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The White Savior Trope and The Persistence of Whiteness in the films 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and 'Green Book.'

Bachelor's project in Cultural Studies

Supervisor: Dr. Astrid Rasch

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Abstract

Films tend to reflect our society and are a highly influential part of our attitudes toward others. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how these films portray race and racism in their contemporary era. Some scholars argue that whiteness and its superiority are often portrayed through films, especially films that contain the white savior trope. This thesis will analyze how two films, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Green Book*, releases in 1962 and 2018, represent the racial tension of their time and how they contain the white savior trope. Furthermore, this study intends to answer how the white savior trope preserves whiteness as a norm and what are the consequences of this. Utilizing the five tenets of Critical Race Theory, this study will examine how cultural mediators like films portray race relations, racism and preserves whiteness.

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INTRODUCTION

While the use of the term and phenomenon of the "white savior" can be found in popular culture, stories, and essays, the idea and meaning of the term date back centuries.¹ The notion of the white savior was manifested by the poem "White Man's Burden," written by Rudyard Kipling in 1899. The poem subtitled "The United States and the Philippine Islands"² encouraged the American government to colonize the Philippines and its people. The idea behind this poem manifests the notion of imperialism and urges the white race, as the "superior" race, to take responsibility and take up the "burden" to civilize the Filipinos and the other non-white population of the world.³ Even if Kipling's poem contains more explicit racist ideas than the contemporary idea of the white savior, the belief that white people have a moral obligation to save the less unfortunate people of color still exists.

In 2012, Teju Cole, a Nigerian-American author, coined the term "White-Savior Industrial Complex" following *Kony 2012*, an American short documentary about an African warlord who led a rebel group that terrorized several Central African states.⁴ Teju Cole published a series of seven tweets arguing that Kony's 2012 video failed to recognize the pattern of oppression and power behind the inhumanity portrayed in the video and claimed that the "White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validated privilege."⁵ In other words, white savior complexity allows individuals emotional rewards for "saving" the less unfortunate while completely neglecting the policies they have supported that have established and preserved this system of oppression. Teju Cole's tweets were widely shared and got significant media attention, and he is often credited for the term's popularity. Today we find the most widespread use of the concept in films, mainly to criticize movies that contain the white savior trope.⁶

This thesis will focus on a close reading of the films *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Green Book*, two films that are produced in 1962 and 2018, and it will attempt to contextualize them. The choice of these two films was prompted by their content of the white savior trope.

¹ Matthew W. Hughey. *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 9

² "The White Man's Burden": Kipling's Hymn to U.S. Imperialism." HISTORY MATTERS - The U.S. Survey Course on the Web

³ Patrick Brantlinger. "Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" and Its Afterlives." *English Literature in Transition. 1880-1920* 50, no. 2 (2007), 172-173

⁴ Bex Sean & Craps Stef. "Humanitarianism, Testimony, and the White Savior Industrial Complex: What Is the What versus Kony 2012." *Cultural Critique* 92 (2016), 33

⁵ Teju Cole. "The White-Savior Industrial Complex." *Atlantic*, (March 21, 2012)

⁶ "A trope is a recurring cinematic motif that conveys a specific and poignant symbolic meaning" (Hughey. *The White Savior Film*, 8)

Furthermore, these two films are produced in two different eras, the civil rights era and the post-civil rights era. Therefore, this thesis will analyze and attempt to understand how the white savior is presented in their respective time and how the white savior trope preserves whiteness. Critical Race Theory has been applied to various aspects of our society, examining race and racism across cultural modes of expression, like films. This thesis will attempt to answer critical questions like: how do the chosen films contain the white savior trope? And, how does the white savior trope preserve whiteness as a norm, and what are the consequences? Adopting the five tenets of critical theory, this thesis will attempt to understand how racism and whiteness is established and maintained by mediated perceptions of race and how victims of racism are affected.

CHARACTERISTIC OF THE WHITE SAVIOR TROPE

Matthew Hughey characterizes the white savior trope as films that contain a white character intruding on a nonwhite culture that is, or soon will be, under attack. Throughout the film, the white character discovers the negative truth about themselves and their culture.⁷ After interloping the nonwhite community and discovering the negative aspect of the social order, the film's narrative is focused on the white characters' moral commitment to overpower and transform the oppressor and save the people of color from disaster.⁸ However, to save these "helpless" people of color, the white savior character struggles because the white character must make choices and sacrifices that affect their life to protect the nonwhite group.⁹ In addition, the white savior character is placed next to two other characters to make the white savior character more exceptional. The white character is placed next to the 'Bad White' character, often racists and violent, and the 'Natives,' often dysfunctional and in need of saving.¹⁰ The white savior character is also characterized as hardworking and mindful and the "source of social uplift and redemption."¹¹ Another dimension of the white savior film is portraying 'White civility' and 'Black Savagery,' which resembles the colonial era. In this dimension, the black characters are portrayed as savages, emotional, and exotically magical, that must be saved by "the colonialist, religious, and capitalist intervention of a white do-gooder."¹² In some films, the black person is characterized as a noble or moral character that transforms the life of the lost and broken white character. Additionally, the black character is minimized and remains static, while the white character develops.¹³ Furthermore, films with the white savior trope often claim that they are based on true stories or portray highly racialized historical events, like the U.S. Civil Rights Movement.¹⁴

Other scholars like Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon use the term "the messianic white self" when referring to the white savior character. They define them as "the redeemer of the weak, the great leader who saves blacks from slavery or oppression, rescues people of color from poverty and disease," and this messiah character is often an estranged hero,

⁷ Matthew W. Hughey. *The White Savior Film*. (2014), 28

⁸ *Ibid*, 31-34

⁹ *Ibid*, 42

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 48

¹¹ *Ibid*, 52

¹² *Ibid*, 59

¹³ Matthew W. Hughey. "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism: The Odyssey of Magical Negroes and White Saviors." *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 9 (2012), 756

¹⁴ Matthew W. Hughey. *The White Savior Film*, 64

excluded from his/her society and an outsider within his/her society.¹⁵ Kelly J. Madison calls the white savior trope 'the anti-racist-white-hero' and claims that films with this trope always contain or follow a common narrative structure. The four common narrative structure are that; 1) through association with a black person, the white-hero experiences and witnesses some extreme form of racism, 2) because of the experience, the white hero develops an anti-racist consciousness, 3) in the hands of a white racist, the white hero sacrifices something to help the black person, and 4) the white hero suffers the consequences of the sacrifice but somehow triumph in the end.¹⁶

Films with the white savior trope often portray a white person saving a "helpless" person of color. While the white characters in these films are portrayed as active agents, representing movements and making decisions, people of color are rarely shown as initiators of their struggle. Their viewpoint is excluded, and they are stereotyped as helpless. In addition, while the representation of the white characters is developing throughout the films, the person of color often remains secondary and static. Someone coded only to improve the white character.

