White and Black: Norman Rockwell, Childhood Innocence & the Reality of the U.S. South in the Civil Rights Era

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G.L. Lebon of New Orleans vehemently expressed his opinions to a national publication in a letter dated January 6th, 1964, in care of *Look* magazine. He wrote, "THERE CAN BE, AND THERE WILL BE NO COMPROMISE WITH THE VICIOUS CRIME OF RACE MIXING AND INTEGRATION. THE WAR HAS JUST BEGUN!" Lebon's letter was addressed to Norman Rockwell, the popular American illustrator.[1] It was a Rockwell painting, published as a centerfold in *Look* magazine that elicited such a fervent response. Unlike Rockwell's customary illustration of the American ideal, the painting in question had political undertones, which was radically different from Rockwell's usual work.[2] This paper will therefore provide a study of Rockwell's painting in its historical and social context, which permitted and ultimately elicited such an impassioned response towards an iconographic painter.

Through a close examination of Rockwell's 1964 painting *The Problem We All Live With*, this paper argues that by suggesting an alternative, controversial reality, Rockwell complicated his customary illustration of the ideal. Instead of depicting the ideal, the illustration uncovers the reality of Black childhood in the Southern United States during the 1950s and 60s. Rockwell's painting intended to shock the middle class, who had come to trust and accept his views as truth, into reconsidering segregation. Rockwell's message becomes clear by studying his depiction of the young girl and the US Marshalls within the painting, as well as the elements of illustration employed. By placing the audience in the position of the mob or spectator contributing to or witnessing the racist and evil acts, Rockwell suggests that the White middle-class viewer, as a participant, is a part of the problem. He hoped his painting would force his audience to recognize the plight of the African American child and take action to save their

[1] G.L. Lebon letter to Norman Rockwell, January 6 1964, from Norman Rockwell Museum Archives, 30407. http://collections.nrm.org/images/full/derivatives/studio%20collection/correspondence/business/civil_rights/st1976.20029.012.jg (accessed January 29, 2012).

[2] Norman Rockwell, "The Problem We All Live With, 1964," in *Norman Rockwell, Behind the Camera,* by Ron Schick and John Rockwell, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 106-107.

innocence. To demonstrate this, as well as the historical significance of the painting more generally, this paper will examine Rockwell and who he was as a painter before turning to a close examination of the painting, its context and its intended message. It will then return to the few letters we have, including the above letter from G.L. Lebon, to discuss how the painting was received and if the elicited reactions match the painting's intended purpose.

Normal Rockwell was an American painter and storyteller, who employed narrative imagery to appeal to human emotions. Rockwell was famous for depicting the innocence of the American lifestyle, child and family. Coined the "kid with the camera eye," Rockwell captured the common moments of everyday experiences, while also depicting the central narrative of the American ideal.[3] Beginning his career as an editor for the Boy Scouts of America's monthly magazine, *Boys Life,* Rockwell established his position as a believer in the American dream and the innocence of the American child.[4] Therefore, Rockwell's weekly contributions to *The Saturday Evening Post* for four decades secured his position as an admired and trusted illustrator.[5] The *Post* stated that their mission was "to invent an American mythology that would touch and influence its readers" and Rockwell's illustrations worked to do just that.[6] As a result, Rockwell was closely associated with the perception of the American ideal as a reflection of reality. Therefore, his illustrations and his accepted vision of American culture readily entered middle class homes via magazine publications as well as framed reproductions. The *Post* was the most widely distributed publication in the United States and remained so throughout the 1950s, as reading the *Post* was considered a vital part of participating in the American experience.[7] Moreover, in 1945 *The New Yorker* reported that statisticians estimated the Boy Scout calendars, illustrated by Rockwell, received one billion, six hundred million views on any given day.[8] As a result, Rockwell's perception of childhood was popularized through his illustrations and was understood to reflect the middle class and the ideal way they perceived themselves. Therefore, Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With,* was not only controversial due to its subject matter, but also due to the fact that it was Rockwell's first painting to significantly diverge from the popular image he had illustrated for several decades.

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[3] Ron Schick, and John Rockwell, *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 9.
[4] Schick, 16.
[5] Schick, 17.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Anne Knutson, "The Saturday Evening Post," in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People,* ed. Maureen Hart Hennessey and Anne Knutson (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1999), 144.
[8] Richard Halpern, *Norman Rockwell: The Underside of Innocence*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), ix.

