story, “for whom religion lies closer to race”—whose culture is racialized as a matter of cultural and social inheritance.<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> Fessenden argues that that Twain's travel memoir, *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World*, “follows a civil-religious imaginary in figuring this ‘Christian’ identity as first and foremost a voluntary one, a matter of consent (which can, as in Twain's case, be withheld) and not of descent, as in presumably the case for the racialized religious exotic of the Old World or Far East.” *Culture and Redemption*, 158.

<sup>412</sup> Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics and Empire: The politics of Islamic Reformation,” *Public Culture* vol.18, no. 2 (2006), 341.

<sup>413</sup> Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 159.



Huck's choice to distance himself from both the religious and white institutions that have justified and enslaved Jim is often read as a moral triumph, as his resistance to a racist society. Yet there are two thought-provoking takeaways from this scene when we consider Huck's choice within Protestant frameworks that imagined religious freedom a matter of voluntary religious affiliation. First, Huck still relies on the religious and racial frameworks he has been taught to make his decision. The choice for him is still between heaven and hell and he still thinks Jim is property, which is why he decides to "go to hell" to "steal Jim out of slavery."<sup>414</sup> Huck's reasoning demonstrates how difficult it is to actually "stand apart" from one's social framework in order to interpret it. Huck's decision shows the reader that there is room for resistance, but Huck struggles to find a sustained place "apart" from the religious frameworks he has been 'sivilied' into. This struggle may suggest, as Fessenden remarks of another of Twain's novels, that for Huck, "Protestantism...[has] absorbed all possible alternatives."<sup>415</sup> Or, put another way, Huck's struggle to find moral alternatives reflects how "the dominant framework for morality" in the United States "is not simply 'religious' or even 'Christian,' but specifically Protestant" in ways that suppresses, excludes, and dismisses other moral imaginaries.<sup>416</sup>

Second, Huck's decision can also be read as consistent with his desire to escape social responsibility. He takes personal responsibility in his relationship with Jim at the same time that he frees his individual conscience from its association with the institutional violence of white supremacy. He frees his conscience of his cultural inheritance of the

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<sup>414</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 228.

<sup>415</sup> Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 149.

<sup>416</sup> Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, 22.

embodied, colonizing, and violent consequences the Church's racializing hierarchy placed on real people. Thus, this scene suggests Huck strains to find physical or spiritual freedom beyond the colonizing norms of his society without redemptively erasing his place in a larger system of slavery and dispossession, which is not his creation, but his inherited privilege as a white boy in the United States.

On another level, *Huckleberry Finn* also highlights the reader's interpretation to suggest a parallel between Huck's participation in colonizing society and the reader's in a few ways. First, the text uses sentimental conventions to position the reader in a way that makes them sympathize with and want to care for Huck. We correct his improper grammar throughout the novel in order to understand him. We feel the desire to adopt him and to tell him he is morally right when he thinks he is wrong. The reader is positioned to mold him, teach him, and even at moments civilize him into our own moral culture so he doesn't have to feel so deprived in his own. One way *Huckleberry Finn* tries to imagine an alternative to colonizing childhood is by giving a child, Huck, authorial privilege. But even as Huck narrates the story himself, the reader tries to civilize him into our understanding of morals and values. Huck says he is damned and we correct him by interpreting that he is saved.

This is one of the rhetorical effects of the double timeframe of the novel. The moral clarity the reader has is made possible by the historical distance between the fictional and authorial setting. The historical distance allows the reader to assert their difference from Huck and Huck's culture. Yet it seems important to unpack this imagined difference. By reading the go to hell scene as moral lesson, as sentimental interpretations do, the reader can feel "self-satisfied" in how different they are from Huck. How Huck's moral quandary is very clear to them. This feeling of difference emulates a Protestant definition of religious

freedom, which encourages the subject to imagine they can stand apart from the norms and values Huck's society to interpret them as if they are free of and immune to the acculturative or 'sivilizing' realities of these norms and values in their own world in a way Huck is not.

The Protestant particularities of this moral framework of interpretation allows the reader just like Huck to think about their historical inheritance as a matter of consent rather than cultural and social inheritance. The sentimental reader, like Huck, can use their imagined difference from Huck to rationalize their individual freedom from the historical institutions of slavery, colonization, and imperialism as if the norms of these institutions do not linger in the U.S. culture they inhabit.

This imagined difference between the reader and Huck could be read as a sentimentally sanctioned eschatological hope in progress—much like the sentimental ideas of progress I explored in the previous chapter. It seems what *Huckleberry Finn* describes, at least unconsciously, is that whatever progressive freedom sentimental interpretations of the novel imagine, they usually come with a dark undertow of unfreedom.<sup>417</sup> Huck's morality becomes the imagined antidote or resolution to the persistent presence of racism in his time and in ours when sentimental readers, like Huck, assert individual freedom from accountability to institutions and structural realities that perpetuate this racism in the novel and in contemporary society. Sentimental interpretations place trust in the very self-satisfied interpretation of moral progress of which the book seems to suggest readers should be more suspect and ignore the lessons the book describes about the colonizing power of ostensibly, 'universal' morality of sentimental reading habits.

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<sup>417</sup> Fessenden, "Haunted America," 30.

There is a poignant similarity between the scene in which Huck tells Jim he has “missed the point” of the King Solomon story and the 20<sup>th</sup> century debate about the novel in which Justin Kaplan suggests that John Wallace has missed the point of *Huckleberry Finn*. Against Huck’s regurgitated interpretation that Solomon is wise because his tradition (Miss Watson) told him so, Jim’s interpretation of the story is informed by his lived experiences. Jim explains that Solomon does not value the life of one child because he has “five million chillen runnin’ round” so that “he as soon chop a chile in two as a cat.”<sup>418</sup> Jim’s interpretative concern about the value of human life speaks to his experience in chattel slavery in which enslaved Black people were treated as animals instead of humans. Even after Jim shares his interpretation of the story informed by the lived reality of dehumanizing racism, Huck insists he has missed the point. Huck uses the interpretive tradition that told him Solomon is wise to dismiss Jim’s concern about the virtue of the story. In striking similarity, Wallace questioned the moral virtue of *Huckleberry Finn* based on his lived experience of the enduring presence of racism in the American literary canon, public education, and U.S. culture. Kaplan used the interpretive tradition that told him Huck is moral to dismiss Wallace’s concern about the virtue of book.

This striking parallel begs the question: has celebrating Huck’s moral triumph continued a pattern of moral acculturation that Huck himself tried to escape? Has the imagined difference from Huck, which is the basis of sentimental interpretations of the book, helped readers imagine their individual freedom from the racist institutions that continue to shape U.S. society? Do sentimental interpretations acculturate Huck to avoid

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<sup>418</sup> Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 90.

working through the colonizing and racializing realities that remain intertwined with moral edification? If so, what other possibilities for interpretation might make more room for moral imaginaries that do not reenact these religious and racial exclusions?

In a multi-religious, multicultural nation, unacknowledged religious influences within dominant moral frameworks and hermeneutics that claim to promote diverse forms of moral imagination, “far from safeguarding an arena for democratic flourishing,” as Tracy Fessenden explains “[have] functioned instead to promote particular forms of religious possibility while containing, suppressing, or excluding others.”<sup>419</sup> If people want to use *Huckleberry Finn* and other books to think about morality, empathy, norms of civic engagement, and national belonging, as this case study suggests they often do, we must acknowledge some of limits of the sentimental hermeneutic I have outlined in this chapter in a multicultural, multireligious society.

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<sup>419</sup> Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, quote retrieved from <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691049632/culture-and-redemption>

### Chapter 3: Empathetic Imagination in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Exploring an Alternative to Sympathetic Identification and Sentimental Reading

In 2012, high school senior Blake Murphy told his mom that he had nightmares after reading part of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) for his Advanced Placement Literature class. The Pulitzer Prize winning novel is set in Reconstruction era Ohio and engages the legacy of slavery in a community of formerly enslaved people and their families. Blake told his mother, Laura, that the book "disturbed" him.<sup>420</sup> Laura Murphy knew that her son's English class might deal with "mature references" to "slavery or the Holocaust," but she was alarmed when her son told her *Beloved* made references to "bestiality, gang rape, and molestation."<sup>421</sup> Murphy met with teachers and administrators at Lake Braddock Secondary School in Fairfax, Virginia, to discuss her concerns about *Beloved*. She insisted that parents should be notified in advance of students reading texts with explicit references to sex.<sup>422</sup> Teachers and administrators rejected Murphy's suggestions, citing a school-wide "opt-out" policy, which allowed students to read an alternative book if requested. Unsatisfied with their response, Murphy took her complaint to the Fairfax County School Board. When her efforts made national news, she told the *Washington Post* that she was determined to "make sure every kid in the county [was] protected."<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> T. Rees Shapiro, "Fairfax County parent wants 'Beloved' banned from school system." *Washington Post*, February 7, 2013. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/fairfax-county-parent-wants-beloved-banned-from-school-system/2013/02/07/99521330-6bd1-11e2-ada0-5ca5fa7ebe79\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/fairfax-county-parent-wants-beloved-banned-from-school-system/2013/02/07/99521330-6bd1-11e2-ada0-5ca5fa7ebe79_story.html)

<sup>421</sup> Ibid.

<sup>422</sup> This was based on another policy in the district that required teachers to send home parental approval forms before showing films with sexual content in class. I learned of this form in a personal email exchange with the former chair of the high school English department.

<sup>423</sup> Shapiro, "Fairfax County parent wants 'Beloved' banned from school system."

Laura Murphy's request to remove *Beloved* from the class reading list was not the first request of its kind brought to the Fairfax County School Board. John H. Wallace asked the Fairfax County board to remove *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* just thirty years earlier. Murphy made it clear that she did not want the book to be "banned," but she asked the school board to consider removing *Beloved* temporarily until the school adopted a policy that gave parents more information and say about what their children read in class. The board members voted six to two against Murphy's request.<sup>424</sup> A few of the board members were sympathetic to Murphy's concerns. One told the *Washington Post* that "the graphic, violent, disturbing sexual material doesn't have to be in the classroom."<sup>425</sup> Others asserted that although *Beloved* dealt with mature content, they believed the novel was appropriate for the 17 and 18-year-old students who read it in their AP Literature classes. One board member argued that decisions about literature should be made by teachers, not parents, stating "I trust our educators to use sound judgment for determining what's appropriate in the classroom."<sup>426</sup>

A number of Lake Braddock English teachers insisted that *Beloved* was not only appropriate, but also beneficial for their students, in terms my readers will now find familiar. After their meeting with Murphy, members of the high school English Department sent home a letter to parents that stated their position on the issue. They explained that given the reality of social "troubles" in the world, "reading and studying books that expose us,

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<sup>424</sup> Members of the Fairfax County school board decided to read *Beloved* themselves to draw their own conclusions before discussing Murphy's case. Shapiro, "Fairfax School Board members had to read 'Beloved' before ruling on the book," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2013.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/fairfax-school-board-members-had-to-read-beloved-before-ruling-on-the-book/2013/02/08/70a9f612-720e-11e2-a050-b83a7b35c4b5\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/fairfax-school-board-members-had-to-read-beloved-before-ruling-on-the-book/2013/02/08/70a9f612-720e-11e2-a050-b83a7b35c4b5_story.html)

<sup>425</sup> Ibid.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

imaginatively and safely, to that trouble steels our souls to pull us through our own hard times and leads us to a greater empathy for the plight of our fellow human beings.”<sup>427</sup> Lake Braddock teachers defended *Beloved* as consistent with their curricular goals in the literature classroom.<sup>428</sup>

Just as concern about morality and forming young minds animated debates about *Mockingbird* and *Huckleberry Finn*, so too does this debate about *Beloved*'s suitability for high school age children recapitulate these themes and demonstrate some of their more contemporary directions. Both Laura Murphy and the Lake Braddock English department appealed to claims about the formative experience of reading literature. According to Murphy, *Beloved* could disturb innocence, provoke nightmares, and conjure mature images from which children should be protected. According to Lake Braddock English teachers, *Beloved* could inform and mold students' spiritual and empathetic sensibilities.

The arguments about *Beloved* in Fairfax County demonstrate how sentimental themes and claims about literature continue to emerge in contemporary discourse. Both Murphy's concern about protecting childhood innocence and the educators' optimism that literature informs a reader's empathetic abilities resonate with aspects of the sentimental literary tradition I have explored throughout this project. This chapter analyzes *Beloved* to illustrate how the novel is in conversation with sentimental constructions of childhood innocence and sentimental modes of sympathetic identification in readerly empathy. I join other scholars

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<sup>427</sup> Shapiro, "Fairfax County parent wants 'Beloved' banned from school system."

<sup>428</sup> Although teachers must now acquire individual parental approval forms for their syllabi at the beginning of the year, *Beloved* remained part of the Lake Braddock curricula. I was given this information in an email exchange with Allison Rockmann, former Department Chair at Lake Braddock High School.



who have asserted *Beloved* is avowedly critical of the conventions of sentimental literature by outlining how the novel unmask and revises these sentimental conventions.<sup>429</sup>

Morrison herself wrote about the relationship between *Beloved* and the sentimental tradition in her essay “Sites of Memory” (1995). She explains she wrote *Beloved* with concerns about how enslaved and formerly enslaved people “patterned” their narratives “after the sentimental novel that was in vogue at the time.”<sup>430</sup> She names how “literary conventions of the day” made demands on Black authors to make their suffering “palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it” and to leave out and ‘forget’ details of their experiences in their writing.<sup>431</sup> Morrison explained *Beloved* was her “wish to extend, fill in and complement slave autobiographical narratives” without the limitations of sentimental storytelling.<sup>432</sup>

This chapter explores some of the ways *Beloved* examines, challenges, and revises sentimental literary conventions, especially those that encouraged Black narrators to shorten, omit, and ‘forget’ aspects of their “interior lives” to appeal to white readers.<sup>433</sup> I use *Beloved* to further explore this project’s central concern about the common assumption that literature

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<sup>429</sup> Jennifer Williamson, for instance, argues that Morrison uses *Beloved* to critique the limits of sentimental sympathy; Lauren Berlant suggests *Beloved* is “postsentimental” in its refusal to offer readers the illusion that they can transcend social and historical boundaries in the way sentimental texts often do; and Peter Becker suggests Morrison reshapes sentimental tropes of victimized women to comment on racialized sympathy in early sentimental texts. See Williamson, *Twentieth Century Sentimentalism: Narrative Appropriation in American Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013); Berlant, “Poor Eliza”; Rebecca Wanzo, “Apocalyptic Empathy: A Parable of Postmodern Sentimentality,” *Obsidian* III, 6/7, no. 1/2 (2005): 72-86; and Peter Becker, “Genealogies of Sympathy: Reclaiming the Material in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Winter 2019), 1-28.

