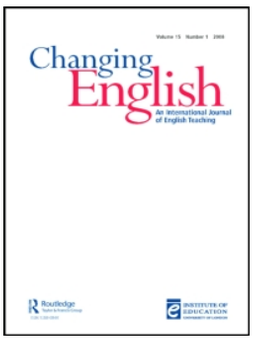

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The Homeschooling of Scout Finch

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Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is one of the most widely taught texts in language arts classrooms through the English-speaking world and is greatly valued by many readers today for its depiction of youth grappling with racism in the American South of the Depression Era. However, the novel's subtle and sustained critique of public education has remained largely unrecognised. This essay identifies in the novel an underlying nostalgia for the past homeschooling of Southern white aristocracy as well as disdain for modern public institutions and for the democratic values that those institutions seek to instil in youth.

Keywords: secondary education; home education; Reconstruction; African American education; pauper schools

In his closing argument toward the end of Harper Lee's immensely popular novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960/2002), Atticus Finch seeks to convince the judge, jury, and packed courtroom audience that the evidence has failed to show that his black male defendant is guilty of raping a white woman and that he should not be convicted simply because of his race. The end of Atticus' closing argument bears quoting at length:

> Thomas Jefferson once said that all men are created equal, a phrase that the Yankees and the distaff side of the Executive branch in Washington are fond of hurling at us. There is a tendency in this year of grace, 1935, for certain people to use this phrase out of context, to satisfy all conditions. The most ridiculous example I can think of is that the people who run public education promote the stupid and idle along with the industrious – because all men are created equal, educators will gravely tell you, the children left behind suffer terrible feelings of inferiority. We know all men are not created equal in the sense some people would have us believe – some people are smarter than others, some people have more opportunity because they're born with it, some men make more money than others, some ladies make better cakes than others – some people are born gifted beyond the normal scope of most men. (Lee 1960/2002, 233)

Atticus' purpose is to lead up to his final pronouncement that 'in this country our courts are the great levelers, and in our courts all men are created equal' (233), but what stands out in his closing argument are those seemingly unanticipated sentences about public education. In pivoting on the word 'equal' and the phrase 'feelings of inferiority', Atticus' speech emerges as an oblique challenge to the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, a ruling issued six years before the

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publication of Lee's novel. In that ruling, Chief Justice Warren writes that 'segregation [in public education] is a denial of the equal protection of the laws'. Drawing on the work of the social scientist Kenneth B. Clark, Warren further argues that '[t]o separate [some children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.'

A few critical discussions of *To Kill a Mockingbird* since the 1990s have explored the novel's reluctant engagement with the challenges to Jim Crow legislation throughout the American South in the 1950s. Eric J. Sundquist (2007) writes, for example, that like 'any novel dating from the rising crest of the Civil Rights movement', *To Kill a Mockingbird* 'must bear the consequences of its own nostalgia for a simpler, slower time' (82). However, the nostalgia that marks Lee's novel is not simply the longing for a past that is perceived as more harmonious than the present but also the longing for a time before the interference of outsiders whom Atticus variously calls in his closing argument 'the Yankees', 'the distaff side of the Executive branch' and 'the people who run public education'.

Atticus' criticism of 'the people who run public education' hints at a widespread scepticism toward that institution among the fictional inhabitants of the town of Maycomb, Alabama and the town's rural surroundings; no good lawyer is likely to end the defence by presenting a potentially divisive or irrelevant issue to a jury who will then decide the fate of a man facing the capital charge of rape. Rather, Atticus assumes that his audience shares his views: 'We know', he says to them, 'all men are not created equal in the sense some people [by whom he means, at least in part, the folks in the US Department of Education] would have us believe.'

Similarly, Atticus' criticism of public education in his closing statement, which many readers see as the climax of the novel, may prompt us to consider how *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a whole might present a subtle yet sustained argument against public education and what it means, then, to have such a novel widely taught in secondary schools across the English-speaking world today. What has yet to be recognised, in other words, is the novel's indictment of the public educational system that has so fully enshrined it.