In the painting, *The Problem We All Live With*, Rockwell's goal was to persuade his audience to recognize the complexities of childhood and society. Rockwell transitioned from portraying optimistic scenes of the American middle class to exposing the oppression and prejudice experienced by the Black community.[9] In highlighting these issues, Rockwell specifically illustrated the child often forgotten or eliminated by the middle class, including himself. By publishing a painting with a Black child as the subject, Rockwell hoped that if he became aware of the situation in the South, his audience would be forced to take notice as well. Moreover, Rockwell's objective was to influence the middle class response by constructing a narrative that highlighted the innocence of the child and the stages of childhood. By publishing his painting in *Look* magazine, Rockwell asked his audience to do just that – to take notice and *look* at the innocence of the Black child.[10] In doing so, Rockwell hoped to persuade his audience to discover the injustice that condemned Black children. Many followers were curious about Rockwell's abrupt departure from the *Post* and his subsequent move to *Look* magazine, which was revealed to be a result of *Look's* offer to appoint Rockwell as a "specialist in current affairs," fulfilling his desire to illustrate paintings with political messages.[11] Rockwell stated that *Look* allowed him to "paint the BIG picture, something serious and colossal which [would] change the world!"[12] Due to the curiosity that surrounded his transition, Rockwell was aware that his painting would be viewed by the masses and he therefore used the publicity to make a significant statement. Accepted as a representative of the middle class, White child's innocence, Rockwell intended to utilize his authority on the subject to attach the concept of innocence to Black children as well. In a period when the middle class was consumed by consumerism, Rockwell hoped his audience would recognize how they were also consumed by either discrimination or acquiescence. As a result, Rockwell intended to shock his audience into action, guiding them to recognize the plight of Black children and take steps to protect their innocence.

In this particular painting, Rockwell's goal was to persuade his audience not only to notice the child, but also to notice her surroundings and their own position within the situation. The painting portrays a young Black girl being escorted in front of a crowd into school. Although the crowd is not illustrated, their presence in the painting is nevertheless apparent. In

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[9] Due to my preference to use Black instead of African American and White instead of Caucasian, both Black and White have been capitalized when referring to a group of people and making a classification, as not to get confused with the colors black and white.
[10] Robert Coles, "Ruby Bridges and a Painting," in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People,* ed. Maureen Hart Hennessey and Anne Knutson (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1999), 111.
[11] Halpern, 124. Karal Ann Marling, *Norman Rockwell: America's Most Beloved Painter*, (Cologne: TASCHEN, 2005), 84.
[12] Schick, 200.

fact, by placing the audience of the painting into the position of the faceless crowd, Rockwell makes a significant allegation regarding his audience's active position within the situation. By viewing the painting, Rockwell makes his audience participants in the actions portrayed, condemning them of wrongdoing. Due to Rockwell's photorealism, his audience became witnesses not only to the painting, but also to the event depicted. Whether or not the viewer of the painting associated themselves as a guard, participant or a bystander to the actions, Rockwell ultimately suggested that the middle class was not doing enough to positively modify the situation. Rockwell hoped that by casting blame on his audience, his painting would ignite a passionate response that would lead to a change for the betterment of the Black child and society as a whole. By publishing this painting in a national publication, Rockwell publicly revealed his position on the civil rights movement. Rockwell hoped to influence his audience by publicly announcing his own position and by highlighting the innocence of the child.

Rockwell also employed the use of illustrative elements to further highlight the connection between Black and White children. Rockwell's paintings were considered to bridge the gap between high and low art.[13] Therefore, Rockwell similarly sought to bridge the separation between the Black and White child, by highlighting society's tendency to separate the world into a struggle between "us" and "them."[14] A study conducted in Indianapolis through a series of interviews found that the average White American felt ambivalence towards Black Americans in the 1950s.[15] It was this ambivalence Rockwell took issue with. His intent was to mediate the situation through the use of paint and canvas, and through the medium of a magazine. If the ideal was constructed to be the middle class White American, the counter-ideal was designated to those with a darker skin colour.[16] However, Rockwell intended to emphasize that despite a darker complexion, the Black child was equally innocent. In her autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Anne Moody reflected that as a fifteen year old in 1957 she felt "the fear of being killed just because [she] was black."[17] Ultimately, the civil rights movement placed Black children at the forefront of the struggle.[18] Rockwell employed the same strategy to appeal to the emotions of his audience who were likely parents themselves. Therefore,

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[13] Thomas Hoving, "The Great Art Communicator," in *Norman Rockwell: Pictures for the American People,* ed. Maureen Hart Hennessey and Anne Knutson (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1999), 29.
[14] Robert M. Entman, and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 46.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 303.
[18] Mintz 303.

Rockwell's choice to depict a young girl as the subject of his painting was significant, as it highlighted the capability of gender to influence perception. Ultimately, girls were generally viewed as more inherently pure and innocent and therefore Rockwell's depiction of a girl was likely a deliberate choice. By emphasizing the civil rights movement with a focus on girlhood, Rockwell attempted to ensure that his intended audience recognize that Black and White children were equal, because ultimately *all* children should be considered innocent.