<sup>430</sup> Morrison, “Sites of Memory” in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction* edited by Carolyn C. Denard (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 69.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 70. Morrison explains that what is “most importantly” missing from slave autobiographies is that “there was no mention of their interior lives.” (70)

promotes moral or empathetic formation.<sup>434</sup> I do so by examining the difference between sympathetic identification from the sentimental tradition and what I call empathetic imagination—Morrison’s participatory storytelling. I argue that *Beloved* posits narrative critiques of sentimental modes of empathy as identification and offers a different model for empathetic possibilities in literature that emphasizes both the disruptive presence of the imagined other and the limitations of knowing or understanding them. Religion is central to my analysis because the religious historical origins of the sentimental tradition are relevant to my analysis of *Beloved’s* critiques of sentimentality. I also acknowledge some of the religious implications of empathetic imagination at the end of the chapter. I conclude that empathetic imagination in *Beloved* leaves room for some of the religious and ideological perspectives that are often marginalized in sentimental storytelling and reading.

Further, this chapter’s exploration of childhood innocence as a literary device in *Beloved* expands thematic concerns about childhood from previous chapters by explicitly examining the relationship among childhood innocence, whiteness, and redemption. I explain how childhood innocence as a literary device in the sentimental tradition constructs white innocence through obliviousness and compassion for the representation of the suffering other. *Beloved* critiques the self-reflexive direction of redemption in sentimental storytelling and reimagines childhood innocence through the titular character Beloved in a way that demands accountability instead of offering absolution to literary characters or real-world problems. This analysis demonstrates how redemptive themes in sentimental reading

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<sup>434</sup> Ann Jurecic argues that the empathy in *Beloved* “is more complex than the empathy that many readers and English educators assume is naturally engendered in literature.” “Empathy and the Critic,” 19. For more on empathy and literature see Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*; Kathleen Lundeen “Who has the Right to Feel?: The Ethics of Literary Empathy.”

and writing are particularly unhelpful for ethical engagement with the unfinished history of racism and systems of racial oppression in the United States.

### ***Protective Parents and the Racialized Constructs of Childhood Innocence***

Laura Murphy argued that teenagers need to be “protected” from “mature” images in *Beloved* and that parents should have a say in what their children read. When the Fairfax County school board voted against her request to have *Beloved* removed from the high school reading list, she lobbied the state legislature to pass a bill that would require parental approval for all texts that contain “sexually explicit content.”<sup>435</sup> In 2016, House Bill 516, also known as the “*Beloved* Bill,” passed in both bodies of the Virginia General Assembly. The bipartisan bill was quickly vetoed by the Virginia Governor, Terry McAuliffe.<sup>436</sup> While the “*Beloved* Bill” did not find a place in Virginia law at the time, the concern Murphy raised about her son’s experience reading *Beloved* resonated with concerned parents and residents across Virginia and the United States.<sup>437</sup> In interviews, Murphy clarified that her concern was not about *Beloved* in particular, but sexually explicit content in literature in general. Murphy’s message was loud and clear: parents should be able to protect their children from things they don’t want them to read, see, or know.

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<sup>435</sup> For more on the Beloved Bill see R. Steven Landes, “HB 516 Education, Board of; policy on sexually explicit instructional material” *Virginia’s Legislative Information System* <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?161+sum+HB516> (accessed September 23, 2022) and Chantal Winstead, “The ‘Beloved’ Bill: The Controversy of HB 516,” April 24, 2016 <https://ncte.org/report/the-beloved-bill-the-controversy-of-hb-516/>

<sup>436</sup> The same thing happened again with a pass and veto in 2017. Terry McAuliffe’s veto of the bill became a part of the 2021 gubernatorial race with Gov. Glenn Youngkin. Murphy used her story about *Beloved* in an ad campaign endorsing Youngkin. See Laura Vozzella and Gregory S. Schneider “Fight over teaching ‘Beloved’ book in school becomes hot topic in Virginia governor’s race,” *The Washington Post*, October 25, 2021 [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/beloved-book-virginia-youngkin-mcauliffe/2021/10/25/e6157830-35d3-11ec-91dc-551d44733e2d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/beloved-book-virginia-youngkin-mcauliffe/2021/10/25/e6157830-35d3-11ec-91dc-551d44733e2d_story.html)

<sup>437</sup> The Virginia Town Hall Records include hundreds of entries that support Murphy’s suggestion. See “Public Comment Forum,” Virginia Regulatory Town Hall, January 15, 2014. <https://townhall.virginia.gov/L/Comments.cfm?StageID=6796>

Murphy's concern about a parent's ability to protect and choose what is right for their child resonates with the story of *Beloved*. The novel is set among a community of formerly enslaved people in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1873. The events of the novel are inspired by the real-life story of Margaret Garner—a woman who escaped slavery and then infamously killed one of her children rather than have the child enslaved. Morrison imagines a fictionalized proxy for Garner with her character Sethe—a woman who escapes enslavement from a plantation ironically called “Sweet Home” with her four children. Sethe creates a relatively comfortable life for her children with her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, in Cincinnati at 124 Bluestone Rd. But one terrible day Sethe's former enslaver, Schoolteacher, comes to take her and her children back into slavery. In a desperate attempt to protect her children from Schoolteacher, Sethe tries to kill them, taking the life of one of her daughters with a handsaw. In this moment, Sethe is certain that death is a safer place for her children than enslavement. In the tension between a mother's love and infanticide, the novel *Beloved* explores freedom and responsibility in this haunting scene of parental protection.<sup>438</sup> *Beloved* narrates the lengths to which a mother will go to protect her children from knowing and experiencing slavery.

Although the objects, modes, and consequences of protection in these two examples are unfathomably different, both Laura Murphy and the character Sethe try to protect their children from things they don't want them to know—sexually explicit references in literature

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<sup>438</sup> In her forward to *Beloved*, Morrison writes, “The historical Margaret Garner is fascinating, but, to a novelist, confining. Too little imaginative space there for my purposes. So, I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her history to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's ‘place.’ The heroine would represent the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror; assume the consequences of choosing infanticide; claim her own freedom.” Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 1997), xvii.

or dehumanizing enslavement. The shared concern about childhood innocence that emerges in Murphy's concerns about *Beloved* and within the novel itself provides an opportunity to examine childhood innocence as an affective social construct and a literary device commonly employed in sentimental literature. In this section, I draw primarily upon Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence* and Jane Tompkins' *Sensational Designs* to explore childhood innocence as a literary device in sentimental literature as emotionally effective, religiously redemptive, and "raced white."<sup>439</sup> I outline details of this literary convention to better illuminate how Morrison deconstructs and challenges the racialized idea of innocence in *Beloved*, especially as it relates to both redemption and whiteness.

### *Sentimental Constructions of Childhood Innocence*

Childhood has not always been associated with innocence in the United States.<sup>440</sup> During the colonial period, Calvinists affirmed a traditional doctrine of original sin which conceptualized children as "inherently sinful and sexual."<sup>441</sup> This doctrine had wide-reaching cultural currency until philosophical and theological discourses in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries put forward a "competing doctrine" of childhood innocence which portrayed children as "holy" and "able to redeem adults."<sup>442</sup> The emerging religious correlation

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<sup>439</sup> Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 243.

<sup>440</sup> For more on the construction of childhood innocence in American society see Caroline Levander and Carol J. Singley eds. *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Judith Butler, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?," *differences* vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002), 14-44. Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, Or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (New York: Macmillan, 1994); and Jodi Eichler-Levine, *Suffer the Little Children: Uses of the Past in Jewish and African American Children's Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

<sup>441</sup> Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 4.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid. See also James Russell Kincaid's *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1998). Kincaid explains that "Originally, for the Romantics, innocence was connected not only to God but to active sympathies and primal love..." (54)

between children and innocence in the United States was developed more fully and affectively through portrayals of children in sentimental literature such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's Little Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Louisa May Alcott's Beth March in *Little Women*.<sup>443</sup> Childhood innocence in these sentimental texts provided images of the suffering or dying child who was angelic, Christ-like, and offered imaginative redemption to fictional characters and social problems in the real world.<sup>444</sup> Popular sentimental fiction and religious narratives in the 19<sup>th</sup> century frequently employed the trope of childhood innocence as an affective conduit of religious knowledge and conversion.<sup>445</sup> Stowe's commentary in a sketch she wrote about children after the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* captures the popular religious sentiment well: "Wouldst thou know, o parent, what is that faith which unlocks heaven? Go not to wrangling polemics, or creeds and forms of theology, but draw to thy bosom thy little one, and read in that clear trusting eye the lesson of eternal life."<sup>446</sup>

Even as childhood refers to an age of adolescence, childhood innocence has not historically been constructed around age-specific developmental capacities, but instead on the idea that children are inherently "oblivious" to certain social realities.<sup>447</sup> Childhood

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid., 4. Bernstein notes that by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century "sentimental culture had woven childhood and innocence wholly together" especially through characters like Little Eva and Beth March.

<sup>444</sup> Little Eva from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is perhaps the most emblematic example. On her deathbed Little Eva helps facilitate the religious and moral conversions of other characters and, in asking her father to promise he will free all of the people he enslaved in this conversionary moment, also promotes the abolitionist movement beyond the text.

<sup>445</sup> See Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 122-146. The redemptive narrative about children was representative of a narrative circulating throughout religious literature at the time. Especially in "evangelical sermons." (128) "The power of the dead or dying to redeem the unregenerate is a major theme of nineteenth-century popular fiction and religious literature." (128)

<sup>446</sup> Quoted in Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*, 128.

<sup>447</sup> Bernstein, 6. This idea of obliviousness signals both historical forgetfulness and a kind of not noticing that if later figured in 'color-blindness. Bernstein argues that what is forgotten through the child's performance of oblivious innocence is "not only whiteness but also racial difference constructed against whiteness." Bernstein, 8.

innocence in sentimental literature is often predicated upon a state of not knowing, not noticing, or actively “repelling knowledge”—especially knowledge related to sex, race, and class.<sup>448</sup> For example, Scout Finch performs obliviousness to race, gender, sexuality, class, and other cultural identifiers when she declares, “I think there’s just one kind of folks. Folks.”<sup>449</sup> The image of the innocent child common in sentimental literature thus simultaneously constructs and conceals social identities through performances of “obliviousness” to worldly realities.<sup>450</sup> Accordingly, sentimental appeals to childhood innocence consistently emerge in public discourse in claims that children are “racially unconscious, asexual, and cognitively incapable of understanding complex matters such as race, gender, and sexuality.”<sup>451</sup>

This emphasis on obliviousness is one reason childhood innocence in sentimental literature is almost always “raced white.”<sup>452</sup> When the norms of childhood are predicated on the ability to remain oblivious to the racializing, sexualizing realities of society, they exclude

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<sup>448</sup> Bernstein gives the example that Little Eva in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is depicted in popular illustrations that accompanied and advertised the novel sitting on Uncle Tom’s lap with one hand on Tom’s hand and the other on his thigh—apparently “ignoring racial prohibitions and not-imagining sexual congress.” Bernstein suggests that Little Eva’s innocence in this scene is based on her obliviousness—specifically “not-thinking about race, gender, age, or sexual desire.” Bernstein, 7. James Russell Kincaid adds in *Erotic Innocence* that Romantic era conceptions of childhood are predicated on a kind of “ignorance.” As he explains, “the idea of innocence and the idea of ‘the child’ became dominated by sexuality—negative sexuality, of course but sexuality all the same. Innocence was filed down to mean little more than virginity coupled with ignorance; the child was, therefore, that which was innocent: the species incapable of practicing or inciting sex. The irony is not hard to miss: defining something entirely as negation brings irresistibly before us that which we’re trying to banish.” (55)

<sup>449</sup> Lee, *Mockingbird*, 259.

<sup>450</sup> Bernstein, 6; this idea of obliviousness signals both historical forgetfulness and a kind of not noticing that if later figured in ‘color-blindness. Bernstein argues that what is forgotten through the child’s performance of oblivious innocence is “not only whiteness but also racial difference constructed against whiteness.” Bernstein, 8.

<sup>451</sup> Alisha Nguyen, “Childhood Innocence and the Racialized Child in A Whit Space,” *NEOS* Vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring 2021) <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol13iss1sp21/nguyen/>

<sup>452</sup> Bernstein, 243.

certain experiences of childhood.<sup>453</sup> Namely, in the United States innocence is deployed within a racial hierarchy in which Black children and other marginalized children are often forced to notice and confront ‘adult matters’ such as race and social injustice more frequently and at a younger age than their white peers, precisely because people and social institutions racialize them in discriminatory and unjust ways.<sup>454</sup> When sentimental authors constructed innocence on the basis of “the child’s ‘holy ignorance’” they imagined innocent children as oblivious to social injustice in ways that “defined [Black children] as nonchildren” in the literary and broader cultural imagination.<sup>455</sup>

One telling literary example is how Stowe wrote the character Topsy as a rhetorical counterpart to Little Eva. She portrayed Little Eva as angelic and Topsy as “the mischievous black girl” who “was at heart an innocent child who misbehaved because she had been traumatized by slavery.”<sup>456</sup> At best, Topsy’s innocence was helplessly dependent on Little Eva’s—contingent on her ability to perform norms of white childhood.<sup>457</sup> At worst, especially in popular adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* for the stage, Topsy was cast as a

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<sup>453</sup> As James Russell Kincaid explains, “Perhaps there’s something about the way we have idealized ‘the child’ that makes us indifferent to most children...” *Erotic Innocence*, 54.

<sup>454</sup> Nguyen explains, “in American culture, children are often seen and perceived as racially unconscious, asexual, and cognitively incapable of understanding complex matters such as race, gender, and sexuality.” Alisha Nguyen, “Childhood Innocence and the Racialized Child in A Whit Space.” Similarly, Kerry H. Robinson and Criss Jones-Diaz suggest that children are viewed as “‘too innocent’ to be subjected to the burdens of what are perceived to be adults’ concerns.” Kerry Robinson and Criss Jones-Diaz, *Diversity and Difference in Early Childhood Education: Issues for Theory and Practice* (Berkshire, UK: McGraw-Hill Education, 2006), 138. See also, Tanya Katerí Hernández, *Racial Innocence: Unmasking Latino Anti-Black Bias and the Struggle for Equality* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2022)

<sup>455</sup> Bernstein, 6. See also Bernstein’s article “Let Black Kids Just Be Kids.” *The New York Times*, July 26, 2017 <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/26/opinion/black-kids-discrimination.html> and Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia Blake, and Thalia González. “Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood.” Center on Poverty and Inequality, Georgetown University, 2017, <https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/girlhood-interrupted.pdf>

<sup>456</sup> Bernstein, “Let Black Kids Just Be Kids.”

<sup>457</sup> Ibid. As Bernstein explains in this essay, “key players in the civil rights movement made childhood innocence central to anti-racist causes. In 1939, the psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark introduced the ‘doll test,’ in which black children, when confronted with their preference for white dolls, burst into tears.”