¹⁵ Hernan Vera and Andrew M. Gordon, *Screen Savors; Hollywood fictions of whiteness* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher INC, 2003), 33

¹⁶ Kelly J. Madison. "Legitimation Crisis and Containment: The 'Anti-Racist-White-Hero' Film." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 16, no. 4 (1999), 405

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This part of the thesis provides historical context, the context in which the chosen films, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Green Book*, was produced. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was produced in 1961, an era characterized by the civil rights movement. *Green Book* was produced in 2018; a contemporary period referred to as a 'post-racial or 'colorblind' era. These are two significant historical eras in terms of racial politics. The first historical era, the Civil Rights Movement era, is estimated to be from 1955 to 1965. During this era, African Americans struggled to obtain their fundamental human right; freedom. The latter era, the post-racial era, is a post-civil rights era, often referred to as a 'colorblind' era; it is a period that questions the presence of racism and the relevance of race in today's society.

Civil Rights Movement era

The laws that gave African Americans their rights and freedom were not well received by the Americans, especially those in the South who experienced their economy declining as they lost free labor. As a backlash, African Americans were victims of Jim Crow laws, which segregated them from whites in parks, schools, transportation, hotels, public places, theaters, etc.¹⁷ These laws, promoted mainly by the Southern States, were entirely institutionalized by the beginning of the 20th century. The Supreme Court ratified this by establishing a "separate but equal" policy in 1896 that lasted until the 1960s.¹⁸

In this context, the 20th century set in motion one of the United States' most important social movements, the Civil Rights Movement. A movement that protested racial segregation and discrimination, and fought for African Americans' rights and opportunities as American citizens.¹⁹ The movement started to eradicate institutionalized racism and segregation and got its foothold during the 1950s, as organizations and freedom movements had important victories. However, this fueled violence and resistance, especially in the southern part of the country. As a result, Southern states used tactics like "separate but equal" policies that still preserved segregation.²⁰ The demand for equality accelerated over the years, and civil rights activists like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, James Farmer, etc., emerged.²¹ However, liberation for blacks in the Deep South still had a long way to go because blacks were still

¹⁷ "Jim Crow Laws." African American Civil Rights Movement.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ "What is Civil Rights Movement?" African American Civil Rights Movement

²⁰ August Meier. "Negro Protest Movements and Organizations." *The Journal of Negro Education* 32, no. 4 (1963), 438

²¹ "What is Civil Rights Movement?" African American Civil Rights Movement

largely segregated. As a result of this, poverty amongst black skyrocketed, and there was a rising tempo of militia groups, like the White Citizens Council, in the South.²² This civil rights movement uprising that lasted until 1965 was the result of several events. After World War II and during the Cold war, America was acquiring a more liberal attitude towards race, primarily because the U.S. was attempting to establish itself as a global power and guide the rest of the world by its democratic values. Therefore, the display of racism towards African Americans threatened these efforts.²³ The persistence of segregation and display of racism towards African Americans threatened the U.S. ideological effort to be seen as the leader of the free world and the image of America as the "land of the free."

Post-racial era

Despite several improvements since the civil rights era, the U.S. inherent racist system has been a powerful force of element in the so-called "post-racial" era. The notion of a "post-racial" era questions whether or not racism still is a vital problem in America.²⁴ Some scholars argue that the election of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 proves America is in a post-racial era and has therefore rushed to declare America as a post-racial society.²⁵ However, with the election of the Republican candidate Donald J. Trump in 2016 and the flourishing of white supremacist rhetoric that followed Trumps' election, post-racial is not an accurate description of the American society. In the years Donald Trump was president of the United States, the racial discourse accelerated, and the racial, religious, cultural, and social divide strengthened among the population.²⁶

The racist racial discourse increased during Trump's era, and the political climate saw an increase in racial sentiment, discrimination, and harassment of minorities. Such increase is seen in the United States justice system, with the growing racially motivated police brutality and mass shootings.²⁷ From summer 2014 into the winter and spring of 2015, as a response to the police murdering unarmed black men like Michael Brown and Freddie Gary, there were

²² August Meier. "Negro Protest Movements and Organizations." (1963), 441

²³ Ibid, 437

²⁴ David A. Hollinger. "The Concept of Post-Racial: How Its Easy Dismissal Obscures Important Questions." *Daedalus* 140, no.1 (2011), 174

²⁵ Jennifer Lee. "A Post-Racial America? Multicultural Identification and the Color Line in the 21st Century." *Nanzan Review of American Studies* 30 (2008), 19

²⁶ Alan Abramowitz & Jennifer McCoy. "United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump's America." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no.1 (2019),137-138

²⁷ Lynne Peoples. "What the data say about police brutality and racial bias—and which reforms might work." *Nature* 583, (2020), 22

mass protests in the United States, led by African Americans and movements like the Black Lives Matter (BLM).²⁸ In 2020, slogans like "I Can't Breathe," "Say Their Names," and "Defund the Police" emerged across the world as a reaction to the murder of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd.²⁹ These murders committed by racist policing spread nationally and internationally. The daily police killing, harassment, and brutalizing, and terrorizing of unarmed African Americans were once again highlighted. The racial injustice in the United States justice system is clear; scholars often mention the mass incarceration of black men. This mass incarceration, the disproportionate rate of police brutality, and harassment of black Americans show that the United States targets African American communities.³⁰

Today, the United States claims that it is a "colorblind" or "post-racial" society, actively referring to racism as something 'in the past,' and utilizes colorblindness as a political tool to further this idea.³¹ However, the mass incarceration and negatively targeting African American communities destabilize the idea of the U.S. as a "colorblind" and "post-racial" country. The ideology of colorblindness is further promoted by social movements like All Lives Matter (ALM), which emerged as an opposition to BLM. All Lives Matter supporters assume that race does not matter and that systemic and structural oppression of black Americans is no longer an issue, therefore, claiming that all lives matter, not *only* black lives.³² In addition, some chant "Blue Lives Matter" and "Not all cops are bad" as a response to the police brutality and those who want to hold the racist structure of the police accountable. The fact that movements like Black Lives Matter have to exist in this supposedly "colorblind" and "post-racial" society is another example that illustrates the continued racism in American society.

