

Beyond the Sentimental Text:
The Practice and Pedagogy of Critical Literacy
in Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*

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In 1960, Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* entered a national discourse in the throes of Civil Rights reform. The story, with its climactic rendering of a racial injustice that reflects the 1930's Scottsboro trials, immediately commanded nationwide attention. Within the year, it won a Pulitzer Prize and immediately moved into classrooms. More than forty years later, after tens of millions of copies sold, ten foreign language translations, a movie, a play, and much censorship debate, *Mockingbird* remains a curricular centerpiece for examining the themes of discrimination and justice in literature. The story, narrated from the perspective of the young Scout, is strongly emotive, and the novel is in fact one of the top books "most often cited as making a difference in people's lives," second only to the Bible (Johnson xi). Even in the development of this project, the very mention of *Mockingbird* has sparked a nearly universal response from readers across ages: "I love that book!"

Critic Eric Sundquist notes that the novel's "emotive sway remains strangely powerful because it also remains unexamined" (Sundquist 183). Despite the work's enormous popularity, *Mockingbird* has generated relatively little literary criticism, because its emotional effects, linear plot, and clear prose create the illusion of transparent meaning. The novel's design, with a child narrator detailing the eccentricities of a small Southern town, can be interpreted as a romantic reflection on a bygone era of innocence (Hovet 69). The provocation of a reader's nostalgia is suspiciously similar to the gaudy sentimentality that James Baldwin decries in his treatise on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, "Everybody's Protest Novel." Indeed, both acclaimed novels resonated emotionally amidst a scene of national turmoil. The danger is that *Mockingbird*, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, seems so obvious in its value, that it provides readers with the "very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all" (Baldwin 153). A reader who is appropriately angered by Tom Robinson's trial and sympathetic to the Finch family may feel

quite proud of his own virtue and his own intelligence at grasping Harper Lee's "message." Thus in a classroom, where literature is often treated as a project of message hunting, a teacher may not see the need to engage students in more meaningful and complex analysis.¹ If reading stops with the provocation of emotion or the project of message-hunting, *Mockingbird* is indeed "a formula," as Baldwin accuses of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Baldwin 151).

But beyond *Mockingbird's* sentimental appeal and moralizing surface, what drives the novel's popularity? Its typical adolescent readership signals its core: this is a story about coming-of-age. Scout's developing consciousness, of her intricate social world and her role in it, is *Mockingbird's* emotional, moral, critical, and intellectual propeller, the foundation that makes her story a gripping read even decades after the eras of the Scottsboro trials and Civil Rights reform. Scout constantly observes, questions, experiences, and experiments with her social milieu, and ultimately, she learns to critique her environment, to be aware of her own subjectivity and its boundaries, and to understand agency in her surroundings. These qualities characterize the mode of thinking that Paulo Freire calls "critical literacy," a literacy beyond the simple skills of reading and writing.

As the young adult Scout reflects on her learning encounters in school, with her father Atticus, and Maycomb's many characters, she realizes the limitations of their pedagogies, and her own capacity to develop and practice her critical literacy. Her journey into consciousness, which is fraught with confusion, disruption, and discomfort, redefines "reading" as an

¹ Gerald Graff critiques most classroom approaches to literature as limited projects that teach students to find one right interpretation of a text. In seeking an obscured "right answer," textual meaning for students "seems neither natural nor cultural but magical" (Graff 83-85). With *Mockingbird*, it seems the book has performed the magic trick of interpretation for the student already, or at least makes the student feel like he has performed the magic trick on his own.

interpretive process applied to living texts, and one which must finally result in the transformation of those texts.²

Literacy as a Framework for Understanding To Kill A Mockingbird

Scout is quintessentially a reader. Her brother Jem says she has “been readin’ ever since she was born,” and her facility as a reader is often her distinguishing trait (7). Scout herself strongly identifies as a reader, and equates reading to “breathing,” an act necessary for her very survival (20). Reading, in its basic and traditional sense, means perusing and extracting information from written language (OED). Using this definition alone, an examination of reading in *To Kill A Mockingbird* would be fairly short. Though Scout emphasizes her ability to read, her encounters with printed materials are barely recounted. Despite this lack, however, the novel sustains her identity as a reader. Scout constantly peruses and extracts information from language, whether the written language of texts or the spoken language that pervades her environment. In this way, Scout’s texts are physical books and newspapers as well as human interactions. But Donald Macedo notes that “Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world” (Freire 29). That is, texts of any kind (written or otherwise) can only be interpreted with knowledge of their social milieu. The act of reading “implies perceiving the relationship between text and context,” or, to use Paulo Freire’s phrasing, the connection between word and world (Freire 29). Scout is a reader in an even greater sense than she claims to be, because she lives in a constantly interpretive mode, moving from word to world and back again.