“pickaninny”—a dehumanizing image, which portrayed Black children as “comically impervious to pain and never [in need of] protection or tenderness.”<sup>458</sup> In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison acknowledges and critiques this popular literary construct of innocence when her central character and narrator, Claudia, a Black child, receives a white doll with blue eyes and asks, “‘What made people look at them and say, ‘Awwwww,’ but not for me?’”<sup>459</sup>

Literary motifs of the suffering, innocent, and Christ-like child codified “white girlhood,” in particular, as redemptive.<sup>460</sup> In early sentimental texts such as *Little Women* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the suffering or dying child expressed Christian sentiments of Christ-like sacrifice which aligned the suffering child with “spiritual transcendence” and allowed children to play a redemptive function, as a conduit of salvation for people around them and social causes beyond them.<sup>461</sup> Innocent white children not only redeemed literary characters, but also made affective cases for social movements beyond the text. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for instance, sentimentalized relationship between a white child and a Black adult functioned as a literary device, which “transferred innocence from white childhood” to Black characters and simultaneously lent “moral authority” and “affective power” to the social cause of abolition.<sup>462</sup> This literary device emerges repeatedly in popular sentimental fiction. Huck’s

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<sup>458</sup> Ibid.

<sup>459</sup> Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage International, 1970), 22. Bernstein interprets Claudia’s question as Morrison’s commentary on “the bluest eye of girlhood—an imagining of white girls as tender, innocently doll-like and deserving of protection and black girls as disqualified from those qualities.” Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 29.

<sup>460</sup> Sara Lindey, “Sentimental and Redemptive Girlhood in the Abolitionist Adaptation of Maria Susanna Cummings’s *The Lamplighter*” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1, Spring 2018, p.4-27.

<sup>461</sup> Jane F. Thraikill, “Traumatic Realism and the Wounded Child” in *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader* edited by Carol J. Singley, 131. As Thraikill explains, in many nineteenth sentimental novels “the figure of the wounded child is invoked for its affective power” and for “its ability to lend a certain moral authority to the position being advanced.” Thraikill, 142.

<sup>462</sup> Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 6; Thraikill, 142. For instance, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe portrays Little Eva as an angelic figure whose innocence “was transferable to surrounding people and things.” Bernstein, 6.

relationship with Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* sanctifies abolition, and Scout's sympathy for Tom Robinson in *Mockingbird* promotes desegregation and colorblind justice.<sup>463</sup>

As we can see, sentimental portrayals and appeals to innocence have been highly racialized. The salvific obliviousness of sentimental innocence both constructs and conceals a racial hierarchy in which whiteness must be protected and Blackness is defined out of childhood and innocence. Such literary constructions of innocence as obliviousness reinforce whiteness as “an unmarked category,” which does not acknowledge whiteness as “an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.”<sup>464</sup> In this way, childhood innocence as a literary device and whiteness as a racial construct are both characterized by a certain kind of forgetting; ignoring the very social details that might disrupt one's obliviousness to social positionality and differences in experience.

It's alarming that the literary device of childhood innocence is commonly employed in sentimental novels and narratives concerned with exposing, remembering, and confronting the racial violence and inequality given the redemptive, concealing, and forgetful qualities that often accompany this sentimental literary construct. As this project has explored in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Mockingbird*, sentimental storytellers and readers alike imagine that children can redeem systems of injustice and oppression through their changed hearts and perspectives. Childhood innocence then often works as a sentimental plot device for forgetfulness because “the vision of the child leading and healing a troubled world” is

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<sup>463</sup> Notably, however, that *Huckleberry Finn* used childhood innocence to support a political endeavor that had already succeeded: slavery was abolished almost 20 years before Twain published *Huckleberry Finn*. Lee's discussion of Jim Crow in the 1930s still sanctioned the efforts to desegregate public space that were well-underway when the novel was published in 1960.

<sup>464</sup> Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 7. First quote from her summary is her citing Richard Dyer and second direct quote is her citing George Lipsitz.

future-oriented—soothing present tensions, violence, or injustice by deferring responsibility and change as a project for the next generation.<sup>465</sup>

*Beloved* refuses this redemptive construct of innocence through the imperative to remember the sordid details of slavery and an acknowledgement of the difficulty of doing so in the absence of the diversity of recorded stories from people who experienced it. In both *Beloved* and her literary criticism, Morrison comments on the effect of sentimental literary conventions on slave narratives in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which forced forgetfulness through the pressure to appeal to and not offend the innocence of the white reader. Morrison names how enslaved and formerly enslaved writers often took “refuge in literary conventions” of the sentimental genre, which compelled them to “pull the narrative up short” in places where it might offend the white reader with the “more sordid details of their experience.”<sup>466</sup> *Beloved* departs from these sentimental literary conventions because it does not leave out the “sordid” details in order to protect innocence or leave open the imaginative redemption of whiteness.<sup>467</sup>

The titular character, Beloved, refuses forgetfulness and reimagines childhood innocence—not because she isn’t innocent, but because her innocence is neither oblivious nor forgetful. Beloved is the ghost of Sethe’s murdered child who shows up one day in a physical form and takes up residence with the family. Beloved stands in contrast to the 19<sup>th</sup> century sentimental image of the suffering child who redeems other characters and social causes. Beloved’s innocence is not a literary vehicle for forgetfulness or redemption, but

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<sup>465</sup> Madeleine R. Grumet, “The Lie of the Child Redeemer,” *The Journal of Education* vol. 168, no. 3, (1986), 88.

<sup>466</sup> Morrison, “Sites of Memory,” 69-70.

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

instead of memory and accountability. She is a figural representation of the past that refuses to be forgotten—even as the characters in the novel are “intent on forgetting.”<sup>468</sup> She is a living breathing dead girl, or as Robert Yeates suggests, a literary representation of “the Caribbean concept of the zombi,” which takes the form of a “reanimated corpse.”<sup>469</sup> In Morrison’s portrayal, *Beloved* does not redeem other characters or a social cause in any straightforward way. Instead, she demands an *account*, to be *counted*, and to hold others *accountable* for what happened to her. As Morrison put it in her essay, “On *Beloved*,” the character *Beloved* is “hungry for the past, desperate for being not just remembered, but dealt with, confronted.”<sup>470</sup>

While the character *Beloved* is an important figure for reimagining sentimental constructions of childhood innocence, a close analysis of another character, Edward Bodwin, clarifies what I see as the novel’s more pointed critique of the sentimental convention of innocence. In a scene toward the end of *Beloved*, Edward Bodwin—a white abolitionist who helped Baby Suggs and Sethe make their home at 124 Bluestone Road in Ohio—is on his way to pick up Sethe’s daughter, Denver, for her first day of paid work for his family. In this scene, the narrative voice briefly switches to Bodwin’s perspective and his memory switches back and forth between his childhood home at 124 Bluestone and his time working in “the Society” of abolitionists. His reflection offers the reader an opportunity to

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<sup>468</sup> Morrison, “On *Beloved*” in *The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 627.

<sup>469</sup> Robert Yeates, “The Unshriven Dead, Zombies on the Loose?: African and Caribbean Religious Heritage in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* vol 61, no. 3 (Fall 2015), 515-537. Yeates notes that one reason the zombi is fitting for this role is because historically in Haitian stories, the zombi was a figure who was portrayed as the revolutionary enslaved person who comes back to life to defeat their enslaver.

<sup>470</sup> Morrison, “On *Beloved*,” 627.

notice the mechanics and consequences of innocence in narration and illustrates how this trope can function as a strategy of self-reflexive absolution.

In his brief time as narrator, Bodwin summarizes Sethe's story—"her news." The story of Sethe's child's death is only narrated directly a few times in the novel and one is Bodwin's interpretive summary: "The Society managed to turn infanticide and the cry of savagery around, and build a further case for abolishing slavery."<sup>471</sup> Bodwin's interpretation of Sethe's story illustrates the interpretive conventions of sentimental storytelling in which Bodwin imagines that his compassion can redeem Sethe's 'savagery' by making it part of a political endeavor to abolish slavery. Bodwin's narration reflects how literary conventions of the sentimental tradition often packaged narratives of Black pain and suffering to appeal to the redemptive "Christian compassion" of white audiences "as a means for accomplishing political and social change."<sup>472</sup> This scene also reflects the historical record in which the real Margaret Garner did not get to tell or control the uses of her own story. Abolitionists made news out of her life experience in their own voices for their own ends, regardless of Garner's desires or wishes to have her experience turned into a cause.

While online teaching guides and plot summaries frequently portray Bodwin as a "generous" white person because he supported abolition—in stark contrast to other 'dangerous' white people in the novel, such as Sethe's former enslaver, Schoolteacher—Morrison refuses such neat categorization for Bodwin.<sup>473</sup> The novel states explicitly that Mr. Bodwin and his sister Miss Bodwin helped formerly enslaved people "because they hated

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<sup>471</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 222 and 307.

<sup>472</sup> Williamson, *Twentieth Century Sentimentalism*, 153 and Rebecca Wanzo, "Apocalyptic Empathy," 72.

<sup>473</sup> For one example of such a study guide see "Mr. And Miss Bodwin in *Beloved*" *Shmoop*, <https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/beloved/mr-mrs-bodwin>

slavery worse than they hated slaves.”<sup>474</sup> The meaning of this phrase is illustrated more fully when after accepting an offer to work for the Bodwin family, Sethe’s daughter Denver asks Janey, the Bodwin’s hired help, if the Bodwin’s are “good whitefolks.”<sup>475</sup> Janey responds, “They good. Can’t say they ain’t good.”<sup>476</sup> However, on Denver’s way out of the Bodwin’s home following this interaction, she notices a statue “sitting on a shelf by the back door, a blackboy’s mouth full of money...painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words “At Yo Service.”<sup>477</sup> The phrase on the bric-a-brac statue implies that Black people are “inherently inferior” and subservient and prompts suspicion about whether the Bodwins are indeed trustworthy just because they were abolitionists.<sup>478</sup>

It’s helpful to note how Bodwin’s narration juxtaposes adult awareness of race and racism with longing for childhood innocence in order to better understand the way this scene can be read as a critique of sentimental innocence. The specific words Bodwin chooses to narrate his memories suggest his work as an abolitionist helped him better understand the dehumanizing racialization many enslaved and formerly enslaved people experienced. Yet Bodwin uses sentimental strategies of sympathetic identification to conflate his experience with the enslaved experience. First, he discusses how as an adult working with the Society he was made aware of his own racial identity. He reflects that people racialized him as both Black and white by calling him “the ‘bleached n[----]r” because he had “theatrically...white

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<sup>474</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 162.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.* and Heather Duerre Humann, “Bigotry, Breast Milk, Bric-a-Brac, a Baby, and a Bit in ‘Beloved’: Toni Morrison’s Portrayal of Racism and Hegemony,” *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Fall 2004), 71.

hair” and a “big black mustache.”<sup>479</sup> Second, he recalls that once a “Mississippi Riverman” “caught” him and “shoe-blackened his face and his hair” implying he was “caught” and racialized with blackface in a way reminiscent of how a formerly enslaved person might be “caught,” identified by the color of their skin, and re-enslaved.<sup>480</sup> Such reflections suggest that while Bodwin acknowledges his whiteness, he believes that his experiences working as an abolitionist have racialized him out of whiteness in a way that may not fully acknowledge his privilege as a white man in the post-civil war United States.

Notably, his accounts of his work as an abolitionist are interwoven with his childhood memories, which subsequently contrast adult awareness of racial injustice with longing for childhood innocence. Bodwin remembers that childhood was “a time when he buried things...precious things he wanted to protect” and now wonders “where, exactly, was the box of tin soldiers? The watch chain with no watch?”<sup>481</sup> Bodwin expresses his desire simply: “Now he just wanted to know where the soldiers were and his watchless chain. That would be enough for this day: bring back the new girl and recall exactly where his treasure lay.”<sup>482</sup> Bodwin’s longing for childhood things—those “precious things he wanted to protect”—can be read as a longing for obliviousness about his place within a racist society and as a self-protective mechanism for imagining his own innocence.<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>479</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 306. The n-word is spelled out in *Beloved*, but I decided not to spell it out in this quote to be consistent with my choice throughout this project.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 306-307.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 306. As Kerry H. Robinson explain, the “constructed social and moral concept” of childhood innocence “reflects an adult state of preoccupation with a longing for something lost and forever unattainable.” Kerry H. Robinson, “In the Name of ‘Childhood Innocence: A Discursive Exploration of the Moral Panic Associated with Childhood and Sexuality,” *Cultural Studies Review*, Vo. 14, no. 2 (September 2008), 116.

This longing for innocence can also be seen in Bodwin's version of Sethe's story. Bodwin's imagination of Sethe as a savage criminal in need of his compassion and redemption is the imaginative key to the construction of his own innocence. In Bodwin's account of Sethe's "news," he imagines that he has redeemed *her* 'savagery' with *his* compassion. But Morrison prompts the reader's suspicion of Bodwin in ways that demonstrate the self-reflexive direction of sympathetic identification. As I will outline in more detail later in this chapter, sentimental modes of sympathetic identification provide the illusion that one can use compassion to transcend positionality in oppressive systems by identifying with the suffering 'other.'<sup>484</sup> Yet in this case, the direction of sentimental redemption does not transfer innocence to a Black criminal as Bodwin imagines. Instead, Bodwin's imagination of the Black criminal reassures him of his innocence, to absolve himself of and transcend his positionality as a white man in a racist society.

Morrison explains in *Playing in the Dark* that "the fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, or perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity."<sup>485</sup> The scene in which Bodwin recounts his efforts to "turn around...savagery" into "a further case for abolishing slavery" demonstrates the reflexive uses of the Africanist presence in sentimental storytelling. Morrison further illustrates the consequences of this imaginative convention through another key passage. The

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<sup>484</sup> The way I am summarizing Berlant's argument here is informed by Ann Jurecic's discussion of Berlant's "Poor Eliza" in her essay "Empathy and the Critic." She writes, "According to Berlant, sentimentality creates the illusion that identification with a person who suffers allows one, through feeling, to transcend structural problems such as racism and sexism. But this is a false transcendence, Berlant tells us, for 'witnessing and identifying with pain, consuming and deriving pleasure and moral self-satisfaction' does not change the world." Jurecic, "Empathy and the Critic," 17.

<sup>485</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 17.



following passage of Stamp Paid's narration of the "white folks' jungle" offers readers a different way of interpreting the object of savagery and direction of redemption in Bodwin's version of Sethe's story.<sup>486</sup> Stamp Paid, a formerly enslaved resident of the community in Cincinnati, reflects:

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. Meantime, the secret spread of this new kind of white folks' jungle was hidden, silent, except once in a while when you could hear it mumbling.<sup>487</sup>

In light of this passage, one can interpret Bodwin's brief account of Sethe's "cry of savagery" as concealing, forgetting, and performing obliviousness to the "hidden," "silent," "secret spread of this new kind of white folks' jungle"—"the jungle they made" and imagined as Black savagery, when indeed "the screaming baboon lived under their own white skin."<sup>488</sup> Bodwin imagines he "turns around" Sethe's savagery, but the turning is self-reflexive—an affective imaginative strategy to help assure a complicit Bodwin of his own innocence and redemption from the savagery of racist ideologies, objects—such as the 'at yo service' statue—and ways of narrating Sethe's news.