Race in Hollywood films

There are a significant number of films made about race relations and films with racial themes, and Hollywood's film industry, as one of the world's most popular sources of entertainment, has throughout centuries portrayed them in various ways. Films made in

²⁸ Taylor, Keenga-Yamahtta. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 2

²⁹ Mary L. Cappelli. "Black Lives Matter: The Emotional and Racial Dynamics of the George Floyd Protest Graffiti." *Advances in Applied Sociology* 9, no.10 (2020), 323

³⁰ Taylor, Keenga-Yamahtta. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*. (2016), 3

³¹ Cappelli. "Black Lives Matter: The Emotional and Racial Dynamics of the George Floyd Protest Graffiti." (2020), 4-5

³² Keon West, et al. "Implicit racism, colour blindness, and narrow definitions of discrimination: Why some White people prefer 'All Lives Matter' to 'Black Lives Matter'". *British Journal of Social Psychology* 45, (2021), 3

Hollywood are often a reflection of the social order of their time.³³ The film's socio-historical context is therefore important to consider. The idea of whiteness, its superiority and normality, Matthew Hughey states, has helped "create a racial order in which nonwhites (particularly blacks) were framed as inferior relative to whiteness."³⁴ Vera and Gordon state that we often learn what we know about people we consider to be "others" through "the moving pictures" that "allow access to private space, scenes that would normally be out of reach of our eyes."³⁵ Therefore, it is problematic that the common trend in representing race and race relations has been one that preserves whiteness and establishes white norms. Hollywood's contemporary portrayal, Harris continues, reflects and maintains popular beliefs about blackness³⁶ as either 'helpless' or 'savage.' The implied content of these descriptions is a way of seeing whiteness as the norm; socially, rationally, traditionally, etc.³⁷ These images that produce and reproduce stereotypes and ideas which tend to affect our behavior toward others³⁸ are problematic because these films often fail to reflect the underlying social structure of power and the social reality.³⁹ Through films that contain the white savior trope, Hollywood's film industry continues to reinforce whiteness as a norm.

³³ Jason Smith. "Between Colorblind and Colorconscious: Contemporary Hollywood Films and Struggles Over Racial Representation." *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 8 (2013), 780

³⁴ Matthew W. Hughey. "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism" (2012), 759

³⁵ Hernan Vera and Andrew M. Gordon. *Screen Saviors*. (2003), 9

³⁶ Keith M. Harris, "Boyz, Boyz, Boyz: New Black Cinema and Black Masculinity," in *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Daniel Bernardi (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 51

³⁷ *Ibid*, 51

³⁸ Hernan Vera and Andrew M. Gordon, *Scree Savior*. (2003), 2

³⁹ Thomas Cirpps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 4

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a salient theory to understand the framework within which these white savior films are produced. Several critical thinkers acknowledge that the term 'race' is socially constructed and is created to capitalize and oppress people of color.

Therefore, utilizing the Critical Race Theory and its five tenets to examine how cultural mediators like films portray race and the institution of racism is prominent for this study.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is an academic school of thought and a framework that examines the display of race and racism across dominant cultures. CRT holds the legal institutions of the United States to be innately racist as they create and maintain economic, political, and social inequalities that mainly benefit the white population of the United States.⁴⁰ The school of critical race theory emerged as a response to the slow progress of racial reforms in the United States after the civil rights era. It was first introduced in the mid-1970s by legal scholars and activists such as Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman.⁴¹

Five Tenets of Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory, comprised of five basic tenets, examines the construction of whiteness. According to Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, these tenets are; (1) the notion of colorblindness, (2) the idea of interest convergence, (3) the social construction of race, (4) different racialization and its consequences, and (5) the unique voice of color. The first tenet emphasizes that racism is difficult to address because it is not acknowledged; this tenet included the notion of colorblindness, which derives from the idea that race is irrelevant to the law and equal opportunity.⁴² It is argued that colorblindness is a political tool for those who benefit from its existence.⁴³ The notion of colorblindness, Delgado and Stefancic state, "can be admirable, as when a governmental decision maker refuses to give in to local prejudices." Still, it can also function as a tool that maintains racist policies and a fabricated sense of neutrality.⁴⁴ This thesis will argue that colorblindness is continuously maintained and displayed by films containing the white savior trope. The second tenet offers a further aspect

⁴⁰ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. *CRITICAL RACE THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION*, 3rd, ed. (New York University Press: New York, 2017), 3

⁴¹ Payne Hiraldo. "The Role of Critical Race Theory in Higher Education." *The Vermont Connection* 31, no. 1 (2010), 53-54

⁴² *Ibid*, 56

⁴³ Jason Smith. "Between Colorblind and Colorconscious" (2013), 781

⁴⁴ Delgado & Stefancic. *CRITICAL RACE THEORY*. (2017), 27

and introduces the idea of interest convergence. As the first tenet addresses the difficulty of acknowledging racism, this tenet argues that white people only support abolishing racism or breakthroughs for blacks to serve their interests.⁴⁵ For instance, black people in America achieved civil rights victories only when equality converges with United States' need to show the world that it was racially tolerant. This tenet can explain why films with the white savior trope are popular, as they seem to appeal to the white majority audience. As they implicitly lay instructions on receiving redemption by helping the 'helpless' people of color,⁴⁶ these films persist in associating whiteness with salvation.

The third component states that 'race' is a socially constructed term coined to disadvantage people of color; this has been the core issue for CRT. It emphasizes that there is no scientific evidence that confirms that there are different races because race is a product of social thought. However, society ignores and manipulates this evidence to categorize people of color.⁴⁷ In the discussion about how films have the power to influence our understanding of race and race relations, the third tenet is relevant because "racism and discrimination are matters of thinking, mental categorization, attitude, and discourse." Because of this fact, films have the power of changing the system of racism by images, words, attitudes, social teachings, etc.⁴⁸ The fourth tenet concerns differential racialization and its consequences. CRT draws attention to "the ways the dominant society racializes different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs."⁴⁹ Films tend to portray stereotypes, racializing minorities in response to shifting time; therefore, this tenet helps look at how these films portrayed people of color in their context and the consequences of these. The fifth and final tenet of critical race theory draws attention to the unique voice of color, called counter-storytelling. Critical race theorist encourages counter-storytelling, as a method of telling the stories of marginalized groups, whose stories are not often told, to challenge the dominant narrative and change racial domination.⁵⁰ Critical thinkers believe that because those with minority status have presumed knowledge of race and racism, and because of their histories and experiences with oppression, they may be able to communicate different perspectives to the master narrative of the whites.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Delgado & Stefancic. *CRITICAL RACE THEORY*. (2017), 41

⁴⁶ Matthew W. Hughey. "Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism." (2012), 751

⁴⁷ Delgado & Stefancic. *CRITICAL RACE THEORY*. (2017), 9

⁴⁸ Ibid, 21

⁴⁹ Ibid, 10

⁵⁰ Hiraldo. "The Role of Critical Race Theory in Higher Education" (2010), 54

⁵¹ Delgado & Stefancic. *CRITICAL RACE THEORY*. (2017), 11

FILM CRITERIA

To approach this study, I have looked at how these two feature films, released over 50 years apart, have the same white savior trope and correlate to the same ideas of race relations. A "feature film" is a term used to describe films produced to mainly be displayed in cinemas, and these films have a running time of at least 90 to 210 minutes.⁵² To decide which films I was going to analyze, I used the Internet Movie Database's (IMDb) list of "Most Popular Feature Films," tagged with keywords "white-savior" and "feature film," released in between the years 1960-2020. As mentioned earlier, the choice of the release range is because this thesis aims to contextualize. This search resulted in 33 films; from this, I chose *Green Book* as it is the most popular and because it is the most recently released film. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was released during the civil rights era and is number seven of the most popular feature films on the list.⁵³ I assume that the more popular films tend to appeal and reach the most audience, and this social reach of these popular films may help draw the conclusion that racism and whiteness are displayed and preserved through popular films.