Rockwell employed the use of a specific colour palette in his painting to further emphasize his intended message. The young schoolgirl is illustrated with a very dark black complexion. As a result, the young girl's white dress presents a stark dichotomy of black versus white. However, Rockwell intended to emphasize this contrast in order to expose his message regarding childhood innocence. By the 1930s childhood was largely identified in a sentimental way, defining children as "priceless."[19] However, this ideal remained exclusive to certain members of society for quite some time. By depicting the young girl in a white dress, Rockwell draws numerous parallels to the middle class child. Firstly, the colour white symbolizes purity and innocence, concepts regularly associated with the White child. As a result, the colour white was used in attempt to accentuate the young girl's connection with White children and middle class ideals. Rockwell also carefully illustrated the detailed design of the girl's dress in order to appear fashionable. Equipped with a collar, capped sleeves, frilled skirt and tied with a bow, the dress appears to be well made, similar if not identical to the dress a privileged young White girl would wear. In addition, the girl in the painting is wearing matching white socks and shoes, with her hair braided and tied back in a white bow. By portraying the young girl as well put together, Rockwell appealed to middle class parents to recognize the similarities between the subject and their own child. The young girl was also depicted carrying a blue notebook with stars, an illusion to the American flag and a symbol of American patriotism. Rockwell associated the child with a shared national identity, linking her to all other American citizens. Even in the choice of the notebook design, Rockwell made a significant statement, in hopes of persuading his audience to realize the Black child's right to a childhood, an education and an American identity.

Despite the young girl's dark complexion, Rockwell uses overwhelming imagery to connect the girl to middle class notions of childhood innocence. Richard Halpern argues that Rockwell's work was never actually about innocence, but rather about the ways society

[19] Rebecca De Schweinitz, *If We Could Change The World: Young People and America's Long Struggle for Racial Equality*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 2.

manufactured innocence.[20] If this is in fact the case, Rockwell's painting relied on the manufactured notions of innocence popularly accepted by the middle class, in order to emphasis his position and persuade his audience to believe the same. Rockwell's paintings traditionally depicted the innocence of society, and heavily relied on children, whom were recognized to be the ultimate symbol of innocence. However, *The Problem We All Live With* ultimately complicated this notion of innocence, because despite the young girl's presence in the illustration, the world in which she was depicted was far from ideal. Therefore, although Rockwell aligned the young girl with innocence by highlighting her dress and its "whiteness", Rockwell simultaneously suggested that the innocence he had depicted for several decades was a myth if events such as those depicted in *The Problem We All Live With* were simultaneously occurring. Therefore, although the context of *The Problem We All Live With* was extremely different from previous works, the presentation of the child was portrayed in a similar fashion. The NAACP adopted the same mode of presentation in their publications, displaying Black children who exemplified middle class values.[21] Ultimately, this was a recognized tool of persuasion to further appeal to a White, middle class audience.

By aligning the Black child with notions of "whiteness," Rockwell attempted to appeal to the emotions of White middle class parents. The absence of the young girl's *own* parents, was a narrative technique employed by Rockwell to further appeal to his intended audience, as a means to emphasize that their assistance was necessary. Rockwell requested his audience help the young girl, not only to safeguard her innocence or support civil rights, but also to further protect her as any "parent" should. This was an important strategy employed by Rockwell to counteract the spatial positioning of his audience within the painting's narrative as the opponent: Rockwell also positioned his audience as potential heroes. The young girl, despite her small stature in contrast to the guards, is illustrated alongside the faceless US Marshals. The girl adopts a similar demeanor, as the position of her hands directly copies the men around her. By presenting both the guards and the young girl in a marching position, Rockwell creates the illusion of the individuals heading into battle. By highlighting this similarity, Rockwell emphasized that the young girl was being forced to grow up and face the burden of adult experiences. The guard illustrated in the forefront of the painting is also of considerable importance. The man is depicted with one Black hand and one White, suggesting that change was in progress, but was not fully

[20] Halpern, 2.
[21] De Schweinitz, 3.

complete, and that change was failing to keep up with those promoting segregation and hate. Although protecting the child, the guard is depicted as being just out of arm's reach. Furthermore, the guard's fist connects to the crack dividing the racist graffiti marked on the wall. Rockwell wished to convey that those promoting positive change were beginning to divide the general public opinion and those with racist views. In addition, although at first glance the red tomato stain, symbolizing bloodshed, may seem solely directed at the young girl, upon further observation it appears to be directed at both the child and the guards. Ultimately, not only was Rockwell appealing to save Black children from a childhood deprived of innocence, but Rockwell was also enlisting the help of his audience to generate a stronger force capable of acting as guards for all Black children and their civil rights.