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<sup>486</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 234.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*, 234-235.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*

Bodwin's longing for childhood innocence is disrupted just moments later when he approaches 124 and sees Beloved. In this climactic scene, Sethe mistakes Bodwin for Schoolteacher and Beloved mistakenly identifies him as a white man on a slave ship. These instances of mistaken recognition are telling. Sethe and Beloved both mistake Bodwin for an enslaver in a way that further complicates his imagined innocence through the telling gaze of women who do not see him as he sees himself.<sup>489</sup>

This scene illustrates what I read as the novel's subtle critique of the oblivious and redemptive qualities of innocence constructed in sentimental storytelling and hermeneutics. When Beloved and Sethe mistake Bodwin, the abolitionist, for an enslaver, the misrecognition is telling not because it is accurate, but because it tells a different version of Sethe's story and a different way of reading the narrative Bodwin has given us. Bodwin's version of Sethe's story reflects how sentimental literary conventions packaged narratives of Black pain and suffering to appeal to the "Christian compassion" of white audiences "as a means for accomplishing political and social change."<sup>490</sup> His version of her story maintains his image of himself and other white abolitionists as benevolent, because in his telling "*the Society managed to turn infanticide and the cry of savagery around, and build a further case for abolishing slavery.*"<sup>491</sup> His version of her story avoids offending the white reader by assuring them that the "cry of savagery" belongs to Sethe, rather than identifying that the true source of savagery is "the jungle [white people] had made" through the violence and dehumanization of racialized slavery. In notable contrast, Sethe's and Beloved's misrecognition of Bodwin

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<sup>489</sup> Unlike the previous experience where Schoolteacher enters the yard and Sethe tries to kill her children, this time instead of attempting to kill her children, Sethe runs at Bodwin with an ice pick until a group of women from her community stop her. At just this moment, Beloved disappears.

<sup>490</sup> Williamson, *Twentieth Century Sentimentalism*, 153 and Wanzo, "Apocalyptic Empathy," 72.

<sup>491</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 222 and 307.

speaks to the savagery of the individuals and systems who enslaved and dehumanized Sethe and her children. It reflects the potential complicity of people who imagine their innocence through willful obliviousness to the persistence of this savagery.

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Laura Murphy's sentimental appeal about protecting her child and other children from sexually explicit content in *Beloved* is worth reconsidering in light of this exploration of childhood innocence in the novel. Murphy explained that she understood that her son's English class might deal with "mature references" to "slavery or the Holocaust," but she was alarmed when her son told her *Beloved* made references to "bestiality, gang rape, and molestation."<sup>492</sup> Murphy asserted her son and children like him are 'too innocent' to deal with this 'adult' content. In effect, Murphy expressed a common belief that the history of slavery should be 'palatable' and not disruptive of childhood obliviousness to the sexual and other forms of violence so common throughout the historical realities of slavery in the United States.

Interpreted in this way, Murphy unwittingly advocates the kind of historical forgetting Morrison critiques in *Beloved*. In what I interpret as Murphy's sentimental imagination, children are and should remain oblivious to the more "sordid" details of slavery. Her statement about protecting all children from such imagery expresses a longing—not unlike Bodwin's—to remember the past in ways that maintain innocence even in encounters with stories about human innocence violated and dehumanized. Morrison, by

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<sup>492</sup> Shapiro, "Fairfax County parent wants 'Beloved' banned from school system."

contrast, imagines a child who knows and won't forget, who asks for an account of what happened.

The desire to protect this sentimental construction of childhood innocence also has pedagogical implications for how we think about the role of history and truth telling in literature and classrooms. Such arguments suggest details from the past should remain there and not come into the present to “disturb” people. Morrison, by contrast, stated she wrote *Beloved* in a way “that the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead; that the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive.”<sup>493</sup> Morrison “decided that the single most uncontroversial thing one can say about the institution of slavery vis-à-vis contemporary time, is that it haunts us all.”<sup>494</sup> Murphy’s concern about the way *Beloved* disturbed her son ironically raises questions central to the novel. How does the past disturb the present? What kind of innocence is protected when we look away? And how might the ghosts of U.S. history see us, in our defensive longing for innocence, differently than we see ourselves?

### ***Sympathetic Identification and Its Consequences***

The Lake Braddock English teachers did not share Laura Murphy’s concerns about childhood innocence when it came to the sexual content in *Beloved*. Instead, they suggested that this content and other difficult imagery in the book—which depicts some of the disturbing details of slavery in the United States—are important for students to encounter in literature. The teachers suggested that literature provides a “safe” way of engaging with the

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<sup>493</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, xix.

<sup>494</sup> Morrison, “On *Beloved*,” 627.

“troubles” in the world and in U.S. history.<sup>495</sup> The Lake Braddock High School teachers defended *Beloved* with claims about the cultural utility reading this book could have for helping readers develop “empathy.”<sup>496</sup>

These teachers are not alone in their sense that *Beloved* provides an opportunity for readerly empathy. Scholar Ann Jurecic suggests that *Beloved*'s “essential challenge” is whether or not reader’s “can possibly empathize with Sethe” after her choice to kill her child.<sup>497</sup>

Online teaching materials suggest that teachers encourage students to engage with the characters in *Beloved* through identification, asking them to consider this and other questions about empathy, morality, and history.<sup>498</sup> For instance, one lesson plan prompts students to write journal entries as characters from the novel—such as Denver, Lady Jones, and Paul D—in order to imagine how they might feel as a particular character in various situations.<sup>499</sup>

Another teaching guide asks students to relate Sethe’s life-altering choice to kill her children to a decision in their own life as a way of thinking about the ethics of her choices and of their own.<sup>500</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> Shapiro, “Fairfax County parent wants ‘Beloved’ banned from school system.”

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

<sup>497</sup> Ann Jurecic, “Empathy and the Critic,” 18.

<sup>498</sup> Giselle Liza Anatol, “Beloved,” *Language Matters II: Reading and Teaching Toni Morrison*, Project on the History of Black Writing, University of Kansas, <http://www2.ku.edu/~langmtrs/lmII/discussions/beloved.html>

<sup>499</sup> Sophie Bell’s teaching guide, for instance, suggests teachers prompt students to “write a journal entry as Denver, explaining how you *feel* about *Beloved*. Sophie Bell, “This is Not a Story to Pass On’: Teaching Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *Curricular Resources 1999 Volume I, Unit 2* (99.01.03), <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/curriculum/units/1999/1/99.01.03/8>

<sup>500</sup> See teaching guides such as “A History Lesson Based on *Beloved*: Criminal Rights, Ethics, & Slavery,” Bright Hub Education, High School History Lesson Plans, Grades 9-12, 23 January, 2013 <https://www.brighthubeducation.com/history-lessons-grades-9-12/127757-using-the-novel-beloved-to-discuss-criminal-rights/> (Accessed July 14, 2021); Melissa Strong, “*Beloved* by Toni Morrison” 2016, Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America, <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/beloved-by-toni-morrison/teaching-guide> (Accessed July 14, 2021)

These pedagogical examples demonstrate some ways teachers offer students opportunities to practice empathizing with characters in *Beloved*. These activities often encourage students to imagine themselves *as* or *in the place of* fictional characters in ways notably similar to sentimental forms of sympathetic identification. Scholars such as Lauren Berlant are wary of sympathetic identification, because these forms of identifying with characters most often ignore “irreducible social differences.”<sup>501</sup> In the previous examples of classroom activities students in contemporary settings—presumably with different cultural, racial, ethnic, national, gender, and sexual identities—are asked to *identify with* or *feel as* formerly enslaved Black people from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These modes of identification can obscure social power dynamics to produce a feeling that the reader can transcend historical, temporal, and social boundaries through simply imagining what they would feel in another person’s place.

Berlant’s concerns about sympathetic identification align with my critique of Atticus’s “simple trick” of walking around in another person’s skin. Without detailed attention to the historical, cultural, and social contexts of both the person empathizing and the person or character they are empathizing with, such activities may minimize rather than illuminate the significance of social and cultural context for interpersonal understanding.<sup>502</sup> Berlant warns that this “form of liberal sentimentality...has been deployed mainly by the culturally privileged to humanize those very subjects who are also, and at the same time, reduced to cliché within the reigning regimes of entitlement or value.”<sup>503</sup> While activities that

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<sup>501</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” 641.

<sup>502</sup> See Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*; Kathleen Lundeen “Who has the Right to Feel?”; Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*.

<sup>503</sup> Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” 636.

promote sympathetic identification are popular in literature classrooms, these activities may provide false optimism about empathetic outcomes and possibilities.<sup>504</sup>

The sentimental hermeneutics for reading *Beloved* that sometimes emerge in classroom settings are also notably dissonant with the novel's various critiques of sympathetic identification. I outline a few examples of such critiques and incongruences in this section to further illuminate the limits of sentimental approaches to reading *Beloved*.<sup>505</sup> I have already discussed how sentimental conventions limited what enslaved writers wrote in their narratives by omitting aspects of their interior lives to appeal to the sympathies of white readers.<sup>506</sup> It's also helpful to examine the subjugating conventions of sympathetic identification that many white readers used to *read* those narratives. Outlining some of these sentimental modes of *reading* illustrates how *Beloved's* narrative is at variance with the sentimental strategies sometimes employed to interpret and teach it.

As this dissertation has argued, sympathetic identification as a model for empathy in literature has roots in the religious devotional reading practices that accompanied the early development of sentimental fiction, especially those practices that were closely tied to the abolition movement in the United States. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, moral sensibilities of

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<sup>504</sup> Jurecic suggests that the way *Beloved* works with empathy defers a sentimentalized reduction of empathy as "an outcome to be assessed" and instead offers empathy as "an inexhaustible subject" to be practiced in relationship with the text. Jurecic, 24. This is in part, Jurecic names because "readerly empathy differs profoundly from social empathy" in part because "feeling an empathic connection with an autobiographer's narrative persona, in other words, is a whole lot easier than interacting with her in person. Listening in the social world entails understanding expectations and negotiating responsibilities, neither of which matters as one sits in a quiet corner with a book." (15)

<sup>505</sup> Contemporary scholars suggest that *Beloved* challenges reductive sentimental modes of empathy. For instance, Berlant categorizes *Beloved* as distinctly "postsentimental" for refusing the gratification of a reader's identification with pain and suffering of the characters. Ann Jurecic argues that while the novel does "valuable work *with* empathy" it does so in a "complex" way that avoids oversimplified forms of identification Berlant, "Poor Eliza," 655 and Jurecic, 18.

<sup>506</sup> Morrison, "Sites of Memory," 70.

sympathy and compassion became familiar virtues across Protestant denominations as they emerged in aspects of religious life from approaches to pastoral care to aims of devotional practice.<sup>507</sup> The specific religious practice of sympathetic identification was informed by the association between morality and feeling as emotional expression became an increasingly central part of spiritual experience, especially around the subject of suffering and pain.

These devotional practices of identifying with another person's suffering developed at the same time that many Protestant denominations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century United States participated in the "reinterpretation of human pain."<sup>508</sup> Against the correlation between "pain and divinity," which was popular in early Calvinist orthodoxy and Catholic contemplative practices surrounding saints and the crucifixion, Protestants rethought "the purpose and place of suffering in human life."<sup>509</sup> Peter Becker summarizes that "as Punishment and suffering began to be viewed less as a consequence of sin and more as a societal injustice, the beholding of the victim turned into a contemplative practice" for personal and social transformation.<sup>510</sup> As these hermeneutic practices developed simultaneously in Protestant devotional reading culture and abolitionist literature, rituals of feeling *as* the suffering 'other' became an important part of Christian spiritual formation in the United States. Elizabeth Clark explains that "the habit of sympathy was a part of many

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<sup>507</sup> Elizabeth Clark, "The Sacred Rights of the Weak," 476 and E. Brooks Holifield writes about the increasingly important place of feeling and sympathy in pastoral care in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. *A History of Pastoral Care in America*. Many of these sources note the "cross-pollination" of moral sentimentality across different Protestant denominations at the time. In particular, see David Howe Walker, *The Unitarian Conscience*. For more on the role of sympathy and moral philosophy in art and society more broadly at this time see also David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy*.

<sup>508</sup> Elizabeth Clark, "Sacred Rights of the Weak," 472.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*, 461 and 471.

<sup>510</sup> Peter Becker, "Genealogies of Sympathy," 8. See also Barbara Welter for how this shift away from the God of Calvinism to a compassionate Christ who was sometimes considered more feminine was also part of this popular turn among Protestants. Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976).



Christians' religious practice, a habit that abolitionists drew on in their presentation of the suffering of slaves.<sup>511</sup> Many fictional and autobiographical sentimental stories about slavery thus aimed to provide readers with opportunities to identify with and *feel as* enslaved people as a way of cultivating sympathy.<sup>512</sup>

Slave narratives, abolitionist narratives, and sentimental fiction about slavery were popular resources for cultivating religious virtues in Protestant devotional reading. As one minister exhorted a member of his congregation, "I rejoice that you are taking pains to cultivate little Charley's sympathy and compassion by showing him the poor slaves in the hold of the slave ship. Pray do it *often constantly*. The only way effectually to cultivate those elements in the mind of the child is to show them *suffering objects*."<sup>513</sup> As a religious practice, sympathetic identification was an interpretive formula for bettering the self through reading stories about enslaved people's pain.<sup>514</sup> These imaginative exercises "depended on and fostered strong identification" by prompting readers to "presume" they could understand an enslaved person's response to violence and dehumanization.<sup>515</sup> As Clark explains, "tracts and speeches instructed readers and listeners to imagine that they were being whipped or to imagine that their children were standing on the auction block."<sup>516</sup> Thus, white Christians

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<sup>511</sup> Clark, 476.

<sup>512</sup> Another such example Elizabeth Clark gives is that "John Rankin tutored his compassion by picturing his family as slaves being whipped; but as his "imagination depicted in lively colors, their tears, and their shrieks, and bloody stripes," he found himself too agitated to go on." Clark, 479 quoting John Rankin, *Letters on American Slavery* (Boston: Garrison & Knapp, 1833), 56.

<sup>513</sup> Elizabeth Clark, 479 quotes this instance from Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, eds. *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sarah Grimke, 1822-1844 2 vols.* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co, 1934), 892.

<sup>514</sup> For studies on the broader notion of sympathy and its emergence in Western thought see Elizabeth Barnes, *States of Sympathy*; Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York: George Bell & Sons, 1802).