In addition to the criteria mentioned above, the chosen films had to deal with black-white race relations specifically. This relation had to involve a white main character who aimed to save a black person or group of black people. These films also had to be a success in winning Academy Awards, which helped determine popularity. *To Kill A Mockingbird*, directed by Robert Mulligan, was nominated eight times and won three awards at the 35th Academy Awards. It is also a film adaptation of Harper Lee's famous 1960 novel of the same name.⁵⁴ The film *Green Book*, directed by Peter Farrelly and produced by Jim Burke, received three Academy Awards in 2019 for best picture, best original screenplay, and best supporting actor for Mahershala Ali, who played the pianist Don Shirley.

⁵² Matthew W. Hughey. "Cinethetic Racism: White redemption and Black Stereotypes in "Magical Negro" Films." *Social Problems* 53, no.3 (2009), 551

⁵³ "Sort by Popularity - Most Popular Feature Films tagged with keyword "white-savior." IMDb.

⁵⁴ James Power. "'To Kill a Mockingbird': THR's 1962 Review." *The Hollywood Reporter* (2020)

ANALYSIS

In this part of the thesis, I will do a close reading of the chosen films to look at how the white savior trope is present in these and discuss how the white savior trope is assisting in maintaining the notion of whiteness and its consequences. In the first film, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I will argue that the film can be classified as a white savior film because it contains several characteristics of the white savior trope. However, there are two white savior characters, Scout and Atticus, but Atticus is a failed white savior because he did not save Tom from his faith. In the second film for this analysis, *Green Book*, I argue that although Tony or the film does not display all the characteristic traits of the white savior trope, this film can still be classified as a white savior film. Additionally, I will use some of the tenets from the critical race theory to discuss how the trope contributes to maintaining and establishing the notion of whiteness as a norm.

The white savior trope in To Kill a Mockingbird

To Kill a Mockingbird is a film adapted from the famous 1960 novel by Harper Lee of the same name. The film, set in the early 1930s, happens in the fictional old town of Maycomb, Alabama. The innocent Scout Finch (played by Mary Badham) is a six-year-old who spends much of her summer days with her older brother, Jem, and Dill (neighbor). Scout and Jem's father, Atticus Finch (played by Gregory Peck), is a single father and lawyer. He agrees to defend a black man, Tom Robinson, accused of raping Mayella Ewell, a white woman. The film's events are narrated by the grown Jean Louise "Scout" Finch, looking back on one eventful summer of her childhood. The audience witnesses the violent, racist, and corrupt society of Maycomb through the eyes of young Scout.

The setting of this film is as mentioned in a fictional town in the southern state of the United States. One element in the white savior trope is that the trope often portrays a highly racialized historic event, representing an era when racism and racial injustices heightened. This film's events unfold in the early 1930s. The 1930s often referred to as the Great Depression, is an era that was an economic downturn for all Americans but especially African Americans. By 1932, almost half of black Americans were out of work, many white Americans called for firing them, and racial violence prevailed, especially in the South.⁵⁵ Throughout the film, racial slurs are uttered, and we witness the racial injustice of Maycomb.

⁵⁵ "Race Relations in the 1930s and 1940s: Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945: U.S. History Primary Source Timeline: Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress: Library of Congress." The Library of Congress.

A prominent example that shows the racist society of Maycomb is the fact that Tom was indicted by an all-white jury, despite the evidence showing otherwise. In his closing argument at the trial, Atticus acknowledges and illustrates the racial and social injustice of the era by claiming that, Mayella is a "victim of cruel poverty and ignorance." Still, she is not Tom's rape victim because she is lying to get rid of her guilt for trying to sleep with a black man;

"Now I say "guilt," gentlemen, because it was guilt that motivated her. She's committed no crime. She has merely broken a rigid and time-honored code of our society, a code so severe that whoever breaks it is hounded from our midst as unfit to live with."⁵⁶

"Now what did she do? She tempted a negro. She was white, and she tempted a negro. She did something that in our society is unspeakable: she kissed a black man."⁵⁷

The way Atticus describes the era's society illustrates that it was a time marked by prejudice, where a white person could not even live with the guilt of being attracted to a black man.

Atticus Finch is a character who shows an outstanding example of an anti-racist white male; he is a lawyer that embodies the messianic white self and who believes in justice and the justice system. Atticus's character represents morality and justice; he is committed to racial equality, he is wise, empathetic, courageous, and selfless. One of his most selfless acts is his decision to selflessly defend Tom Robinson in front of the racist community of Maycomb, despite knowing the consequences of his actions. Because of this act of selflessness, Atticus can be characterized as the 'white messianic self,' he decides to take up the battle against racism, portraying him as hardworking and mindful, and as the "source of social uplift and redemption." He believes that it is his moral obligation to overpower the racist laws. One passage that illustrates Atticus's courageousness is when Scout asks him why he is defending Tom when he should not be, and Atticus answers that he could have never been proud of himself if he hesitated;

"If I didn't, I couldn't hold up my head in town. I couldn't represent this county in the legislature, I couldn't even tell you or Jem not to do something again."⁵⁸

Atticus tells Scout that he could not have lived with himself or be a good father if he did not set exemplary standards. Scout, in some sense, is also characterized as courageous. Before the scene where Atticus tells her his reasons for defending Tom, she gets into a fight with Cecil Jacobs on the school ground. Cecil provokes her by saying that her daddy defends 'niggers.'