² My use of the term “living text” reflects Robert Scholes’s proposal that “Textual studies must be pushed beyond the discrete boundaries of the page and the book into the institutional practices and social structures that can themselves be usefully studied as codes and texts” (Scholes 17).

Scout develops her critical literacy through her relentless analytical reading of multiple texts. The term “critical literacy” arises from the work of Freire and Macedo, who theorized about education in relation to economically and politically oppressed people in their native Brazil. In their studies, they found that teaching basic reading and writing skills did not create what they would acknowledge as fully literate citizens. They argue that literacy surpasses the simple mechanics of reading and writing, requiring in addition the command of “a myriad of discursive forms and cultural competencies that construct and make available the various relations and experiences that exist between learners and the world” (Freire 10). It is through the practice of varied discourses and cultural habits that a student becomes aware of the social structures he lives within, and the nature of his subjectivity. This type of literacy is therefore termed “critical” in two senses: first, in that the literate student can be intellectually critical of his socio-cultural environment; and second, in that this type of literacy empowers him to act as an agent of change in society, and thus is critical to his survival.

Literacy is further defined by what it is not, that is, illiteracy. Freire and Macedo write that illiteracy “is not just related to the inability...to read and write adequately; it is also fundamentally related to forms of political and ideological ignorance that function as a refusal to know the limits and political consequences of one’s world view” (Freire 5). Thus literacy and illiteracy together form a spectrum of intellectual and cultural competencies. Freire and Macedo attend to the nature of this spectrum among the Brazilian underclass, but the concept is as useful for understanding Scout’s social text – that is, Maycomb’s characters and their interactions. Through the course of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Scout studies the discourses of her town, from that of the Quarters to that of the courtroom, and she gradually gains an awareness of and ability to question her social position and her cultural capital in relationship to others’. Examining Scout

as a growing literate person therefore requires a consideration of other people's views and practices of literacy in her context: to what extent are people in Maycomb literate, and how does their literacy effect Scout's development as a thinker?

The Damage: Literacy in School

Maycombers, including the young Scout at first, assume that the formal school system provides children with engaging experiences to adequately develop their literacy. At six years old, Scout is curious about the world of older children and the mysteries of the schoolhouse; she "never looked forward more to anything in [her] life" than her first day of school (17). School, however, quickly proves intellectually limiting, as a systemic philosophy of education emerges through Scout's early encounters. The foremost purpose of school attendance in Maycomb is to learn to read and write, a purpose the school's teachers defend as theirs alone. The first grade teacher, Miss Caroline, actually scolds Scout when she discovers that Scout is "literate" (19). Miss Caroline insists that Atticus, who taught Scout to read, "does not know how to teach" and has caused "damage" which she must undo (19). Later that day, Scout is castigated for knowing how to write, which she is not supposed to learn until she is "in the third grade" (21). Miss Caroline's educational philosophy strictly categorizes children's knowledge and ability according to age. This belief pervades Maycomb, and manifests itself in the cautionary or dismissive words of Scout's third grade teacher, Reverend Sykes, and Aunt Alexandra. It underlies the text whenever adults insist that there are some things children should not know. Thus the literacy that Scout first encounters in school is bounded and controlled within the realm of functional and academic literacy: adults expect students to gain basic literacy skills "by

waving cards at [them]” and offering prescribed “imaginative literature” designed for this pedagogical purpose (20, 19).