<sup>515</sup> Elizabeth Clark, 479.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*

read stories about “the ‘poor slave’ to foster Christian virtues of compassion and sympathy.<sup>517</sup>

The minister’s word choice that encouraged his parishioner to show the young boy “suffering *objects*” is telling. While this devotional practice may have been an “effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering,” the formula of these stories—as Saidiya Hartman asserts—“require[d] that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible” in a way that continued to dehumanize Black people.<sup>518</sup> While readers imagined that engaging suffering made them more compassionate toward others, sympathetic identification was also frequently a practice of subjugation.<sup>519</sup> Sentimental stories and hermeneutics subjugated “people of different classes and different races, who were compelled to play not the leading roles but the human scenery before which the melodrama of middle-class redemption could be enacted, for the enlightenment of an audience in which they were not even included,” as Laura Wexler explains<sup>520</sup>

As a religious practice and an interpretive mode, sympathetic identification utilized the “socioemotional codes” of sentimental literature to center and appeal to the emotional needs of white readers and continued to dehumanize those ‘objects’ of readerly sympathy.<sup>521</sup> Instead of fostering compassion, Hartman explains the potential “violence of identification” in the sentimental tradition in which empathy does not “expand the space of the other but

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<sup>517</sup> Williamson, *Twentieth Century Sentimentalism*, 153.

<sup>518</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>519</sup> Lauren Wexler, 101.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

merely places the self in its stead.”<sup>522</sup> In other words, sympathetic identification constructed a kind of absence where the specific interior life of the narrator was universalized so that the reader could imagine themselves in their place.

These histories of sentimental reading practices are important to consider given that contemporary teachers sometimes promote sentimental strategies for reading *Beloved*. Historically, these sentimental strategies centered the perspectives and emotions of white readers without naming the exclusion of other identities and perspectives. Such unacknowledged exclusions do not align with the ostensibly universal lessons about empathy people suggest reading in these sympathetic modes can foster in readers and students.

Morrison explained that what she found most troubling about the effect of sentimental conventions on slave narratives was that “there was no mention of their interior lives.”<sup>523</sup> She said *Beloved* was her “wish to extend, fill in, and complement slave autobiographical narratives” without the limitations of sentimental storytelling.<sup>524</sup> *Beloved* subtly, but decidedly critiques how sympathetic identification constructed ‘suffering objects’ instead of the subjectivity and humanity of enslaved people. The novel leverages this critique by ‘extending,’ ‘filling in,’ and otherwise centering the imagined “interior lives” of the characters. One way *Beloved* is incongruent with the sentimental hermeneutics sometimes employed to read the book is in its self-conscious insistence on the presence of characters’ interior lives in ways they were historically absent from the literature of their experiences.

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<sup>522</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 20.

<sup>523</sup> Morrison, “Sites of Memory,” 70.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

One of the most pointed critiques of sympathetic identification in *Beloved* is the scene where Sethe's mother slaps her. *Beloved* critiques sympathetic identification in this scene by illustrating the potential for misunderstanding that can happen in the process of this strategy for empathy. In the scene, Sethe tells a story to Beloved and Denver about how her mother showed Sethe her branding scar. Sethe admits she did not know her mother well—"she didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights."<sup>525</sup> So when her mother shows her the branding scar of a "circle and cross burnt right in the skin" on her rib, she felt the intimacy and importance of this moment.<sup>526</sup> Sethe's mother tells her the mark is a way of *identifying* her: "'this is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.'"<sup>527</sup> Sethe tells Beloved and Denver that she didn't know how to respond to her mother. "All" she knew was this was an "important" moment and that she "needed to have something important to say back."<sup>528</sup> So Sethe replied, "Yes, Ma'am,' I said. 'But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too.'"<sup>529</sup> Towards the end of the scene, Denver asks Sethe if her mother did mark her and Sethe reports that her mother "slapped [her] face."<sup>530</sup> Sethe explains to Denver: "I didn't understand it then. Not till I had a mark of my own."<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>525</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 72.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.* Mae G. Henderson interprets this moment as one in which Sethe's mother "transformed a mark of mutilation"—a mark an enslaver used to mark her as his 'property'—"into a sign of recognition and identity." Mae Henderson, *Toni Morrison's 'Beloved': Re-membering the Body as Historical Text* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 95.

<sup>528</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 72.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*

I read this scene as a critique of sentimental sympathy—what Avery Gordon describes as a “repudiation” of “sympathetic identification”—because Sethe’s response to her mother shows the “desire for inclusion” in the physical and existential pain of being marked in this way, which Sethe does not understand.<sup>532</sup> Sethe seems to think that her empathy—her offer to “mark the mark on [her] too”—will create intimacy between her and her mother and reflect the importance of her mother sharing this identifying mark, even if she does not understand its contextual meaning. But the slap disrupts Sethe’s illusion that she could understand and identify *with* her mother’s mark by putting it on her body too. The slap indicates that empathy is not identifying *with* or *as* the other by imagining your body with the same mark. Instead, this scene suggests that empathy is honoring the other’s request for recognition—to recognize them, as in see and know them on their own terms—by acknowledging that we may not fully understand the identifying marks they show us. In short, the slap suggests that sympathetic identification loses sight of alterity, because one cannot presume to know the other through imagining how they would feel in their place.<sup>533</sup>

The critique of sympathetic identification in this scene can be interpreted as one part of *Beloved’s* larger critique of sentimental approaches to empathy and understanding. Namely, while this particular scene speaks to the limits of sympathetic identification for understanding another person’s point of view, the novel more broadly refuses to appeal to a kind of sympathetic misunderstanding of the enslaved experience which would center the

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<sup>532</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 186-187. She suggests this scene also warns against the redemptive “clean slates” and “future” of the sympathetic formula in which one imagines all will be well “If you were me and I were you.” (187) She also explains that this desire for inclusion “is the essential quality of sympathetic identification.” (187)

<sup>533</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

emotions of the empathizer or reader instead of the interior lives of the characters telling the story of enslavement.

*Beloved's* narrative dissonance and critique of sentimental strategies for storytelling and reading is most noticeable in the book's attention to the presence of the narrator's interior lives in the face of their historical absence from literature and historical records. Morrison suggests in an critical essay that part of what allowed writers and readers to imagine Black people and other marginalized and exploited communities as objects of sympathy instead of fully formed subjects was the belief that "one could write about them, but there was never the danger of their 'writing back.'...One could observe them, hold them in prolonged gaze, without encountering the risk of being observed, viewed, or judged in return."<sup>534</sup> Sympathetic identification in this view is predicated on constructing, narratively and hermeneutically, a kind of absence of subjectivity—universalizing the interior life of the narrator in a way that simplifies how they may have understood their pain or experience by prioritizing the readers imagined feelings in their stead. As Berlant puts it, sentimentality "uses suffering vampirically to simplify the subject, thereby making the injunction to empathy safe for the subject."<sup>535</sup>

*Beloved* provides narrative opportunities to imagine how enslaved people might have observed, viewed, and judged the people who wrote about them—without the historical literary conventions of sentimental narratives that required them to refrain from such observations, judgements, and perspectives. This is one reason the scene between Sethe and her mother is such an important commentary on the limits of sympathetic identification as a

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<sup>534</sup> Morrison, *Unspeakable*, 387.

<sup>535</sup> Berlant, "Poor Elize," 658.

mode of empathy. Unlike the narratives where readers could identify with the suffering of enslaved people and feel they had understood their experience to cultivate their own virtues of compassion, Sethe cannot imagine that her response is appropriate, because her mother is present and slaps her. The slap confronts Sethe with the inappropriateness of her identification in a way that readers of slave narratives who might have performed the same misunderstanding almost certainly were not. The critique of sympathetic identification happens because Sethe's mom is present to critique and to tell Sethe with a slap that she has misunderstood her request for recognition.

There are other scenes that comment on the excluded perspectives of the “interior lives” of people who were historically subjugated in sentimental storytelling and hermeneutics. One such scene is when Sethe tells Beloved about an experience at “Sweet Home,” one she has never told to anyone else. She tells Beloved about Schoolteacher, the man who took over Sweet Home after Mr. Garner passed away. She says that Schoolteacher was a studious man who recorded information about Sethe and the other enslaved people at Sweet Home in his notebook, using the ink she made—because her ink was his favorite. She recounts to Beloved: “Schoolteacher was teaching us things we couldn’t learn. I didn’t care nothing about the measuring string...Schoolteacher’d wrap that string all over my head, ‘cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth. I thought he was a fool. And the questions he asked was the biggest foolishness of all.”<sup>536</sup> Sethe recounts that one day, when Schoolteacher was conducting lessons with two of his pupils, she heard one of his students say her name. She overheard Schoolteacher instruct a student that he was filling out a chart

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<sup>536</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 226.

incorrectly: “I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up.”<sup>537</sup> Sethe silently slips away from this scene in disbelief at what she has heard. She goes to Miss Garner, who she asks to clarify the definition of “characteristics” without giving her any details of the previous scene. Garner responds, “a characteristic is a feature. A thing that’s natural to a thing.”<sup>538</sup>

This scene represents how historically Black people were “seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.”<sup>539</sup> Just a few pages before this account, Sethe narrates how when Sixo—another enslaved person at Sweet Home—made a clever joke, “Schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined.”<sup>540</sup> Yet the way Sethe narrates her experience with Schoolteacher to Beloved shifts “the critical gaze” from “the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers.”<sup>541</sup>

This scene juxtaposes Schoolteacher and his pupils writing *about* Sethe with Sethe’s “telling it” for “the first time” aloud to Beloved.<sup>542</sup> The scene encourages the reader to think about Sethe’s presence in a moment when a document is written about her. We hear in Sethe’s words some of her interior life—her thoughts, fears, regrets, and judgements are present in her account of the situation in a way that Schoolteacher did not record in his account of her “characteristics.” Sethe speaks aloud for the first time for Beloved and the reader what was not written. The way Sethe acknowledges this as her first telling turns the

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<sup>537</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>539</sup> Morrison, “Sites of Memory,” 70.

<sup>540</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 225.

<sup>541</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 90.

<sup>542</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 228.



listener's attention to sound instead of text—to the 'glaring' silence that accompanied the written word. What was not written was how Sethe felt when others wrote her 'animal characteristics,' how she judged Schoolteacher for measuring and asking foolish questions, and how she felt complicit for making the ink that recorded these dehumanizing 'facts' of racist imagination because she believed her ink facilitated the transmission of those lies.

One way of interpreting this scene is as a commentary on reading for the excluded perspective of the "interior lives" of people who were historically subjugated in sentimental storytelling and hermeneutics. This scene illustrates how readers might shift their attention from what is written, "passed on" in ink, to the imaginative practices of those writing and also the imaginations, thoughts, and feelings of the people they claimed to represent. The focus of this scene, unlike sympathetic identification, is not what one might imagine feeling in the place of the other, but the interior life of the one being imagined—her judgements, fears, regrets, and thoughts.

It is no coincidence then that the most sinister character in the novel is called "Schoolteacher," if we consider this literary detail a further meditation on how reading is a skill taught and learned. Toward the end of the book, when Denver says that Miss Bodwin has been teaching her "book stuff," Paul D, another formerly enslaved person from Sweet Home, tells her: "Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in the world more dangerous than a white schoolteacher."<sup>543</sup> Morrison's depiction of Schoolteacher can be read as a commentary on education in the United States in a few ways. One can interpret that Schoolteacher uses Sethe's ink to pass on dehumanizing ideas about Black people to his students as an imagined

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<sup>543</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 314.

origin story of some of the eugenic science that was taught in many U.S. public schools until almost the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>544</sup>

We might also imagine the hermeneutics of Schoolteacher's ink—how he teaches his pupils to read Sethe and to (mis)represent her, or how Sethe and other enslaved people are excluded from the intended readership of his writing. When Sethe explains to *Beloved* that “Schoolteacher was teaching us things we couldn't learn,” she suggests she and other enslaved people at Sweet Home “couldn't” learn Schoolteacher's lessons because they are for the audience, the benefit, and empowerment of white people. The lessons in reading and writing Schoolteacher offers are a way of deciding who *counts* and who gets to give an *account* of their humanity.<sup>545</sup>

Morrison's literary scholarship and *Beloved* as a novel explore ways of reading and interpreting the American literary canon beyond modes of reading students have “been taught to do”—including Morrison herself.<sup>546</sup> She explains that as a young reader she thought, because she was taught by teachers and critics, that Black voices were absent from the literary canon. If they did show up it was as figures in the “‘normal,’ unracialized white world that provided the fictional backdrop,” because these texts were not “for black people,” but aimed at and preoccupied with white readers.<sup>547</sup>

The history of sympathetic identification suggests that sentimental ways of writing and reading were historically preoccupied with white readers in just this way. Against sentimental hermeneutics which prompt readers to imagine what a contemporary reader

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<sup>544</sup> Footnote a few of the sources that detail this (Ruth Benedict efforts are relevant again here.)

<sup>545</sup> The idea of counting is important in *Beloved* add two articles about this

<sup>546</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 3.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

might have felt in the place of an historic person, Morrison focuses on the interior lives of narrators, not the reader. In *Beloved*, the narrators allow contemporary readers to practice this type of critical inquiry through the characters' observations about those people who have the power to tell stories and write in the world of the novel. Readers can look at Schoolteacher—the definer—from the perspective and intimacy of Sethe's point of view as the defined. Similarly, the reader sees Edward Bodwin through the eyes of other narrators instead of just the way he narrates himself. In this way, the narrators of *Beloved* provide an account of “unspeakable things, unspoken,” highlighting the silences of literature and the historical record by pointing out some of the people who forced those silences. In sum, *Beloved* imagines what it might mean to hold acts of reading and writing as well as those doing that reading and writing accountable for their consequences, intended and unintended.

In contrast to the way that Schoolteacher's work—written in Sethe's ink—claims to record ‘facts’ about enslaved people's ‘animal characteristics,’ *Beloved* calls attention to the untrustworthiness of ink and representation. The final chapter of the novel is a kind of epilogue that zooms out of the personal narratives given by the characters and comments on the potential instability of the narrative itself. This short final chapter makes clear that the story readers have just heard is one that was forgotten: “It was not a story to pass on. They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their talks, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her.”<sup>548</sup> It is also a story the text suggests is not transmittable: “This is not a story to pass on. By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is

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<sup>548</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 323.

down there.”<sup>549</sup> In this final chapter, Morrison acknowledges the limits of representation.

The traces of Beloved are gone, although the consequences of her existence remain, because Beloved transcends language and this final passage names the inability of language to capture in print—footprints or otherwise—those “unspeakable things, unspoken.”

This final chapter may also, as Avery Gordon suggests, provoke “recognition that real representations are fictive too.”<sup>550</sup> Those things written in ink—the historical record and Schoolteacher’s science—claim the status of ‘fact,’ but leave out crucial information. Gordon suggests that “Beloved is a sign without a referent.”<sup>551</sup> As the final chapter highlights, “everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don’t know her name.”<sup>552</sup> These lines direct readers back to the historical record that never recorded the name—that forgot facts about the person they have just spent more than 300 pages imagining.