⁵⁶ "To Kill a Mockingbird," YouTube Filmer, 01:34:19 – 01:34:45

⁵⁷ Ibid, 01:35:20 – 01:35:33

⁵⁸ Ibid, 00:53:08 – 00:53:19

However, too young to understand the racial slur, she is insulted by the accusation and fights to protect her father's honor.⁵⁹

Moreover, there is evidence of character development for the white savior character to an anti-racist through association with a black character, and this development is seen in Scout. Scout's character develops an anti-racist consciousness through her indirect association with Tom. Before Tom's incident, Scout was unaware of the town's racial dynamics, and she is the white savior character that portrays innocence. In one of the film's climax moments, Scout accidentally and innocently turns away the lynch mob who arrived to kill Tom, and she does so by greeting her neighbors and connecting with them.⁶⁰ Children, in general, are often a symbol of innocence, and when we look at children, we look at the possibility of growth. Therefore, the focus on Scout's youthful character suggests that the development from innocence to consciousness is a possibility for other whites. In some sense, one can also argue that the notion of 'colorblindness' is manifested through Scout, as she is unaware of the racial injustice of her society. By displaying colorblindness through a child's perspective, the white savior trope is manifesting and preserving the cultural notion that whiteness is associated with innocence and goodness.

In contrast, Atticus has always had an anti-racist consciousness; this is not character development for him as it is for Scout. The portrayal of Atticus is not someone unaware of racial prejudice. He knows of the racist justice system and the hatred of his society; therefore, he is not colorblind. Atticus's anti-racist consciousness did not develop after interacting with Tom because Atticus decided to defend Tom before meeting him and did not assume he was guilty because he was black. Atticus also acknowledges the prejudice of his community when he encourages the white jury, during the trial, not to be prejudiced like the other witnesses:

"In the cynical confidence that their testimony would not be doubted; confident that you gentlemen would go along with them on the assumption, the evil assumption, that all negroes lie; all negroes are basically immoral beings; all negro men are not to be trusted around our women, an assumption that one associate with minds of their caliber, and which is in itself, gentlemen, a lie -- which I do not need to point out to you."⁶¹

In this idealized speech, Atticus encourages the jurors to serve justice motivated by reason rather than passion, enabling them to dismiss the stereotypes. Anticipating that their judgment

⁵⁹ "To Kill a Mockingbird," YouTube Filmer, 00:51:30 – 00:52:15

⁶⁰ Ibid, 01:04:34 – 1:05:31

⁶¹ Ibid, 01:36:09 – 1:36:58

would treat Tom equally regardless of race or social circumstance, Atticus firmly believes that equality and anti-racism are essential to justice. However, the witnesses and Maycomb's residents ignore this fact and assume Tom is guilty because he is black, because of their caliber.

Another characteristic of the white savior trope, in which the fourth tenet is relevant, is the contrast between Atticus, Tom, and Mr. Ewell. Making Atticus's character more noticeable as a white Messiah, his difference with Mr. Ewell and Tom is highlighted. Mr. Ewell embodies the racist and violent 'Bad White.' The only similarities Atticus and Mr. Ewell share are that they are widowers with daughters; beyond this, Atticus is a well-educated lawyer and a good father, while Mr. Ewell is a working-class, ignorant, abusive father and embodies the antagonistic redneck. On the other hand, Tom Robinson is the 'helpless' black person who suffers the consequences of the era's stereotypes. These two characters are needed to glorify Atticus as the white messianic hero. Asserting the need for a white savior character, films with the white savior trope tell the audience what to expect from a white character and a black character. The problem with this is that the white savior trope is framing racism as explicit racial violence and implicitly to ignorance related to the caliber of the time, such as a drunk and uneducated white person. While for black people, their experience is marginalized, and their characteristic is stereotyped as 'powerless.' In contrast, the portrayal of Atticus as the well-educated lawyer and courageous furthers the notion of whiteness as good, civilized, just and brave, while silently portraying the structural power of whiteness. In addition, Atticus's character as a father and as someone older than Tom assists in marking whiteness as advanced, capable, and developed.

Furthermore, Atticus embodies several characteristics of a white messianic self, and the film contains several attributes of the white savior trope. An anti-racist white male is fighting the racist justice system to save a 'helpless' black man, and by doing so, he faces painful consequences conducted by his society. Two scenes that exemplify this are when Mr. Ewell, Mayella's father, calls Atticus "niggerlover,"⁶² and when Mr. Ewell spits on Atticus's face outside Tom's house after the trial.⁶³ However, one of the most severe repercussions Atticus experiences for his actions as the redeemer is towards the film's ending when Mr. Ewell tries to kill Jem and Scout.⁶⁴ However, he never questions or complains about his decision and maintains a belief in the justice system, personifying a perfect Messiah role.

⁶² "To Kill a Mockingbird," YouTube Filmer, 00:47:22

⁶³ Ibid, 01:50:44

⁶⁴ Ibid, 01:55:56

Scout, as the white savior character, is also faced with challenges due to her father's actions. The school ground scene, where Scout fights to defend Atticus's honor, shows Scout being excluded from her schoolmates as a consequence. That the white savior characters are facing the consequences for their action to be anti-racist suggests that white people also experience consequences and therefore justify their role in the fight for equality for black people.

We have seen that Atticus and Scout contain the apparent characteristic of a white savior; however, Atticus is a failed white savior. Although Atticus is honorable, noble, and benevolent, he is powerless because he fails to save Tom from being indicted and killed; this suggests Atticus's failure as a savior. Although the black community applauds him for his integrity and views him as a hero, he did not save Tom Robinson and is not a savior; he is instead a white anti-racist hero. The jail scene when the lynch mob came to kill Tom is when we witness Scout as the white savior character. In this tense scene, Scout, Dill, and Jem see the mob's arrival and storm to the middle of the confrontation. By greeting her neighbors and talking to them, Scout connects with them, dismantles a violent situation that could have unfolded, and saves Tom. The use of a white character to save a black person serves to reproduce the idea that racism can be solved by an individual, ignoring the structural power of racism.

The film is told from the perspective of a white savior. The central focus of the story is on the personal growth of Scout from 'colorblind' (read innocence) into an anti-racist white savior; this is another detail that characterizes this movie as a white savior film. Although this film's events unfold around the attempt to save Tom from a false accusation, Tom's perspective and family are almost entirely excluded. We do not get to see Tom's face until his trial, an hour into the film.⁶⁵ The only time we get to hear his side of the story, which should have been in focus, is when Atticus asks him about it in the trial; he only speaks when addressed. However, the rest of the black people are only shown in their appreciation for Atticus. For instance, the black people are seen at the end of the trial when they stood up to show their gratitude for Atticus.⁶⁶ Focusing mainly on the white character's point of view and primarily displaying the white character's experience and struggle in a film about racism is problematic. The fifth tenet of critical race theory encourages counter-storytelling, giving voice to marginalized groups. People of color have presumed knowledge of racism because they are often the target of it. Therefore, it should have been told from Tom's perspective or his wife's. This film fails to do so. Not portraying people of color as active agents of social

⁶⁵ "To Kill a Mockingbird," YouTube Filmer, 01:09:03

⁶⁶ Ibid, 01:42:57 – 01:43:49

change can lead to the assumption that people of color are powerless. These films minimize and decenter the experience of people of color while highlighting white people's struggle against white racism, and with that, highlighting white heroism.