Jem explains to Scout that Miss Caroline’s pedagogy is the school’s “new way of teaching,” which he believes is called “the Dewey Decimal System.” His nomenclature unknowingly confuses the two Deweys popular in 1930’s school practice: John Dewey, the educational theorist who promoted a learning-by-doing pedagogy; and Melvil Dewey, the librarian who created a system of categorizing books by subject. Jem’s description of the new philosophy, “it’s like, if you wanta learn about cows you go out and milk one,” suggests that the school believes its new practice follows John Dewey’s learning-by-doing pedagogy (20). Yet Scout’s schoolteachers spend a great deal of time teaching the basic literacy skills which they believe do not require one to “do” anything, since “you don’t have to learn much out of books anyway” (20). Indeed, the students are a passive audience to their teachers’ presentations: “no comment seems to be expected” of them, and they “receive [literacy instruction] in silence” (20). In the end, Jem’s misappellation proves ironically true; Scout’s encounters with texts in school model Melvil Dewey’s passive consumption of categorized knowledge more than John Dewey’s project of active meaning-making.

The passivity initiated with Miss Caroline’s first graders extends its effects as Scout grows older. Under the “Dewey Decimal System,” the Maycomb school curriculum insistently denies Scout and her peers the opportunity to use texts as sites for critical inquiry into topics that interest them and potentially affect them. When Scout recounts the “current events” lesson in Miss Gates’s classroom, she mimics the authoritative vocabulary of progressive education, explaining that “each child was supposed to clip an item from a newspaper, absorb its contents, and reveal them to the class” (279). Though the instructive verbs suggest “dynamic” educational

activity, in reality, the transformational work of thinking, questioning, and forming opinions – the work of critical literacy – are not part of the project (280). When Scout and some of her classmates raise difficult ethical questions, such as “How can Hitler just put a lot of folks in a pen like that?” and “Why don’t they like the Jews?”, Miss Gates leads her students and herself down a path of oblivious hypocrisy (280). She insists that in America “we don’t believe in persecuting anybody,” but she abruptly ends the conversation when a student asks if the Jews are “white” (281). Miss Gates retreats to the objective safety of an “arithmetic” lesson to effectively foreclose a significant discussion on what race actually means in Maycomb, so neither she nor the children need interpret hurtful or conflicting truths in their environment or themselves.

Critical literacy, as Freire defines it, means recognizing and critiquing the boundaries of one’s subjectivity, and thus becoming able to challenge or at least complicate the prevailing social order. In Maycomb, however, school is part of a routine social appearance, in which children participate as frequently or infrequently as their parents choose. The Ewell children, for example, only attend the first day, and are dismissed as “trash.” Others, like Little Chuck Little, attend as their farm work will allow, and accept the label “country folk.” Some, like Scout, attend regularly, and Scout notes that this endows her with a special status as a “town child” whose father is a professional. The structure of classroom activities reinforces these differences between children, for example, praising the contributions of the town children while dismissing those of the rural children. The patterns of school attendance among Maycomb’s varied social groups indicate that the townspeople know that the school is not meeting their educational needs. Yet, because no one within or outside of the classroom explores the validity or limitations of Maycomb’s caste system, the school can only perpetuate the social structure, rather than challenge or complicate it. Maycomb’s pedagogical practices are isolated from the context in

which they unfold, so that Scout never experiences in school the movement from written text to the experienced world that is essential to the practice of critical literacy.

Scout has met the literacy goals of the school curriculum before she even arrives, so her progress through the school system is fraught with a sense of ridiculousness. But Scout does not denounce the generalized concept of school as a potential setting for developing critical literacy. Rather, she feels that she “was being cheated out of something...[she] did not believe that twelve years of unrelieved boredom was exactly what the state had in mind for [her]” (37). Scout even admits that some of the teaching tools are “profound,” but “as usual, in Maycomb [they] didn’t work very well” (279). Ultimately, the adult Scout, in her great capacity for critical literacy, understands the limitations of school practices that do not account for the variety of subjectivities among teachers and students. Despite her frustrating encounters with Maycomb’s education system, Scout grasps school’s potential to teach critical literacy, but only under the auspices of a population willing to ask difficult questions of themselves. In a way, however, school does aid in the development of her own critical literacy, because it serves as a live text for her to read. She carries her observations of Maycomb’s injustices and hypocrisies from school to home, where she can form and advance her inquiries with more willing teachers.