The final chapter prompts the reader to question if this story has represented Beloved at all, because what kind of language could? But the narrative also directs reader’s attention back to the gaps, silences, and inaccuracies of what is written in ink and suggests we read these ruptures differently than many schoolteachers may have instructed us to do. It does so by imagining the presence of interior lives of those represented and, of equal importance, recognizing the limitations of this imaginative exercise. At the end of *Beloved*, the reader is left with no certainties, no permanence, no self-righteous forms of identification

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<sup>549</sup> Ibid., 324.

<sup>550</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 178.

<sup>551</sup> Ibid.

<sup>552</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 323.

with the imagined experience of what it would have felt like to be in the narrators' situation. Just the echo of an unrecorded name: Beloved.

### *Empathetic Imagination*

Morrison says in *Playing in the Dark* that, as a writer, she must “place enormous trust in [her] ability to imagine others” and be willing “to project consciously into the danger zones such others may represent for [her].”<sup>553</sup> In naming the work of imagining others as part of her writerly project, Morrison clarifies that “imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purpose of the work, *becoming*.”<sup>554</sup> This section explores how Morrison demonstrates the possibilities and limitations of imagining others in *Beloved*. I build on my observations from the last section that *Beloved* is critical of the types of sympathetic identification that emerged in sentimental devotional reading culture. Against sentimental readerly and writerly practices of ‘taking oneself intact into the other,’ I explore how *Beloved* outlines a different hermeneutic for readerly empathy that leaves room for the religious and ideological perspectives that are often marginalized in sentimental storytelling and reading.

While there are scenes in *Beloved*, like the ones outlined above, that are critical of sympathetic identification, the novel doesn't exclude or reject opportunities for readerly empathy and intimacy with characters. In other words, imagining and empathizing with others through writing and reading is possible, Morrison just designates different writerly and readerly conventions for it. *Beloved* does so by providing a different orientation toward readerly empathy, one that is focused on the interior life of the narrators and characters

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<sup>553</sup> Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 3.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

instead of the emotions and thoughts of the reader, while simultaneously acknowledging the limitations of this imaginative exercise.

Consider Denver's transformation from listener to storyteller. As a listener, Denver only tries to find herself in the story. When Paul D and Sethe tell old stories together, Denver expresses her disdain for any stories that don't center her. In particular she only likes the story of her birth, because she can imagine herself in it. In her words, "This was the part of the story she loved...because it was all about herself."<sup>555</sup> Yet as a storyteller, Denver practices imagining others a different way. When she tells the same story about her birth to Beloved one evening:

Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother. Seeing how it must have looked and the more fine points she made, the more detail she provided, the more Beloved liked it. So she anticipated the questions by giving blood to the scraps her mother and grandmother had told her—and a heartbeat. The monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved....Denver spoke, Beloved listened, and the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it.<sup>556</sup>

Denver doesn't try to tell a story "all about herself" or for herself. Instead, Denver practices imagining Sethe and what she may have experienced: "the quick-change weather up in those hills—cool at night, hot in the day, sudden fog."<sup>557</sup> Instead of focusing on her own identity and experiences, Denver thinks about Sethe's. She does so not to *identify with* her imaginary projection of Sethe, but to *participate with* her listener, Beloved, to imagine what Sethe experienced, felt, and observed. The story is an intimate, nourishing duet in which "the two

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<sup>555</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 91.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

did the best they could to create what really happened” at the same time that Denver acknowledges that only Sethe could say “how it really was.”<sup>558</sup>

In my interpretation, this scene illustrates conventions of the readerly and writerly practice of empathetic imagination—a term I use to refer to the Morrison’s participatory storytelling. Morrison explains that, as a writer, she tries to make the work participatory, specifically emulating “characteristics of Black art” like preaching and music.<sup>559</sup> She says, “It should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify—to expand on the sermon that is being delivered.”<sup>560</sup> Morrison aims to “make that connection” to the reader in writing too.<sup>561</sup> As she puts it, “I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. Because it is the affective and participatory relationships between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance.”<sup>562</sup> Her aim—as she illustrated in the scene with Denver and Beloved—is “to have the reader work *with* the author in the construction of the book.”<sup>563</sup> So a key aspect of empathetic imagination is participatory—not stepping into a world or perspective of characters that are given, but actively participating in the imagination of those worlds and characters.

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<sup>558</sup> Ibid.

<sup>559</sup> Morrison, *What Moves at the Margins*, 59.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid.

Given Morrison's explanation of participatory writing and reading, perhaps Morrison as the author, like Denver, asks the reader, to participate in imagining the character Beloved throughout the novel. The final chapter of *Beloved* calls particular attention to the reader's participation in the construction of the character and story. Throughout the book, the reader encounters the ghostly presence of Beloved. The reader imagines Beloved—through Sethe—as Sethe's dead child, but there are also passages that suggest she might be someone else. Beloved has memories of slave ships and other aspects of the transatlantic slave trade that Sethe's child would not.

Throughout the text, Morrison as the author, the characters, and the reader all call her Beloved. But in the final chapter, Morrison reminds the reader that, whoever she may be, we don't actually know her name: "Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed."<sup>564</sup> William Handley suggests that in this final chapter "Morrison's readers encounter insights into the ethics of their own activity in accounting for an absence that they can neither know nor forget but know that they have heard" in the name—the final word of the book—Beloved.<sup>565</sup> Ending the novel with a reminder that the reader doesn't know the name of the figure they have called Beloved throughout the book highlights how the reader has participated with Morrison in imaging a ghostly presence from an absence. The reader works with Morrison to create what really

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<sup>564</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 323.

<sup>565</sup> W. R. Handley, "The House a Ghost Built: 'Nommo,' Allegory, and the Ethics of Reading in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved,'" *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 36, no. 4 (Winter 1995), 696-697.



happened while also acknowledging—as one of Morrison’s central parameters for empathetic imagination—that what happened is something only known to the character not those who imagine her.

Morrison’s reminder about the limits of representing and imagining others and the book’s final word, “Beloved,” also calls back to the epigraph of the novel, a biblical passage from the New Testament, Romans 9:25: “*I will call them my people which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved.*” The epigraph can be interpreted as an invitation to participate with Morrison in an act of empathetic imagination. Within historical context, Romans 9:25 refers to God including people—the gentiles—in a group that had previously been restricted to Jewish people. One could interpret the epigraph as Morrison’s wish to imagine the names and lives of people who were not included in the historical record—a few of the names and lives of the “60 million and more” to whom the book is dedicated.

The epigraph can be read as Morrison’s authorly intention to call them “people” and “her beloved” as well as an invitation to the reader to do the same. Read in light of Morrison’s philosophy of readerly participation, *Beloved* can be understood as a book length practice of empathetic imagination, mirroring the scene where Denver and Beloved imagine Sethe’s story together. Morrison nurses the reader with details and together they try to create what really happened by calling “her beloved who was not beloved” and acknowledging that what they imagine together cannot really represent the lives of even one of the “60 million and more,” because even if we call her Beloved, how can we ‘call her if they don’t know her name?’

These literary details outline two of the most important conventions of empathetic imagination. First, that the writer and reader prioritize the interior thoughts, feelings, and

observations of the character over the emotions and thoughts of the reader. And, second, that the writer and reader recognize the limits of the imaginative exercise. As Denver puts it, “the two did the best they could to create what really happened, how it really was, something only Sethe knew because she alone had the mind for it and the time afterward to shape it.”<sup>566</sup>

These conventions of empathetic imagination suggest a model of readerly empathy that is distinct from sympathetic identification. The sentimental conventions of sympathetic identification universalize the interior life of the narrator so the reader can imagine themselves in the place of the other without acknowledging important social, cultural, and interpersonal differences that may make understanding the thoughts and emotions of others complicated. Empathetic imagination as an approach to readerly empathy, by contrast, focuses on a posture of humility—imagining the interior life of the character or what an experience might have meant to them—while simultaneously naming the limits of this form of empathetic knowledge, especially through literature.

Sympathetic identification and empathetic imagination offer different hermeneutic approaches to empathy when it comes to reading *Beloved*. The activity of the mock trial that educators sometimes use to teach *Beloved* provides a helpful example for thinking about some of these differences. Quite a few online teaching guides for *Beloved* suggest teachers should have students culminate their experience reading the novel by putting Sethe on trial. As one resource explains, “High school students who have completed this difficult novel deserve a reward. A mock trial will generate enthusiasm and help them collaborate to make sure they understand the events in the novel.”<sup>567</sup> One teaching guide sets aside a class period as a

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<sup>566</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 91-92.

<sup>567</sup> Bell, “This is Not a Story to Pass On”: Teaching Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.”

precursor to the mock trial to discuss if “there is enough support to put Sethe on trial” at all.<sup>568</sup> The guide suggests teachers frame this discussion historically with an explanation of how “Sethe was not considered a person under the laws of the Fugitive Slave Act, but rather property that legally needed to be returned to its owner.”<sup>569</sup> The guide then asks students to discuss the following questions in small groups:

- Can a piece of property commit murder?
- Or, by murdering her unnamed daughter, did she willfully destroy property belonging to the slave owner?
- Was her crime murder, or destruction of property?
- Or, did she commit a crime at all, because she was not really, in terms of the laws of the time, considered a person?
- Only a person can be tried by a jury of his or her peers. Who could possibly try her fairly?<sup>570</sup>

Another resource suggests that the mock trial provides students a way of engaging with the “unresolved question” at the heart of the novel: “whether Sethe did the right thing in trying to kill her children.”<sup>571</sup> This resource goes on to explain the trial referenced in the novel “would not satisfy today’s standards of justice. African-Americans, during this period of history were not allowed to serve as witnesses and jurors. So the question of her guilt and innocence remains very much alive.”<sup>572</sup> The guide says the question students should consider

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<sup>568</sup> “A History Lesson Based on *Beloved*: Criminal Rights, Ethics, & Slavery,” Bright Hub Education, High School History Lesson Plans, Grades 9-12, 23 January, 2013 <https://www.brighthubeducation.com/history-lessons-grades-9-12/127757-using-the-novel-beloved-to-discuss-criminal-rights/> (Accessed July 14, 2021).

<sup>569</sup> Ibid.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid.

<sup>571</sup> This quote is from a teaching guide created by the teachers institute at Yale. Sophie Bell, “This is Not a Story to Pass On?: Teaching Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.” There are plenty more teaching guides online that suggest a similarly structured activity, some that even use language from Bell’s 1999 lesson plan. Those resources include “Guilty or Not Guilty? AP Literature Students Stage A Mock Trial to Find Out,” Fountain Valley School News, 16 December 2011, <https://www.fvs.edu/fvs-news?pk=624891>; Melissa Strong, “*Beloved* by Toni Morrison” 2016, Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America, <https://dp.la/primary-source-sets/beloved-by-toni-morrison/teaching-guide> (Accessed July 14, 2021)

<sup>572</sup> Bell, “This is Not a Story to Pass On?: Teaching Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.”

in this “present-day trial” is whether Sethe was “‘making them safe,’ as she claimed, or committing murder, as many would accuse her of doing?”<sup>573</sup>

I read the mock trial activity as a sentimental approach to *Beloved* for two reasons: 1) it seeks a relatively conventional resolution to a complex ethical question and 2) it centers the judgements, observations, and perspectives of contemporary readers instead of characters in the novel.<sup>574</sup> As we’ve seen elsewhere in this project, sympathetic identification can provide unhelpfully simple resolution to the experience of tragedy, trauma, and suffering—such as the imagined resolution of Tom Robinson’s murder through the hopeful converted hearts of Scout and the reader in *Mockingbird*. The end of my chapter on *Mockingbird* observes how sentimental modes of reading can simplify pain, loss, and trauma and imaginatively redeem difficult realities through the emotional conversion of other characters and readers.<sup>575</sup> In the case of the mock trial, students reimagine legal justice for Sethe and *Beloved* which resolves complex historical realities with the relative finality of a verdict. The mock trial also prioritizes the thoughts and judgement of readers—making contemporary readers the judge and jury of a complex ethical question that the novel does not frame in this way.

Empathetic imagination offers a different approach to reading the question of Sethe’s decision by 1) centering the interior lives, concerns, and observations of the characters and 2) proposing haunting presence in the process of empathy instead of

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<sup>573</sup> Ibid.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid. The teaching guide suggests the jury should be made up of other people who have read the book, but who do not have their grade dependent on the outcome of the trial, so perhaps another section of the class.

<sup>575</sup> Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” 648. Berlant says in a similar vein that “The possibility that through the identification with alterity you will never be the same remains the radical threat and the great promise of this affective aesthetic.”

emotional resolution. Empathetic imagination reads for how the character understands her own actions, what vocabulary she uses or has at her disposal. Unlike the educational guides that may imagine Sethe as less than human because of the Fugitive Slave laws or for killing her daughter, empathetic imagination would ask how Sethe reflects on the savagery of the system of slavery. In *Beloved*, Sethe never imagines she is guilty for infanticide—she never questions her choice to kill her daughter. Sethe only worries about her guilt for one thing: making ink. In the scene after Beloved has left 124, Paul D comes to make amends with Sethe for judging her, “counting her feet” after he heard “*her news*” about the infanticide. Sethe frets to him, “I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn’t have done it if I hadn’t made the ink.”<sup>576</sup> Instead of questioning whether she is guilty for infanticide, Sethe fears that by making the ink she has participated in her dehumanization, that of her children, and others because of how Schoolteacher used her ink to list her “animal characteristics.” By highlighting the ink, Morrison reorients culpability from the one who was defined as an inhuman criminal to those who defined her that way.

Sethe’s plotline in *Beloved* concludes with a question, but that “unresolved question” is not about Sethe’s guilt, as the mock trial activity suggests. In the final scene, after Sethe confesses her fears about the ink, she tells Paul D that she is sad that Beloved “left her” because, in Sethe’s words, “she was my best thing.”<sup>577</sup> Paul D tells Sethe “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” Sethe responds with a question: “Me? Me?”<sup>578</sup> The question readers are left with is not one that belongs to them to answer in mock courts. It is Sethe’s question

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<sup>576</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 320.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

to ask and answer about herself. In *her* question “Me? Me?,” Sethe may be in the process of realizing that what makes her valuable—her best thing—is not those things she made or produced: ink, milk, children—but herself. In other words, Sethe considers the possibility of defining herself, against those things she “couldn’t learn” from Schoolteacher. The pedagogical approach of sympathetic identification through mock trial may unwittingly reenact the scene in which the school teacher and his pupils answer the question for her. The proposed discussion of whether Sethe should be considered a person or property creates an uncanny parallel to the scene in the novel when students are prompted to list Sethe’s human and non-human characteristics, even if these characteristics are based on historical legal systems or ‘the laws of the time’ rather than comparisons to animals. An approach that builds on empathetic imagination instead asks: how might Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman, define herself?