In conclusion, this film contains several characteristics of the white savior trope. The film is set in the 1930s when racial violence, like lynching, was intense, portraying a highly racialized period characteristic of the white savior trope. In addition, both Atticus and Scout, the two main characters, have experienced consequences for their actions to be anti-racist, and they are both portrayed as courageous. However, it is Scout's character that develops the anti-racist consciousness, and it is Scout that is the savior. Although Atticus embodies several characteristics of the white savior, he fails as a savior when Tom is indicted. Therefore, I suggest referring to Atticus as a white anti-racist hero.

In addition, the white savior trope in this film has proven to be problematic in portraying the struggle of black people. The perspective in which the story is told is through a white girl's perspective, and the focus of the story is a white man and his child, not Tom Robinson's racist experience as a black man. By focusing the narrative on the two white characters, the film fails to represent the unique voice of color. It also fails to challenge the dominant narrative that black people are 'helpless,' and attributes to the cultural conception of whiteness as 'innocence' and 'good.' In addition, the film tends to frame racism as explicit racial violence; this problematic because implicit racism is also an element. The perspective in which the story is told is through a white girl's perspective, and the focus of the story is a white man and his child, not Tom Robinson's racist experience as a black man. There is a subtle indication of the white character's heroism and the consequences of the heroic acts that suggest whites also experience pain and have done something to assist blacks.

The white savior trope in *Green Book*

The film *Green Book* is based on actual series of guidebooks, "The Negro Motorist Green Book" or "The Negro Traveler's Green Book," published annually between 1936 and 1966, by Victor Hugo Green. It was a travel guide for African Americans who wanted to travel through the segregated Jim Crow South and the rest of the country, and it documented safe restaurants, hotels, gas stations, etc.⁶⁷ The film is set in 1962 and deals with an Italian-American club doorman, Tony "Lip" Vallelonga (played by Viggo Mortensen). Tony loses his job and gets hired as a chauffeur by an African American classical pianist Dr. Don Shirley (played by Mahershala Ali). Although initially prejudice against African Americans and hesitant to work for a black man, Tony accepts the job as Shirley's chauffeur. With the guidebook for safe restaurants and hotels for black people, "The Negro Motorist Green Book," their journey to the deep South during the Jim Crow era starts. Their eight-week road trip, which comprises the whole film, demonstrates a strange combination of two from different worlds; Tony is Italian-American and from a working-class. Don is a wealthy African-American pianist. These two also have different personality traits; Tony is hard-nosed and clumsy, and Don Shirley is well-educated and stuck-up. However, throughout the film, as they spent more time together, they learn to know and respect each other and eventually form a close friendship. Throughout the film, the duo encounters several racist actions, and as Tony witnesses these injustices, he begins to connect more with Shirley. The film concludes with Tony making it home to his family in the Bronx and the rest of his family welcoming Shirley to spent Christmas Eve with them.

Although the film was produced in 2018, the film's setting takes us back decades to 1962. The 1960s were characterized as a highly racialized era. It was an era when Jim Crow laws prevailed and set in motion the Civil Rights Movement. During this era, African-Americans demonstrated and fought against segregation and discrimination. This portrayal of a highly racialized historic event is the first trait that portrays this film as a white savior film. The first encounter with a racist tone in this film is already at the beginning. It comes to the surface when Tony comes into his living room finding a group of Italian men, family members watching a game. When Tony asks what they are doing in his house, one of the men answers that they are there to ensure that his wife, Dolores, is safe and points to the two black

⁶⁷ James I. Deutsch. "Green Book". *Journal of American History* 106, no.3 (2019), 851

men fixing the sink.⁶⁸ The older man, Dolores's father, uses an offensive Italian racial slur, 'moolinyan,' which means black person,⁶⁹ to describe the black workers.

The central character, Tony Lip, is also initially portrayed as a racist. His prejudice first comes to the surface in the same scene described above, when he notices Dolores giving the black workers glass of lemonade. After Dolores walks the black workers out, Tony throws away the glasses in the trash.⁷⁰ It can be argued that the notion of white innocence is instead presented through his wife when she later picks up the glasses from the garbage in disbelief. Tony's racist attitude is further seen when Don offers him the job as his chauffeur. However, throughout his interview, and the film, we witness that Tony is reluctant to work for a black man as he repeatedly asserted that he was only going to be Don's chauffeur and nothing else, displaying his racist attitudes. For instance, Tony's reluctance to work for a black man is seen when Don brings out his baggage and places it beside the open trunk. Tony is expected to put them in; however, Tony expects Amit, Don's butler, to pick it up. Tony stands there, crossing his arms and looking at the baggage like he had no intention of picking it up.⁷¹ Another that illustrates Tony's prejudice was when he stopped the car to go urinate, he came back to get his wallet,⁷² thinking Don would steal from his wallet. The mentioned scenes illustrate the prejudice black Americans faced in the era, and from the mentioned scenes, it is clear that Tony does not portray an innocent white savior; he is a bigot.

Tony is the white savior character that develops an anti-racist consciousness through his association with Don. As the duo drives through the racist towns of the South, they get more acquainted, and Tony becomes more emotionally invested in Don's life. Tony's most remarkable conversion from a racist to an anti-racist is displayed in the film's ending scenes when Don shows up at the door, and Tony invites him in to meet the rest of the family. Another scene that exemplifies Tony's development to an anti-racist is at the Christmas dinner table before Don shows up. When one of the family members refers to Don using offensive language and asks Tony how the trip was, Tony, shocking the family, tells him not to call Don words.⁷³ The entire film revolves around Tony's character development from racist to an anti-racist white savior; it is the film's central focus. Although this film does not initially portray Tony as innocent of racial prejudice, which is standard for the white savior trope, the

⁶⁸ "Green Book," YouTube Filmer, 00:06:48 – 00:06:54

⁶⁹ "Moolinyan." Oxford Reference.

⁷⁰ "Green Book," YouTube Filmer, 00:08:00 – 00:08:07

⁷¹ Ibid, 00:23:45

⁷² Ibid, 00:32:30 – 00:32:45

⁷³ Ibid, 01:54:47 – 1:54:55

development to anti-racist is a white savior trope characteristic. The twist in Tony's character development subtly provides an instruction to the white audience, implying that all you need to do to become anti-racist is to get acquainted with another person of color. In addition, this film portrays the idea that because a white person has a black friend or acquaintance, it erases their racism or their role in preserving the racist system.