Dangerous Questions: Literacy with Atticus

Most critics claim Scout’s father, Atticus Finch, as her foremost teacher, because of his thoughtful intervention in his daughter’s ideas and behaviors. As a child Scout denies the claim, saying that “Atticus ain’t got time to teach [her] anything” (19). “Until many years later,” Scout does not recognize that Atticus orchestrates her learning, from reading *The Mobile Register* each night to ensuring that she overhears contentious conversations (101). Atticus’s interactions with

Scout are guided by his belief in children's essential capacity to contemplate their environment. He asserts that adults should respond honestly to children's questions, saying that "when a child asks you something, answer him for goodness' sake. But don't make a production of it" (99). Not unlike Scout's schoolteachers and other Maycomb adults, Atticus admits that "children are children," suggesting that they do not have adult concerns and mature comprehension of the world (99). He does not, however, profess the seemingly consequent belief that children should be kept from certain types of knowledge, such as the realities of poverty, violence, or hatred. Rather, he trusts children's moral perspicacity over adults', acknowledging that it "seems that only children weep" at injustice, while adults cannot perceive the wrongdoing (243). Atticus's deliberate efforts to cultivate his daughter's consciousness contribute to the reader's perception of Atticus as a man of "moral courage" (Sundquist 194), and it is tempting to believe that this lawyer possesses "acute moral perception" simply because he seems to be so principled, gentle, and agreeable (Champion 127). Yet lawyer and writer Monroe Freedman accuses Atticus of being "the right type of person," a critique that recalls Baldwin's condemnation of sentimentality: Freedman argues that Atticus is an emotionally appealing figure for readers, not because he does the right thing, but because he professes the right ideas (Freedman 20). On closer inspection of Atticus as a pedagogue, his mode of thinking encourages the development of Scout's critical literacy, but ultimately his voice vibrates with contradictions.

Atticus's role as a pedagogue extends from his role as a reader, which positions his intellectual kinship with Scout; he taught her to read in the literal sense, and he unites with her in the cherished ritual of evening reading. To this hard-working lawyer, submersion in the written word is an informational, recreational, and meditative pastime, enjoyed on a daily basis. While Atticus is characterized as a literal reader, he is also described by the observant Idlers' Club as a

“deep reader, a mighty deep reader” of the court, which distinguishes him as a reader of live texts, characters, institutions, and social interactions as well. To bring his intellectual relationship with Scout to maturity, he teaches her to read in this broader interpretive sense, by answering her questions, equipping her with a vocabulary for discussing the social world, and modeling his own world readings.

Problematically, however, the Idlers’ Club also jokes that “all [Atticus] does” is read (185). Their joke suggests that Atticus’s reading is not purposeful and transformative. Indeed, the lawyer’s incessant reading can be troublingly passive, especially in the eyes of his daughter, who is processing new and sometimes frightening knowledge. After her father’s first encounter with the lynch mob, an exasperated Scout says that “Atticus subject[s] every crisis of his life to tranquil evaluation behind *The Mobile Register*, *The Birmingham News*, and *The Montgomery Advertiser*” (166). On one hand, this ritual allows him to escape the emotional immediacy of his surroundings, and to situate or “evaluate” the meaning of those events in a broader context. At the same time, reading “behind” the newspaper functions as an escape from immediate reactivity, and the process of “tranquil evaluation” forecloses his critical investment in his social environment; Atticus is not only passive but aloof from his surroundings. Thus while he encourages Scout to extend the practice of reading to a greater variety of ambient texts, his reading is still a functional absorption of knowledge reminiscent of the “Current Events” lesson, rather than a transformational conversation with those texts.

Scout indicates her increasing investment in reading her environment by asking questions about the language she hears and the interactions she experiences. In his answers, Atticus introduces a vocabulary for talking about social structure in Maycomb, and directs Scout’s attention to specific social interactions, from which she forms further inquiries. When, for

example, Scout approaches him with the question, “Do you defend niggers, Atticus?”, he cautions her to avoid the label because it is “common.” His answer immediately marks himself and Scout as people of uncommon social status (85). In the conversation that ensues, Atticus explains that Tom Robinson, his defendant, is a church-going man from “clean living folks,” and that in the upcoming case, “we’re fighting our friends” and that Scout should “hold [her] head high and keep those fists down” (86). Atticus believes he is proffering a vocabulary for social difference that is rooted in principles – personal virtue and loyal alliances – as an alternative to the unexamined vocabulary of caste that pervades Maycomb.