The Problem We All Live With was published in an era consumed by political and social upheaval. Therefore, Rockwell's message was that with the help of his intended audience, the setting depicted in his painting could be altered to fit the ideal middle class condition. Furthermore, by focusing his message on the child, Rockwell was able to present his position on the civil rights debate without being overtly political. Rockwell's form of photorealism added urgency to the painting, for even though it was not an actual photograph of a child or event it nevertheless appeared real. The illustration, however, was in fact inspired by numerous stories in the news, specifically one regarding Ruby Bridges and her first day at an integrated school in New Orleans.[22] Therefore, although only a painting, its subject matter highly resonated with *Look's* readers. The decision in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case ultimately found that the state assumed a growing responsibility for the protection and well-being of all children. However, despite the prescribed ideal of a protected childhood, equality was not a reality for the forgotten, racially "other" child.[23] By highlighting the discrimination directed towards the Black child, contrasted by their innocence, Rockwell hoped to convey that with added help Black children would not only be protected under statutes of the law, but the ideal of equal and integrated co-existence would also become a social reality. Therefore, by explicitly illustrating the brutal discrimination a child experienced, Rockwell attempted to emphasize the severity of the issue. However, due to the tense social and political climate, Rockwell's intended message was not universally accepted.

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[22] Laura Claridge, *Norman Rockwell: A Life*, (New York: Random House Inc., 2001), 451.

[23] Molly Ladd Taylor, "What Child Left Behind? US Social Policy and the Hopeless Child," in *Lost Kids: Vulnerable Children and Youth in Twentieth Century Canada and the United States,* ed. Mona Gleason, Tamara Myers, Leslie Paris, and Veronica Strong-Boag, (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 161.

Ultimately, the response to Rockwell's painting, from the sources found, suggests a mixed reaction. Rockwell's painting was recognized as a success in its ability to portray the civil rights cause in relation to integrated schooling in a letter from The Committee for Fair Practices in Delaware. In gratitude to Mr. Louis Redding, the committee requested a reproduction of Rockwell's painting to present their honoree in appreciation of his work as an attorney for the NAACP school cases in the United States Supreme Court.[24] In this particular case, it appears as though Rockwell's intended message was received and accepted by a collection of people. However, other responses were not as fully accepting. In a 1964 letter to L. Burrows, one White man stated, "you look at her and you begin to feel sorry for her – a lot of people will, I'm sure. Its not *her* were against, you know. It's the interference in our life by those folks up North, that's what it was, that's what we were saying."[25] Ultimately, the man recognized Rockwell's intended message and reacted to Rockwell's spatial positioning of his audience as the villains. Although the man responds to a portion of Rockwell's message, it appears as though he ignores the overall goal, as he admits to actively participating in actions such as those portrayed by Rockwell. Lebon's letter, quoted at the beginning of this paper, reveals the outrage felt by some members of society in response to Rockwell's claims. Unwilling to accept and believe in all children's innocence, LeBon accuses Rockwell of attempting to "brainwash" society, for the "facts" prove that "the negro is, by nature, inferior to the white and yellow races." LeBon continued by stating that Rockwell failed to depict the Black youth who brutally raped and killed elderly women and therefore Rockwell was a "traitor to the white race."[26] Lebon's use of strong language, and his declaration of war, proves that Rockwell's message did not result in a widespread successful campaign, especially in the South.[27] Ultimately, the extent to Rockwell's overall success in persuading his intended audience to accept his message is unknown. However, the fact that three separate letters present such diverse responses does reveal that Rockwell was successful in disseminating his message and promoting discussion.

Overall, Rockwell intended to persuade the middle class to recognize their ability to transform the situation depicted within his painting. By employing the use of artistic methods,

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[24] Ellen P Williams, letter to L. Burrows, 3 February 1964, from Norman Rockwell Museum Archives, 30403. http://collections.nrm.o rg/images/full/derivatives/studio%20collection/correspondence/business/civil_rights/st1976.20029.03.jpg (accessed January 29, 2012).
[25] Coles, 111.
[26] G.L. Lebon letter to Norman Rockwell, January 6 1964.
[27] As a resident of New Orleans, Lebon would have been familiar with the case of Ruby Bridges (also a resident of New Orleans). Therefore, due to LeBon's familiarity with the case, it is possible his response to the painting was also partially a response to Bridges and her case. Since Bridges was recognized to be the inspiration for the painting, LeBon may not have appreciated the press that accompanied Rockwell's publication of the painting and the way he believed it portrayed the White citizens of New Orleans.

Rockwell emphasized the innocence of the Black child. Due to Rockwell's previous work and his accepted view on the innocence of the middle class family, child and society, Rockwell suggested that the Black child was equally deserving of such ideals. By placing the young girl in an intense setting, Rockwell hoped to influence his audience's perspective on the unfair positioning of Black children in the civil rights battle, specifically in terms of integrated schooling. Rockwell wished to convey that with the help of his intended audience, children like the one illustrated in his painting could be saved.

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