Empathetic imagination as a hermeneutic approach suggests readerly empathy is ambiguous and complicated. Against sentimental modes in which empathy provides literary and emotional resolution for readers, empathetic imagination does not lend itself to emotional resolution through identification with pain, trauma, or suffering of the other. As Berlant explains, *Beloved* “poses a challenge to the tears of sentimental culture: to refuse the too-quick gratification after the none-too-brief knowledge of pain.”<sup>579</sup> The novel does so by offering a mode of empathetic engagement framed, in part, through the metaphor of haunting, which advances the presence of the imagined other who is not easily dismissed, controlled, or managed.

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<sup>579</sup> Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” 665.

Haunting presence is central to empathetic imagination because this model of empathy insists on the presence of the other in the process of empathizing with and understanding them. *Beloved's* orientation toward readerly empathy suggests readers should try to understand others on their own terms with the “personhood” and “specific individuality we insist upon for ourselves.”<sup>580</sup> As Morrison suggests in her essay “Being or Becoming the Stranger,” in our encounter with strangers, we often try to “sentimentalize,” “appropriate,” “own,” “govern,” “administrate,” “romance” “distance ourselves from,” or “force our own images” on the other person.<sup>581</sup> Instead, empathetic imagination leaves room for the imagined other who may not respond to our attempts to empathize in the way we anticipate or desire. The scene between Sethe and her mother again provides a helpful example. Sethe’s mother slaps Sethe to let her know that she has projected her feelings and thoughts in ways that do not align with Sethe’s mother’s request for recognition. Such a model of empathy opens the possibility of the other being particular and fully human in ways we cannot predict, project, or control. Leaving open this possibility in the encounter with the imagined other through reading means reminding the reader as Morrison does throughout the novel to acknowledge the limits of the imaginative exercise, because the only one who really knows what happened in the story that Denver tells about Sethe is Sethe and the reader does not really know the name of the one they are imagining even if they call her Beloved.

The haunting presence of the other is also central to empathetic imagination because, unlike emotional resolution in the sentimental tradition, empathy does not resolve difficult

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<sup>580</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 39.

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*, 39 and 31.

realities in *Beloved*. Instead, the possibility of transhistorical empathy through reading is predicated on the other who “occupy[ies] the present tense”—asking to be dealt with and accounted for “with no more time for big deferrals or fantasies” or to quote Sethe, “No more running—from nothing.”<sup>582</sup> The haunting presence of the other in this mode of empathy resists quick emotional resolution for complex ethical or historical questions because, as Joseph Winters explains, “there are facets of the past that haunt us because they cannot be easily handled, fixed, and resolved.”<sup>583</sup>

Many scholars consider *Beloved* a paradigmatic novel of trauma, as the ghost of the dead child in *Beloved* represents the unreconciled traumatic past of both Sethe’s family and transatlantic slavery.<sup>584</sup> The literary figure of the ghost surfaces truths about the dehumanizing violence of slavery which are not typically accounted for in historical narratives. The traumatic metaphor of the ghost imagines the presence of the unreconciled past in the form of emotions, speech, and humanity of those unnamed historical figures in ways historical ledgers typically rendered nameless and voiceless.<sup>585</sup> Scholars of literary trauma have long acknowledged that literary narratives can disclose truths about traumatic histories in ways historical archives often do not, precisely because of the potential for

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<sup>582</sup> Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” 666.

<sup>583</sup> Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 249.

<sup>584</sup> See Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 137-192; Evelyn Jafee Schreiber, *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); and Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

<sup>585</sup> For more on how scholars of slavery have turned to literary narrative to ‘reconstruct’ and imagine historical experience, see Saidiya V. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe*, No. 26, Vol. 12 (June 2008): 1-14; Brian Connolly and Marisa Fuentes, “Introduction: From Archives of Slavery to Liberated Futures?” *History of the Present: A journal of Critical History*, vol. 6, no. 2, (Fall 2016), 105-116; and Amanda J.G. Napier “Deliverance in Three Acts,” *American Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 1 (March 2022), 1-23.



literary narratives to present the presence of complex human beings and the lingering presence of the past.<sup>586</sup>

It's no coincidence that in the foreword to her novel Morrison narrates her own realization that *Beloved* would be the central character of her book as a kind of personal ghostly encounter: "I sat on the porch, rocking in a swing, looking at giant stones piled up to take the river's occasional fist. . . . She walked out of the water, climbed the rocks, and leaned against the gazebo. Nice hat."<sup>587</sup> This encounter—which resonates with the scene from the novel in which the character Beloved first appears—suggests haunting is a phenomenon in Morrison's real life, indicating *presences* in our world as well as the world of the novel.<sup>588</sup> She suggests with this story and in the ghostly metaphor of empathy in *Beloved* that "the past remains alive, or in a state between life and death, in part because traumas take time to be made sense of, to be worked through, and to be incorporated into memory and language," as Winters puts it.<sup>589</sup>

Approaching the activity of a mock trial through empathetic imagination would take seriously Morrison's statement that "the only one in a position to accurately render

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<sup>586</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies," *New Literary History*, 26.3 (1995); Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996) and *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013); Arthur G. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998); Lisa Hinrichsen, "Trauma Studies and the Literature of the U.S. South," *Literature Compass*, Vol. 10, no. 8 (August 2013). Dorothy Stringer, "Not Even Past": *Race Historical Trauma and Subjectivity in Faulkner, Larsen, and Van Vechten* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

<sup>587</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, xviii.

<sup>588</sup> The encounter she narrates also shares similarities with the account she gives of her encounter with the "vanishing fisherwoman" in her backyard—a story she explores in her essay, "Being or Becoming the Stranger" as an encounter that taught her about the "prevalent capacity to estrange others" and "how vulnerable we are to distancing ourselves and forcing our own images onto strangers as well as becoming the stranger we may abhor." Morrison, *The Origin of Others*, 31.

<sup>589</sup> Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, 249.

judgement of her own murder” is “the dead child. Beloved.”<sup>590</sup> What if, instead of the educational guide’s recommendation to have contemporary readers serve as judge and jury for Sethe’s trial, the students were asked to engage the presence of Beloved’s ghost in the classroom and in our society? The novel suggests the possibility of such ghostly presence in the final pages, which indicate to the reader that Beloved is still “alive” showing up in “the rustle of a skirt, hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep.”<sup>591</sup>

Morrison suggests readers might encounter this presence—“they can touch it if they like, but don’t, because they know things will never be the same if they do.”<sup>592</sup> This literary meditation on the possibility of an encounter with the haunting presence of Beloved—the character who Morrison referred to as “the ultimate Other”—focuses attention not on ethical questions about Sethe’s crime but about the ethics of responding to the presence of the past, lingering and unresolved in American society.<sup>593</sup>

Of course, it might be a strange, ambiguous, and unpredictable activity for a teacher to bring into the classroom—to suggest that there is a ghost present which the class will call Beloved. To treat the presence of the ghost of slavery as true and real would be to insist on the veracity of what has long been considered “lore” or “myth,” and is often dismissed in popular culture and the academic spaces alike as “primitive” belief in the real presence of spirits and gods. Yet this is precisely what the novel *Beloved* does. Morrison explained in an interview that people treat knowledge of haunting, ghosts, and living-dead “as discredited information held by discredited people” because “there’s supposed to be some other kind of

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<sup>590</sup> Morrison, “On Beloved,” 363.

<sup>591</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*, 323 and 324.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>593</sup> In her essay “Narrating the Other,” Morrison discusses how for her as the author “Beloved the girl, the haunter, is the ultimate Other. Calmoring, forever clamoring for a kiss.” Morrison, *The Origin of Others*, 91.

knowledge that is more viable, more objective, more scientific.”<sup>594</sup> But *Beloved* does not “disregard” the knowledge of haunting simply because “it does not meet the credentials of this particular decade or century.”<sup>595</sup>

Haunting as a central component of empathetic imagination asserts presence in modernity in ways that have historical roots in and implications for religious studies. In the final pages of this chapter, I outline how haunting in *Beloved* subverts modern definitions of proper religiosity and expands the religious, ideological, and ontological possibilities of the empathetic morality people often seek in reading this book. Scholars of religion, literature, and secularism have explored how literature plays an important role in the secularization of American culture, not by being a-religious or all-inclusive, but by “render[ing] dominant forms of Protestant identity continuous with democratic, civil identity” and diffusing Protestant religious norms and values into American popular culture.<sup>596</sup> I have explored elements of this trend in the tradition of sentimental literature and hermeneutics throughout this project. Yet literature is certainly not the only body of writing that played a role in universalizing one way of being religious into the very definition of religion and acceptable forms of religiosity in the United States.<sup>597</sup> As Robert Orsi explores in *History and Presence*, early “theorists of religion in the emerging academic disciplines of sociology, anthropology,

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<sup>594</sup> Danielle Kathleen Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 226.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid.

<sup>596</sup> Tracy Fessenden *Culture and Redemption*, quote retrieved from

<https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691049632/culture-and-redemption>.

<sup>597</sup> Robert Orsi explains how modern religion “inscribes one way of being religious as ‘religion’ itself.” Robert Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 40. See also Webb Keane’s *Christian Moderns*. For more on morality and Protestant Dominance also see Pellegrini and Jakobsen, *Love the Sin* and Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) and *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

comparative religion, and political science” helped construct the ideal of “the modern subject” by defining the place of religious experience in terms that “confine[d] the gods to the inner life of individuals, to the edges of the modern, to the corners of the human mind, and to the past of the species.”<sup>598</sup> Anthropological studies in particular often “reassure[d] moderns that such religious phenomenon” of people who believed gods and spirits were really present in the world “happened elsewhere, among people living in a time out of time” far from the realism of modern society.<sup>599</sup>

The modern religious subject was constructed as a person who “free[d]” themselves “from superstitious and infantile subservience to, and dependence upon, supernatural figures, those really present in bread and wine, as well as those in plaster, paint, water, and rock.”<sup>600</sup> Although this ideal subject was framed by scholars and also in society more broadly as the natural progression of human enlightenment, this definition of modern religious subjectivity marginalized and sometimes criminalized other ways of being religious.<sup>601</sup> As Orsi asserts, “practices of presence became—and to a great extent they remain—the province of people of color, women, the poor and marginalized, children and childish or childlike adults, the eccentric, the romantic, the insane, and those unhinged by life experiences that overwhelm their reason.”<sup>602</sup>

These norms of religious modernity are illustrated in *Mockingbird* when Miss Maudie and Atticus tell Scout to grow out of her belief that Boo Radley is a ghost. When Scout asks

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<sup>598</sup> Orsi, 40.

<sup>599</sup> Ibid.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>601</sup> This understanding of religious maturity, Orsi suggests, “was literally what Immanuel Kant meant by ‘enlightenment.’” Orsi, *History and Presence*, 41. A good case study of how religious difference has been criminalized in the United States is provided in Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion*.

<sup>602</sup> Orsi, *History and Presence*, 41-42.

if these ghost stories are true, Miss Maudie dismisses their veracity as the lore and superstition of Black people and one untrustworthy white woman in town.<sup>603</sup> Growing out of this superstitious belief is the key to Scout's sympathetic conversion at the end of the novel when she is able to "finally see" Boo as her caring human neighbor instead of as a ghost.<sup>604</sup> As I explored in the chapter on *Mockingbird*, this literary correlation between Black superstition and children's superstition reflects an historical tool of colonization in which people used claims about religious differences to assert the existence of innate racial ones.<sup>605</sup> Such claims justified conversion and coercion, proposing that certain people and beliefs needed to be "disciplined, subdued, [and] civilized" into enlightened, rational ways of understanding the world.<sup>606</sup> This colonizing history demonstrates how the ideals of modern religiosity can foreclose different religious, ideological, and ontological possibilities, in which the moralized empathetic encounter of "finally seeing" the other requires discrediting certain ways of understanding and being in the world.

*Beloved* asserts haunting presence in ways that subvert modern definitions of acceptable forms of religiosity. It does so through the character Beloved by proposing, what

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<sup>603</sup> Harper Lee, *Mockingbird*, 51.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.* 323.

<sup>605</sup> Religious historian Sylvester Johnson traces such practices of racializing religious difference back to the 16<sup>th</sup>-century, when Protestants used anti-Catholic claims about the inferiority, superstition, and degeneration of material objects in religious practice to claim ethnic differences between Protestants and Catholics. Sylvester Johnson explains that "the materialist, fetish theory of religion, more expansively, rendered intelligible and justifiable European conquest wars, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the forced displacement of indigenous people. The power of juxtaposing market rationality to fetish religion [as Dutch West Indian Company executive Willem Bosman did in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century did] was realized through a long history of rendering Black religion as the quintessential manifestation of superstition, delusion, and savagery, properties that coalesced into the racial constitution of the heathen." (103) *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonial Democracy and Freedom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 100-106. And As Webb Keane explores, Protestants later used these religious distinctions to justify colonization and slavery by suggesting that "false beliefs" and material objects in African and Indigenous religious traditions were indicators of innate racial differences that made these groups of people unfit for freedom. Webb Keane, "Secularism as a Moral Narrative of Modernity," 160.

<sup>606</sup> Eckford-Prossor, "Colonizing Children," 247.

Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús calls “ontological assertions of presence.”<sup>607</sup> In an interview, Morison reflected on the importance of including “this other form of knowledge” in her writing<sup>608</sup> She explained that her “use of enchantment”—from haunting to magical flight—was essential for writing about Black experiences, “because that’s the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew.”<sup>609</sup> She had observed that both the “very shrewd, down-to-earth, efficient way in which they did things and survived things,” as well as “this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there,” consistently “informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities.”<sup>610</sup> “It seemed impossible,” she noted, to “eliminate that simply because it was ‘unbelievable.’”<sup>611</sup>

The haunting presence in *Beloved* thus subverts “dominant cultural forms” of knowledge and subjectivity “in order to sustain belief systems that have been suppressed.”<sup>612</sup> In particular, Robert Yeates observes how the character Beloved combines “the Euro-American ghost story” with “African and Caribbean notions of the living-dead and the zombi.”<sup>613</sup> As a haunting presence, Beloved occupies characteristics that reference the “reanimated corpse” of the Haitian zombi, the “access to knowledge” of the African living-dead, and the haunting presence of the Euro-American ghost.<sup>614</sup> This literary syncretism reflects something resonant with the history of what Ishmael Reed calls Neo-HooDooism in which “Haitian followers of Vodou appropriated and subverted tenets of Catholicism,

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<sup>607</sup> Robert Orsi, *History and Presence*, 65. Aisha M. Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería: Racial and Sexual Assemblages of Transnational Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 7.

<sup>608</sup> Taylor-Guthrie, 226.

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>612</sup> Robert Yeates, “The Unshriven Dead, Zombies on the Loose”, 533.

<sup>613</sup> *Ibid.*, 533 and 517.