Atticus’s answer, however, indicates that he classifies people according to a “Dewey Decimal System” of his own: African Americans, commoners, friends, family, clean-living folks, each with a diametrically opposed other implied in their pronouncement. In his attempt to “escape [from categorization],” Atticus has “effected...a bitter railing against this trap,” and his “very striving [is] the only motion needed” to trap him once again within insufficient social categories (Baldwin 153). In the end, Scout does not adopt Atticus’s social schema, but labors to create her own framework, as he has done. At first, she internalizes and upholds Maycomb’s caste system, evident when she tells Dill that the harassment of Tom Robinson is acceptable because “after all, he’s just a Negro” (226). Months later, she does not recognize any differences at all among people, saying that “there’s just one kind of folks” (259). Atticus has succeeded, not in imparting his beliefs to her, but in teaching her to criticize the pervasive social attitudes she witnesses.

Atticus’s encouragement to *criticize* and *reject* some worldviews, such as those predominant among Maycomb’s townspeople, exists in tension with his constant instruction to *understand* and *accept* others’ worldviews. Throughout the narrative, Atticus encourages Scout

come to terms with conflict and contradiction in her social environment by analyzing others' perspectives. The first time Atticus introduces Scout to the idea of empathy, after her traumatic first day of school, he infamously instructs her:

If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view - until you climb into his skin and walk around in it (33).

His words assume that full understanding of another's subjectivity is objectively possible, in fact, that it is quite an easy "trick" to shed one's own point of view. Atticus's version of empathy centers on the sentimental notion that one can assume a complete understanding of another's experience, which, in light of other contradictions in Atticus's character, is tempting to dismiss as a certain arrogance or elitism on his part. His exercise of trying on viewpoints, however, proves useful to Scout as she attempts to understand the relationship between her own experiences and others', which is a critical element of her developing consciousness.

Though Atticus instructs Scout to confront conflict and contradiction by analyzing others' subjectivities, he never asks Scout to understand the "limits...of [her] world view," or the truths, contradictions, and complications entangled in her own subjectivity (Freire 5). Even Atticus - a questioner by profession, a master of the art of examination - does not reverse the roles of questioner and answerer with his daughter. Aside from occasional interrogations to indict her for misdeeds, or to help her think through a checker game, he never asks her a critical question. Most notably, he never asks her his "dangerous question": "Do you really think so?" (166). He poses the question once to Jem, to Mr. Link Deas, and to the lynch mob, and in each case his words intend to generate situational and self scrutiny. We never learn the results of those inquiries, but the very description of that question as "dangerous" underscores the power of critical reflection to radically disrupt and alter one's worldview and one's self-understanding of

that worldview. Scout's dialogues with Atticus are not co-constructions of knowledge because Atticus codes his instructions and answers with opinions and values that he wants to impart to her, rather than helping her to generate and verbalize her own opinions and values.

The mixed messages and attitudes that underlie Atticus's speech suggest that he cannot guide Scout further in her literacy development because the truths, contradictions, and complications of his own subjectivity remain unexamined. For instance, when Scout asks "What exactly is a nigger-lover?", Atticus responds that it "is one of those terms that don't mean anything" (124). Yet the term carries an inflammatory meaning to those who use it, and it also carries meaning with Atticus himself. He professes that he does his "best to love everybody," but he willingly describes those who use the term as "ignorant, trashy people," contrasted with "people like ourselves" (124). Atticus's trenchant and unevaluated classism surfaces again in his rant against the Ewells (33); his vehement use of the term "trash" to indict prejudiced people (252); and his willingness to exempt poor people from education and town culture (33). His vision of race, for that matter, hardly exceeds that of a paternalistic "man of the South, a moderately liberal insider," who cannot see how he participates in social stereotypes by employing a black nurse, calling her family, and making her ride in the back of the car (Sundquist 193). In Atticus's tirade against white people who "cheat" black people, he proclaims that "there's nothing more sickening...than a low-grade white man who'll take advantage of a Negro's ignorance." His words posit ignorance as an inherent characteristic of Negroes, rather than one generated by the social structures he supports (252). That Atticus avoids asking critical questions of himself or Scout surprisingly allies him with Miss Gates, Scout's third grade teacher, who shies away from exploring her students' and her own

understandings of race. In Freire's sense of the term, each is "illiterate," in that he "refus[es] to know the limits and political consequences of [his] world view" (Freire 5).