The novel's strong presence in American classrooms is suggested by a quick review of postings at eNotes.com, an Internet site devoted to exchanges between secondary school students and their teachers. With well over 6000 question-and-answer items, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is discussed by teachers and students at this site two or three times as frequently as other commonly taught texts, including *Lord of the Flies*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*. James B. Kelley's (2010) analysis of hundreds of those teachers' statements to students about Lee's novel has revealed that much of its appeal lies in its usefulness for what is called 'character education'. In their posted comments to students, teachers frequently emphasise the passages in Lee's novel in which Atticus' two children, Scout and Jem, learn important 'life lessons' or in which Atticus provides moral guidance to his children (and, by extension, to the reader). For example, these teachers frequently quote a passage from the novel's final pages, in which Scout embraces her father's often-repeated lesson: 'Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them' (321).

In these postings, the teachers make only occasional note of the references to public schooling that structure Lee's novel; indeed, the public school calendar, classroom and schoolyard provide both timeline and stage for many of the

important events in the narrative. For the most part, passage of time in the novel is tracked not by calendar years but rather by the two Finch children's progression through the three grades, and their participation in public school enables their most significant experiences in the novel: for example, the children's route to school takes them past the Radley house, among the gifts that the children find in a knothole in a tree in the Radley's yard is a medal from a school spelling competition, and the schoolyard itself becomes a way for the children to sneak from their home to the Radley back porch. Finally, toward the end of the novel, not long after the trial has ended, Scout and Jem are attacked by Bob Ewell, the story's villain, as they walk home from the Halloween school pageant.

Balancing the references to the public school in the novel are subtle references to homeschooling. Indeed, Scout has been homeschooled before she attends the first grade, and her homeschooling creates problems in the public school classroom. She can read before attending first grade, having learned by sitting in Atticus' lap every night and following along as he read aloud from newspapers, legal documents and other texts. The first-grade teacher does not approve of this practice. Scout tells the reader: 'Miss Caroline told me to tell my father not to teach me any more; it would interfere with my reading' (19). Similarly, through rigorous practice and repeated copying of Bible chapters by hand, Scout has been taught to write in cursive at home by Calpurnia – the family's black maid, cook and maternal figure – and yet Scout is told by her first-grade teacher not to write anything in cursive during class time. The teacher tells Scout: 'We don't write in the first grade, we print. You won't learn to write until you're in the third grade' (21).

Homeschooling was common in wealthy, landed families in the Antebellum South, a type of family represented in Lee's novel by the Finches and their family estate, which once functioned as a cotton plantation operating on slave labour. The spread of public schooling in Alabama was delayed by this same landed gentry; it had a modest beginning with the establishment of Barton Academy in Mobile in 1836, but efforts to ensure free public education did not become widespread until the Reconstruction era. In the *Thirty-Sixth Annual Report of the Superintendent of Education of the Scholastic Year Ending September 30, 1890*, Solomon Palmer writes that Alabama's so-called Reconstruction Constitution of 1868 was the first to make multiple references to public schools, including the statement that 'all the children between five and twenty-one years of age may attend free of charge' (State of Alabama Department of Education 1890). The Reconstruction Constitution allowed for no separation by race, which brought the public schools, according to Palmer, 'into great disrepute among the white people of the State' and made the whole system 'unpopular'. The post-Reconstruction Constitution of 1875 raised the minimum age by two years (from age five to age seven) and introduced a strict division of the races with one simple clause: 'separate schools shall be provided for children of African descent' (lxxxix).

Social class was at least as much a divisive factor as race. Long after their establishment in Alabama, public schools – even those for white children – continued to be viewed as 'pauper schools', for only those families unable to pay for private tutors or academies. The State of Alabama's *Thirty-Sixth Annual Report* suggests that this class-based bias had eroded by 1890. However, the US Department of the Interior, Bureau of Education's 1919 document 'An Educational Study of Alabama' maintains that many Alabama public schools, far into the second decade of the twentieth century, had continued to violate the letter and spirit of the

state mandate that public education be provided to all children for free. Alabama schools regularly charged most of their students fees for supplies and other incidentals, and they identified students who were exempted from such fees on a so-called 'free list' or 'charity list'. Such practice, the administrators in Washington argue,