<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.*, 525.

reconstructing their meanings to fit traditions brought over from West Africa in places like Haiti” as their religious freedom was “suppressed under the dominant religion of Catholicism.”<sup>615</sup> Given Morrison’s own Catholic identity and interest in diasporic African religions, these religious histories that animate the character Beloved surface some of the religious histories and implications of haunting presence in the book.<sup>616</sup>

Beloved’s presence subverts colonizing and racializing structures that discredit “ontological assertions of presence” in historic and contemporary expressions of religion. Beliso-De Jesús explains how in contemporary global practices of Santería, for example, the “dead African slave, Yoruba diaspora oricha, and other racialized entities” make their presences known to practitioners.<sup>617</sup> Just as Beloved is really present for Sethe, Denver, and other characters in the novel—“speak[ing] back, . . . fed, attended to, and active”—in Santería the present entities “are not simply dead or missing persons but rather social figures of a past still present, proof that hauntings have taken place” for practitioners in our world.<sup>618</sup>

Considering haunting presence as an essential part of the empathetic imaginative hermeneutic expands the religious, ideological, and ontological possibilities of the empathetic morality people often seek in reading *Beloved*. This project has explored how sentimental literature and hermeneutics have sometimes diffused Protestant religious norms and values into American classrooms and popular culture. Sentimental approaches to *Beloved* that suggest people minimize the haunting presence of characters to prioritize emotional

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<sup>615</sup> Ibid., 517.

<sup>616</sup> Morrison identified as Catholic for most of her life, frequently attending mass, but later in her life identified as a disaffected Catholic.

<sup>617</sup> Beliso-De Jesús, *Electric Santería*, 7.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid., 9-10. See also Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* and Kristian Wirtz, *Ritual, Discourse, and Community in Cuban Santería: Speaking a Sacred World* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007).

resolutions and the feelings of contemporary readers ignore the possibility of presence and haunting in ways that work against the important subversive work that Morrison does with empathy as well as religious and spiritual presence in the novel.

Empathetic imagination, as a model for readerly empathy—which centers the interior life of the imagined other and haunting presence instead of emotional resolution—can be one way of reading that subverts the “single set of religious moral prescriptions” that sometimes accompany sentimental approaches to finding the moral of the story.<sup>619</sup> Thinking about presence and haunting with this empathetic imaginative approach may help challenge the universalization of dominant forms of religiosity I have explored throughout this project by expanding “the freedom to be differently religious.”<sup>620</sup> It does so by leaving space for different ontological possibilities that can help readers be present with complicated historical realities. The sentimental move to literary and emotional resolution sometimes obscures how difficult social realities linger rather than conclude in our empathetic encounters with them. Empathetic imagination may be one way of practicing an approach to readerly empathy that leaves room for “others” to be included in our public imagination of norms of civic engagement, understandings of morality, and national history. As Morrison prompts in her invitation to participatory reading in *Beloved*: “I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved.”

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<sup>619</sup> Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, 13.

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*



## Conclusions

As I write this conclusion, attempts to ban books and topics from public schools in the United States continue to make national headlines with remarkable frequency. Books by traditionally underrepresented writers are targeted disproportionately in these cases, including the works of Black, Indigenous, POC, and LGBTQ+ authors.<sup>621</sup> Literature in public education has long been a topic through which people articulate and negotiate terms of national identity and belonging. The target on these authors and stories in school curricula contributes to the marginalization of these groups of people in public life and necessitates reckoning with “whose voices count and which histories and experience matter” in our society.<sup>622</sup>

Assumptions that literature is a powerful tool for shaping individuals and society has wide-reaching cultural currency. Such assumptions certainly animate requests to remove books from classrooms and library shelves. Readers also reflect these assumptions in their responses to book banning with stories about how reading a particular book has changed their life or with arguments that literature is a critical tool for addressing social problems. Such testimonies are important for resisting attempts to censor the voices and stories of targeted authors and the marginalizing social effects these bans have in people’s lives. Authors, such as Lisa Ko remind us, however, that as powerful as these arguments may be,

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<sup>621</sup> Jonathan Friedman and Nadine Farid Johnson, “Banned in the USA: Rising School Book Bans Threaten Free Expression and Students’ First Amendment Rights,” accessed August, 17 2022, <https://pen.org/banned-in-the-usa/>

<sup>622</sup> Saidiya Hartman clarifies in her discussion of censorship in an interview with PEN America that book bans are not the only way that people face limitations on their freedom of expression. She clarifies that “the literary marketplace and social precarity, as well as the impositions of form and genre, can also silence writers and thwart freedom of expression.” Saidiya V. Hartman, “Penn Out Loud Talks: Saidiya Hartman and Leslie Jamison” Interview with PEN Out Loud Even, January 29, 2020, <https://pen.org/pen-talks-saidiya-hartman-leslie-jamison/>.

these assertions sometimes place enormous power in “the individualized/sacrosanct act of ‘reading for empathy’” to address systemic issues such as institutionalized racism and white supremacy. “If only it was so simple,” Ko laments.<sup>623</sup>

This dissertation takes critically and seriously the claims that people make about how reading literature can change readers and society through case studies of three books that have been celebrated, banned, and taught in terms of their potential to inform readers’ moral and empathetic development. The case studies of *Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Beloved* speak to some of the complex issues that emerge when we examine different approaches to readerly empathy and assumptions about literature’s role in social change. Each case study surfaces observations about what these books contribute to the debates and pedagogical conversations about morality and empathy, revealing that the frameworks for morality and empathy in the books are at various degrees of congruency and dissonance with the assumptions people bring to them.

One of the key claims of this dissertation is that assumptions about these books’ ability to inform a reader’s moral and empathetic development are better understood when contextualized in relation to the tradition of sentimental literature. The case studies illustrate instances when the didactic rhetorical modes of the sentimental literary tradition appear as a way of reading and interpreting texts. Across the studies, I observe sentimental hermeneutics—an interpretive mode that promotes and seeks personal and social transformation through the act of reading, which frequently emerges in how people interpret, celebrate, teach, and contest *Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Beloved*.

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<sup>623</sup> Lisa Ko, Twitter Post, March 19, 2021, 3:42pm, <https://twitter.com/iamlisako/status/1372996845761409030?lang=en>

Sentimental hermeneutics draw upon and compliment sentimental narrative conventions in that both promote moral and social reform by evoking certain feelings in readers. Sentimental hermeneutics 1) position the reader as the recipient of moral lessons; 2) encourage readers to emulate the moral values and transformations of fictional characters; and 3) offer a model of sympathetic identification in which imagining oneself as another is understood to initiate personal and social reform.

The idea that people seek moral lessons from literature or that reading is or ought to be didactic is not exclusive to the sentimental tradition. What is pronounced and relatively particular about the didacticism of sentimental literature and hermeneutics is that this rhetorical mode synthesizes affect, morality, personal conversion, and social change in ways that suggest individual reading experiences impact particular systemic social issues. The case studies also note other details and patterns that emerge in sentimental hermeneutics, including a tendency to 1) universalize moral lessons by decontextualizing the historical, religious, and cultural specificity of moral and empathetic frameworks; 2) provide narrative, emotional, and sometimes historical resolution through identifying and sympathizing with the suffering other; and 3) prioritize the thoughts, experiences, and interior life of the reader in their empathetic engagement with the other.

The case studies emphasize that sentimental hermeneutics are one approach to interpretation, which have notable limitations and are not always compatible with the moral and empathetic frameworks in the books they are used to read. To build on these insights, future studies could examine how sentimental hermeneutics surface in the reception of

books that are not typically considered part of the sentimental literary tradition.<sup>624</sup> For example, *The Diary of A Young Girl* by Anne Frank is a memoir that largely does not align with sentimental literary conventions. Yet teaching guides and pedagogical resources frequently offer sentimental frameworks for interpreting the text. The Penguin Random House Teacher's Guide for the book claims, for instance, "the essence of Anne Frank's message has become a universal symbol of tolerance, strength, and hope in the face of adversity—a symbol transcending all cultures and ages and conveying the idea that discrimination and intolerance are wrong and dangerous."<sup>625</sup> The sentimental move to "universality" in this discussion of Anne Frank as a symbol of tolerance is worth investigating.

Dara Horn's work could be helpful in such an investigation as she discusses how Holocaust memorials and representations often minimize aspects of Jewish identity to emphasize 'universality.'<sup>626</sup> Does the emphasis on universality in sentimental approaches to interpreting this memoir speak to a kind "tolerance" that does not leave room for Jewish and other religious identities that register as different or 'other' than hegemonically Christian and secular social norms in Europe and America? Such an inquiry could also reveal dimensions of sentimental hermeneutics that I did not observe in these studies and lend further insight into how sentimental modes animate contemporary disagreements about norms of civic

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<sup>624</sup> As the introduction to this project explained, all three of the books in this case study have been studied in relation to sentimental literature in ways the example of Anne Frank's *Diary of A Young Girl* has not.

<sup>625</sup> "The Diary of a Young Girl Teacher's Guide" *Penguin Random House*  
<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/55694/the-diary-of-a-young-girl-by-anne-frank-edited-by-otto-h-frank-and-mirjam-pressler-introduction-by-nadia-murad/9780385480338/teachers-guide/> (accessed September 26, 2022)

<sup>626</sup> Dara Horn, *People Love Dead Jews: Reports From A Haunted Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021).

engagement and national identity, history, and belonging in other literary texts and conversation about them.

This dissertation's interest in the religious dimensions of the oft cited 'universal' moral lesson in these books and the ostensibly secular moral frameworks of sentimental hermeneutics places religion at the center of my analysis. This project makes the case that contemporary assumptions about moral edification in literature are indebted to traditions such as evangelical Protestant reading practices and the religious dimensions of sentimental literary conventions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Acknowledging the religious lineage of sentimental hermeneutics surfaces some of the religious particularities of moral assumptions people may bring to reading and using literature in contemporary political discourse. It also highlights how the universalizing tendency in sentimental interpretations can flatten the textured historical, religious, and social specificity of the moral and empathetic frameworks within the books.

But why do these religious details matter? The case studies suggest that the religious dimensions of moral and empathetic frameworks have implications for religious and cultural inclusion in classrooms and U.S. culture more broadly. For example, the religious details of sentimental literary conventions in *Mockingbird* endorse certain ideas about proper religiosity and acceptable frameworks for discussing racial inequality that suppress and exclude other relevant religious and ideological perspectives. Even within the narrative, the character Lula is dismissed for advocating for a Black affinity space, because her perspective goes against the colorblind theological perspective of the moral ingroup represented in the novel. The case of *Huckleberry Finn* illustrates how the moral frameworks of sentimental hermeneutics themselves can promote similar exclusions as seen in the example in which Justin Kaplan

dismissed John Wallace for reading *Huckleberry Finn* incorrectly because Wallace's concerns about the novel's potential harmful effects on Black children did not align with Kaplan's sentimental interpretation of Huck's subversive morality. Such exclusions do not align with the claims to universality, inclusivity, and timelessness that people historically used to promote these novels in terms of their inclusive empathetic outcomes.

This project suggests that sentimental literature and hermeneutics have sometimes diffused Protestant religious norms and values into American classrooms and popular culture by endorsing ostensibly universal moral frameworks for readerly empathy and moral edification. Such an observation writes against secularization narratives in literary studies and public education. Yet this project highlights the religious dimensions and concerns that emerge in sentimental hermeneutics and within the novels not to suggest that religion needs to be absent from public literary education in the United States in order for it to be acceptably secular and inclusive. Instead, I make the case that examining these frameworks, rather than forgetting them or leaving them out, is helpful for understanding how we might best engage them consciously and constructively rather than by default.

This study also builds on other studies of religion and literature such as those by Fessenden, Sorett, and Eichler-Levine to illustrate how literature can function as a source for examining broader trends in American religious history and discourse. One application of this study could be to include these books in an archive of American religious history or as classroom resources for exploring American religion and religious studies. *Huckleberry Finn* could be an excellent resource for investigating dimensions of American secularism and secularization. *Mockingbird* could be a resource for exploring theological battles that emerged around the desegregation of public schools and their legacies in discourses that frame racism

as a moral problem. *Beloved* could offer a literary case study for scholars and students to interrogate definitions of modern religious subjectivity within the field of religious studies, especially those that have marginalized and otherwise contributed to public policies that criminalize ways of being religious that do not align with reductive scholarly definitions.

My analysis is largely critical of sentimental frameworks for readerly empathy, providing examples of how sentimental approaches tend to universalize certain perspectives, ideologies, and ontologies while excluding others. I also note how sentimental hermeneutics often include conventions that rush toward emotional and literary resolution instead of creating spaces for uncertainty about those difficult realities of injustice and trauma as well as the things we may not be able to know about others even in our empathetic encounters with them. If literature matters because it is a potential source of moral and empathetic development for readers, these limitations of sentimental narrative and hermeneutic conventions matter too.

My analysis posits that uncertainty and humility are more available in empathetic imaginative frameworks than sentimental ones. I do not consider empathetic imagination as a straightforward antidote or substitute for the limits of sentimental hermeneutics. Indeed, another study and further analysis might find that this approach to readerly empathy shares some dimensions with sentimentality that I argue against.<sup>627</sup> I read empathetic imagination as Morrison's constructive response to the limits of sentimental hermeneutics. This framework for readerly empathy too might have its limits, but it strikes me as an important framework

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<sup>627</sup> Ann Jurecic's article "Empathy and the Critic" might provide some direction for this work as she explains that suggesting that *Beloved* is "post-sentimental" may ignore the important work the novel does with empathy. While I see the book critiquing and distancing itself from sentimentality I've explored in this project, there may be other dimensions of sentimentality within the tradition or details in *Beloved* that suggest there are more overlaps than the departures I emphasize.

to consider in conversation with the moral and empathetic outcomes people often expect of each of these texts.

At the end of my chapter on *Beloved* I made a case for how empathetic imagination might provide a different model for engaging discussions about characters choices and experiences in a literature classroom. I believe empathetic imagination might be useful in a religious studies classroom too. Indeed, how we think about, describe, and imagine others is a central methodological question for the study of religion. I have made the case the empathetic imagination can subvert modern definitions of acceptable forms of religiosity and expand the religious, ideological, and ontological possibilities of the empathetic morality people often seek when reading literature for the purpose of engaging in empathetic understanding. Empathetic imagination, as a model for readerly empathy, centers the interior life of the imagined other and provides space for their real presence in ways that do not require them to assimilate into our preconceived notions about them. Thinking about presence and haunting with this empathetic imaginative approach may help challenge the universalization of dominant forms of religiosity I have explored throughout this project by expanding “the freedom to be differently religious.”<sup>628</sup> It does so by leaving space for different ontological possibilities that can help students be present with complicated historical, social, and cultural realities that defy categorization or reduction. I believe these qualities make this empathetic framework useful in methodological approaches to the study of religion both academically and pedagogically.

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<sup>628</sup> Pellegrini and Jakobsen, *Love the Sin*, 13.



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