Like the characteristic of the white savior trope, Tony witnesses some extreme form of racism through his association with Don. Tony, like Don, is also ridiculed in the South. In one scene, when they were driving through heavy rain, they are pulled over by two police officers. One of the officers asks Tony why he is driving Don, and Tony answers, "he's my boss." The officer tells Tony that it is prohibited to be out at night because it is a 'sundown town' and orders the other officer to pull Don out of the car. After looking at Tony's last name, the cop claims that Tony as an Italian is "half a nigger", which is why he is driving Don. When faced with a racial slur directed at him, Tony punches the officer.⁷⁴ The mentioned scene also illustrates the moment Tony identifies and recognizes Don's reality because, as a black man, Don is used to racial slurs launched at him. However, later in the film, Tony excuses his choice to resort to violence by insinuating that he only hit the officer because Don was forced to stand out in the rain.⁷⁵

Another white savior trope characteristic presented in this film is the need to make Tony's character a white redeemer more exceptional or acceptable. Even though initially racist, Tony's character is placed next to other 'Bad White' people who often display explicit or implicit racism. For instance, at the bar scene, the group of white men that attacked Don and beat him up⁷⁶ are the racist and violent white people who make Tony's subtle racism seem "not as bad." While another 'Bad White' character is portrayed by the host of the North Carolina concert. In this scene, Don is invited to hold a concert for a dinner party, and during his break, Don tries to enter the mansion's bathroom; the host denies him this and points Don to 'the colored only' bathrooms.⁷⁷ So here, we have several 'Bad White' characters that glorify Tony's character as the anti-racist hero. As for the 'Native' who is characterized as dysfunctional and needs saving, Don's character does not entirely fit into this image.

Don is not portrayed as 'savage' and 'helpless.' On the contrary, Don is described as pretentious, well-educated, and sophisticated African American. However, according to the

⁷⁴ "Green Book," YouTube Filmer, 01:21:15 – 01:22:45

⁷⁵ Ibid, 01:27:13

⁷⁶ Ibid, 00:54:35

⁷⁷ Ibid, 01:01:55 – 01:02:10

white savior trope's features, these characteristics are only there to transform the lives of the lost and broken white character. Don's character in this film is a prop that enhances and transforms Tony's character; this is seen in scenes where Don is continuously correcting Tony's pronunciation and offers to teach him some things. In one scene, Don tells Tony, "It is my feeling that your dictation, however charming it may be in the tri-state area, could use some finessing."⁷⁸ Don is also seen helping Tony write love letters to Dolores,⁷⁹ and Don often encourages Tony to do the right things; he encourages him to quit gambling and to stop stealing from roadside stores. In addition, the film's white savior trope seems to indicate that Don is the black character needed to transform Tony from a racist to an anti-racist hero. Don assists Tony to realize that he can be a better person, for others and for his family, and to be more mature.

Nevertheless, it can also be argued that Tony is teaching Don something about popular black music and fried chicken, things Don seems to not know much about. During one of their drives, Don asks Tony who is playing on the radio, as he does not know who any of the black artists are, to which Tony answers, "These are your people."⁸⁰ Similarly, it is Tony who introduces Don to fried chicken. When Don claimed he has never tasted fried chicken, Tony shockingly answers, "You people love fried chicken with grits and collard green."⁸¹ The notion of the third tenet, different racialization and its consequences, is prominent in this film. As observed in the scenes with fried chicken and black music, Don does not personify the stereotype about black people, the stereotypes that Tony is trying to inflict on him. Because of these facts, Tony, later in the film, goes as far as claiming that he is blacker than Don. Through Tony's gaze, the white savior trope is simplifying the understanding of blackness to music and fried chicken. The consequence of this is the simplification that all black people are the same. Another scene shows Don attacking Tony for punching the officer because he called him "half a nigger," racial slurs that Don has endured his whole life. This sets off Tony, and he tells Don how hard his life is, "I live in the streets, you sit on a throne. So yeah, my world is way blacker than yours."⁸² By claiming that he is blacker than Don because he knows more about black culture and because he is slightly poorer minimizes the experience and the institutionalized structure of racism. In addition, Tony's reaction resembles the notion of colorblindness. When Don is telling Tony about his experience with racial slurs, Tony

⁷⁸ "Green Book," YouTube Filmer, 00:34:08 – 00:34:15

⁷⁹ Ibid, 01:04:45

⁸⁰ Ibid, 00:41:31 – 00:41:38

⁸¹ Ibid, 00:49:01 – 00:49:06

⁸² Ibid, 01:27:18 – 01:28:10

dismisses this and claim that he has it worse because he is less fortunate, and subtly implying that it has nothing to do with his blackness. Those who hold a colorblind ideology often believe that the problem is not with race and racism but with how hard you work or what kind of person you are. This scene is furthering that idea.

Tony, although not a pure Messiah character, does save Don on several occasions. Even though it is his job, every time Shirley finds himself in dangerous situations, Tony saves him. Tony saves Don from the racist town people, the racist rich people, and racist police officers. But Tony also saves Don from himself. As Don continually refuses to accept the racist codes and tradition of the era, he endangers himself several times. Two scenes exemplify this. The first is when Don encounters a group of white men in the bar. Despite knowing it is dangerous, Don still goes to the bar and gets beat up by the white men, and Tony had to come to save him. When they arrive outside the hotel, Tony confronts Don about leaving the hotel, to which Don answers, "Does geography matter? If I was at a bar in your neighborhood, would the conversation be any different?"⁸³ We also learn that Don knew touring the South meant that he would be exposed to racism and could have played anywhere in the country and make much more money. However, he chose the South, and although an explanation is not provided, the implication is that Don wanted to change the stigma of white people towards people of color through his talent.⁸⁴ Consequently, Tony is hired to protect Don from himself and the racist people around him.

Character development only for the white character is a characteristic of the white savior trope, which is observed in this film. We do not learn much about Don's family or his life before meeting Tony, and we only gain some information about Don when Tony is present. In contrast, we meet Tony's families and friends; the first twenty minutes or so of the film is about Tony and his situation. Don's character remains static and is minimized because he only speaks when spoken to, and we only catch a glimpse of him when Tony is present. In addition, it is evident throughout the film that Don is struggling with his identity and as a black man who white or black people do not accept.⁸⁵ However, the identity crisis and Don's struggle are not in focus, and we only learn this through Tony's perspective. The fifth tenet of critical race theory suggests that people of color should voice their experience with racism because they have presumed knowledge as victims of this notion. By mainly focusing on the white character and his development, this film fails to present the unique voice of color. This

⁸³"Green Book," YouTube Filmer,00:54:40 – 00:56:50

⁸⁴ Ibid, 01:03:56 – 01:04:15

⁸⁵ Ibid, 01:28:30 – 01:29:00

film fails to focus on Don's perspective and Don's experience with racism, therefore failing to challenge the dominant perspective. Additionally, this a film about race and racism in America, told by white directors from a white man's perspective. This furthers the dominant perspective of racism, minimizing it to individual acts and suggesting that racism is a sign of immaturity.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the film is based on actual series of guidebooks, called "The Negro Motorist Green Book," an important guidebook that contained safe motels and restaurants for African Americans. However, this book is barely mentioned in the film. Therefore, I argue that producing a film about racism and telling it through a bigot white man's perspective seems like a tactic that liberates white individuals from their roles in maintaining the institution of racism.