> tends to degrade the idea of a public school to that of a charitable institution, and to keep alive the idea of what was formerly known as the pauper school in certain of the States. Public schools for the poor only are certainly not democratic and are not in keeping with the ideals of the twentieth century. (251)

Through Scout's experiences in the first through third grade, the novel directly engages this question of the relationship between democracy and free public education. To name just one example, the influential philosophies of John Dewey, who argued that public education is necessary for democratic practice and social reform, are introduced through Scout's first-grade teacher Miss Caroline, an outsider to the small town of Maycomb. This new educational model is incorrectly understood by the children and contrasted unfavourably with an idealised past system of home-schooling for the wealthy. Scout observes:

> What Jem called the Dewey Decimal System was school-wide by the end of my first year, so I had no chance to compare it with other teaching techniques. I could only look around me: Atticus and my uncle, who went to school at home, knew everything – at least, what one didn't know the other did. (Lee 1960/2002, 36)

Just as it expresses doubt toward the belief that democracy requires state-funded public education, Lee's novel seems to question the meaningfulness of compulsory school attendance. In his 1922 book *Public Education in the South*, Edgar Wallace Knight discusses Alabama's 1915 passage of its first compulsory attendance law and laments that such laws in Alabama 'have not yet secured … the full force of public approval which is needed for their complete success' (445). Similarly, the 1921 publication *Alabama Childhood* by the Alabama Child Welfare Department observes that the compulsory attendance law covers only children of ages 8–16 (not the full age range of 7–21) and is not fully enforced, 'particularly in the smaller towns and rural communities' of Alabama (85). In some instances, the agricultural economy is clearly responsible. As with many of the poor farmers' children in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for whom there is no simple balance between school and the labour demands at home, the young Walter Cunningham accrues too many absences and is forced to repeat the earliest grades. For other poor families, a complete disdain for education is the culprit. The Ewell children, whom the novel says no truant officer can keep in school, are required to attend only the first school day each year, and with that, the town feels that it has met its legal obligations to that family.

Both Atticus and Calpurnia themselves seem sceptical of efforts to impose education on the poor and the uninterested. Atticus does not believe that the Ewell children should be required to attend school: 'There are ways of keeping them in school by force', he says, 'but it's silly to force people like the Ewells into a new environment –' (Lee 1960/2002, 34). In talking about the members of her church who speak in black vernacular rather than in standard English, Calpurnia takes a similar position on the ineffectiveness of trying to force someone to learn: 'You're not gonna change any of them by talkin' right, they've got to want to learn

themselves, and when they don't want to learn there's nothing you can do but keep your mouth shut or talk their language' (143).

While state educators and administrators in post-Reconstruction Alabama repeatedly demonstrate at least a superficial concern for the 'separate but equal' opportunity of education for black children – for example, their reports regularly note the low salaries and insufficient preparedness of black teachers as well as the high illiteracy and absentee rates for black children – Lee's novel is largely silent about the educational opportunities for the black children who live in the 'small Negro settlement' (142) beyond the trash dump outside of town. The reader does learn that Calpurnia 'had more education than most colored folks' (27); that her black church has only one hymn book and only four members (including herself) who can read it; that she was taught by a white woman, most likely a relative of Atticus, for whom she worked before taking employment with the Finch family; and that she passed her knowledge of reading and writing on to her now grown son Zeebo. Calpurnia comments that '[t]here wasn't a school even when he was a boy. I made him learn, though' (142), suggesting that somewhere in the fictional world of Maycomb in the early to mid-1930s, there is now a school for black children.

As a whole, the novel even seems to suggest that schools run by the state and, ultimately, by the outsiders in Washington put local Southern culture at risk. In discussing the performance of the farmer children in her third-grade class, for example, Scout lists a set of items that are valued by her rural classmates and their families but not by her teacher. These include: 'fiddling, eating syrupy biscuits for lunch, being a holy-roller, singing *Sweetly Sings the Donkey* and pronouncing it dunkey, all of which the state paid teachers to discourage' (280). Indeed, the annual reports by administrators in post-Reconstruction Alabama sometimes articulate this very goal of eradicating what they see as the detrimental influence of the home on the child's intellectual and cultural development. For example, in the State of Alabama's *Thirty-Sixth Annual Report* (1890), C.C. Thach argues (in stunningly charged language) that all school-age children need strong guidance in what they read outside of school to counter the often negative influences of the home environment. Thach writes:

> It is easily conceivable that with entirely proper surroundings a child would speak a perfectly pure English. This result is obtained in a measure by the upper grades of society, and certain verbal inaccuracies often set a seal to one's social position as surely as any heraldic device. But the standard of the home is generally low…. Single-handed, what can the teacher do in the few hours of school, or in the few hours devoted to English, to uproot from the pupil's mind the barbarisms implanted during the other sixteen hours of the day, indeed during a lifetime?
>
> The teacher must carry the war into Africa, raid upon the unwholesome influences of the hearthstone… (lxviii)

The Finch home in Lee's novel is anything but 'unwholesome' nor is it – metaphorically speaking – a dark continent awaiting the civilising force of state-licensed educators. The reader may be left wondering, then, why Atticus requires that his children, particularly Scout, regularly attend the Maycomb public school.

Scout confronts Atticus with this question twice in the novel. In the first instance, she tells her father: 'You never went to school and you do all right, so I'll

just stay home too. You can teach me like Grandaddy taught you 'n Uncle Jack' (Lee 1960/2002, 32). Atticus responds that he does not have time to educate her at home and is obligated to send her to public school; otherwise, he says, 'they'd put me in jail…' (32). Atticus' arguments ring hollow. Calpurnia and he together have already successfully homeschooled Scout well in both reading and writing, and he continues to work with her for hours every evening on her reading and vocabulary skills even as she attends public school during the day. Similarly, he invokes the compulsory attendance law to argue that his daughter must attend school even as he acknowledges that exemptions to the law – most notably, for the Ewell children – are easily made.

Later in the novel, as her frustration with the public school grows, Scout again asks Atticus why he forces her to attend. She comes home one day and repeats a charge that she has heard from a hostile classmate in the schoolyard: 'Do you defend niggers, Atticus?' she asks. Atticus replies: 'Of course I do.' But he then corrects her:

> 'Don't say nigger, Scout. That's common.'
> ''s what everybody else at school says.'
> 'From now on it'll be everybody less one –'
> 'Well, if you don't want me to grow up talkin' that way, why do you send me to school?' (85–6)

Atticus does not answer this time; he simply looks at her, 'mildly, amusement in his eyes' (86). Perhaps Atticus wishes his children be exposed to various instances of ugliness and 'unwholesomeness' in the world – to see and to see beyond the hypocrisies and inadequacies of their teachers, to resist maturely challenges to fight out one's differences in opinion in the schoolyard, and perhaps most importantly to hear the 'common' people around them both casually and hatefully toss around words like 'nigger'.

At its core, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a novel about education, ideology and culture in the South but has not yet been fully examined in that light. The novel is valued today largely for the 'life lessons' that it imparts to young readers, but there is little recognition of its comic yet unrelenting critique of the public school system and its nostalgia for the informal system of homeschooling that predates Reconstruction. Indeed, Scout's intellectual development in the novel occurs not in the public classroom but rather at home with the white father and the black help. The domestic space of the Finches is presented as a refuge – as a wholesome hearthstone – whereas the public school classroom and schoolyard are potentially dangerous terrain.

Segregated by race but not socioeconomic status, the white middle-class town children attending Maycomb's public school come in close contact with the poorest and crudest white residents of the county, and the results are often disruptive. In this sense, the short, embedded story of Boo Radley itself reads as a cautionary tale of how social chaos may result when 'town children' sit next to and rub shoulders with 'bus children' (279): a child from a securely middle-class family in Maycomb attends the public school, befriends the children of rural farmers, gets in trouble for disorderly conduct and is put under virtual house arrest by his father, who thinks it would be a 'disgrace' (11) to have his son sent to a state industrial school.

Published six years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* reflects Southern anxieties about public education in the first half of the twentieth century, anxieties that we often think of in terms of race but that are recast here in terms of class differences. *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains hugely popular and widely taught, but it is also critically neglected, and important questions about the conflicting positions that it presents – questions not just about race and class, but also about public education and private schooling – have yet to be fully explored.

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