As for the rest of the characteristics of the white savior character, Tony lacks several of them to characterize him as the perfect white savior character. For instance, Tony experience extreme racism, but he does not sacrifice something to help Don. However, his character and relationship with Don, as displayed in the film's ending scenes, triumphs. Additionally, Tony does not feel a moral obligation or commitment to drive Don and act as his bodyguard through the deep Jim Crow South; he is simply doing it because he is getting paid. Nevertheless, as illustrated throughout this analysis, Tony does contain some white savior traits, like character development to an anti-racist consciousness and his experience with extreme racism through association with Don. At the same time, the film's white savior trope is prominent with several characteristics. Such as the experience of racism being told through a white character, the static character of Don, Don as a character that assists Tony's character to an anti-racist, and the film's portrayal of the civil rights era.

DISCUSSION

Films that deal with race and race relations have historically provided the audience an instruction on how to interact with others, how whites can interact with people of color, and vice versa. They also play a significant role in shaping and reinforcing cultural beliefs and attitudes about race. Therefore, it is important to examine them through critical lenses. Films are also a reflection of the social order of their time and play an important role in shaping our thoughts about others. It is, therefore, important to contextualize the film's social and historical context. Through the tenets of critical race theory, we can examine race and racism across cultural modes of expression, like films. Adopting the five tenets to review films can help understand how systemic racism is established and maintained by a culturally mediated perception of race and how victims of racism are affected. Applying critical race theory to the two chosen films has also so far illustrated that inequities are often firmly ingrained in the discourse of films; therefore, films play an influential role in disrupting racism.

The first tenet of critical race theory, the notion of colorblindness, is established through central characters in these films, as observed in the analysis. The socio-historical context of the films is prominent here. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a film produced in the 1960s, during the civil rights era. However, the film's setting is dated back to the 1930s. Although both eras are highly racialized, the white savior trope purposely portrays a different period when African Americans had less freedom and rights than they had during the civil rights era. By portraying a different era of racial violence and injustice than their contemporary, the films maintain the notion of colorblindness. The persistence of this colorblind notion in these films again leads to minimizing racism as something that happened 'way back then,' implicitly excuses their racist presence and fails to acknowledge the systemic racism of their era.

The same can be argued for the film *Green Book*; it is set in 1962 but is produced in the post-racial era. Today, many believe that the U.S. is in a colorblind era, and because of this belief, many are resilient to the existence of racism and treats the issue as something in the past. By revising the civil rights era, the white savior trope in this film is furthering this idea. What has also led the United States to see itself as a colorblind country is also shown in the films' portrayal of highly racialized eras, characterizing as explicitly violent and portraying racism as geographically restricted to the South. In these films, the racist events and practices are illustrated explicitly, like Tom being threatened by a lynch mob and Don getting beat up by a group of white men. However, today racism has taken a more implicit form, making it easier to claim colorblindness and deny racism's existence. Moreover, it can

also be argued that colorblind ideology further contributes to preserving whiteness and establishes white norms. For instance, by characterizing Scout's character as colorblind, whiteness is reestablished as innocence and good, and by portraying Tony as a redeemer, it associates redemption with whiteness.

Furthermore, the need to establish and maintain whiteness can be seen through the lens of interest convergence. As mentioned above, films tend to shape our thoughts and realities and provide us with information about important issues and historical events. The white savior trope films we have observed in this study have to some degree, a happy ending, in which the white savior characters triumph at the end. However, this is a problematic narrative in films about race and racism. By adding happy endings, the films applaud and congratulate the white saviors and the white audience for just being aware of and dismantling racism. This element serves the interest of the white audience because these films lay instruction on how to receive redemption by abolishing racism for black people and feeling good about it. The white savior trope also serves the interest of whites because the portrayal of white in a positive light is a reaction to the black movement; they aimed to get a positive response for their fight along with black Americans. By doing this, however, the films downplay racism as prejudice and base it on ignorance, overlooking the reality of systemic racism. These films do not tend to make people aware of systemic racism; instead, they reduce racism to individual prejudice and ignorance.

In addition, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was produced in an era when the U.S. was reframing itself as a racially tolerant state. So, one can argue that by using a white savior trope, it is implied and established that whites have done their part to help black Americans by associating whiteness with salvation. The same argument can be applied to *Green Book's* historical context, as it was produced in the political climate of increased racial sentiment, discrimination, and harassment of minorities. Only portraying the stories that characterize whites as the good, sympathetic, and honorable defenders of African Americans only serves the interest of whiteness. The white savior trope becomes a trope about letting white people off the hook for their roles in sustaining institutional racism while completely reducing the notion of racism to violence, portraying it as a sign of ignorance, and restricting it to the southern racist stereotypes. Although these films imply and attempt to eradicate and expose racism, they are maintaining whiteness as a norm and ignoring the institution of racism.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the films *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Green Book* as two films that contain the white savior trope and continuously establish the notion of whiteness as a norm. The film industry's portrayal of people of color and whiteness is important to study because films as a cultural mediator can influence individuals and society to be anti-racist and recognize the construction of whiteness as well, and not just portray it as the norm. As the third tenet establishes, racism is a matter of mental categorization, attitudes and is a discourse. Therefore, films have the power of changing the system of racism through images, words, attitudes, social teachings, etc. On the contrary, these films fail to do so because they portray whiteness as a norm. Instead of making people aware of their contemporary race relations, these films reduce racism to individual prejudice and ignorance. The white savior trope is a way to preserve whiteness. According to the aforementioned studies, this is to please the white audience, reaffirm their sense of heroism, and associate whiteness with salvation.

SUGGESTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study used Critical Race Theory to view how the white savior trope in the two chosen films portrays whiteness as the norm and associate it with salvation. Future research could examine whether these films that purport to expose and eradicate racism really purport racism to some degree. In addition, as these films tend to lay instruction for white people on how to receive redemption, future research needs to examine the emotional response of these white savior films. As this study examined the white savior trope, further research could also look at savior tropes that do not involve white saviors and how or if these preserve whiteness. Finally, this thesis analyzed the film *Green Book*, which dealt with two characters, one Italian-American and one African American, but this study only looked at how racial stereotypes were reinforced to the African-American character. Future studies may examine the relationship between these two ethnicities and how the film industry has led to amplifying racial stereotypes of other groups.

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