The vital aim of critical literacy is "to be present and active" in transforming "conventional discourse and dominant social relations" (Freire 10). Atticus, however, is entangled in his setting, unable to examine it, or himself, with outsider's eyes. His limited subjectivity thus leaves him incapable of re-envisioning and transforming the opinions and social structures that anger him. He is always his "impassive self" (242), delaying even the impulse to act with a calmly delivered "It's not time to worry yet" (120). Scout and Jem complain that "Atticus can't do anything," and indeed, one of the lingering discomforts of the novel is that Atticus never *does* anything to motivate change in Maycomb (104).

Though many critics uphold Atticus as Scout's foremost teacher, we have discovered a limit to his role. Under Atticus's auspices, Scout's mind is primed for reading the world, but she remains restricted in her journey toward critical literacy. Atticus directs Scout's attention to Maycomb's social structure, and provides her with honest information and a model of his own thinking as an alternative to local mindsets, but he does not help her to organize, transform, or use her new knowledge to act on her environment. Eric Sundquist thoroughly denounces Atticus for his abject failure to deal forcefully and actively with his setting and with his children's education. He argues that Atticus's weaknesses render *Mockingbird* "a masterpiece of indirection" and an "evasion of the hardest moral questions" (Sundquist 187, 184). Ironically, however, Atticus has equipped Scout with the critical tools to inspect and reflect on his weaknesses. The discomforts or disconnects in his character and in their relationship provide another text for Scout to read, and another conversation for her to engage as she assumes the responsibility for her own literacy development.

Watching Herself: Literacy in Scout's Hands

Where Atticus and the school system prove limiting teachers, Scout uses her own imaginative performances to integrate her observations of the social environment, especially her perceptions on topics not addressed by her other teachers. One such topic is Boo Radley. “Atticus never talked much about the Radleys,” but the children are obsessively curious about him (11). Boo’s story frames Scout’s narrative, beginning with “the summer...Dill first gave us the idea of making Boo Radley come out” and ending with the night Boo saves her life and Jem’s (3). To feed their fascination, the children adapt local tales about Boo Radley into a drama, which they enact daily on their front lawn. Neighbors and passersby are potentially their audience, but they perform for themselves more than for a chance onlooker; this performance engages them in the dialectical observation and participation that typify critical literacy. The drama completely engrosses the children in reflection on their social environment, “so busily” that they do not see Atticus observing them (44). As performers, each child analyzes the characteristics, behaviors, voices, and interactions appropriate to his roles, as each recreates many characters within the social milieu of Maycomb: Mrs. Radley, the villainous old Mr. Radley, “the boys who got into trouble,” the “probate judge,” the sheriff, townsfolk, Miss Stephanie Crawford, and of course, the “hero” Boo (44). The troupe “polished and perfected it, added dialogue and plot until [they] had manufactured a small play upon which [they] rang changes every day” (43). By creating a text, “One Man’s Family,” from real life, Scout strengthens her interpretive skill by simultaneously practicing the reading of narrative and the reading of the social world. Significantly, she also exercises the version of empathy that Atticus encouraged, by considering conflict and interaction through multiple others’ eyes.

As Scout matures, her performances move from the obvious venue of the front yard to more subtle role experimentation in real social settings. This shift is particularly important for Scout in coping with her gender role. Atticus avoids discussing the topic of gender with her, though the inescapable fact affects her interactions from the first chapter. In part, Scout negotiates the meanings of “girl” and “young lady” by observing the town women and absorbing the insults and corrections thrown at her by Jem and Aunt Alexandra. She resists the ideals of white Southern womanhood that her surroundings impress upon her: “Ladies in bunches always filled [her] with a vague apprehension and a firm desire to be elsewhere” (262). Finally, however, she experiments with the role in order to understand it. At Aunt Alexandra’s missionary circle, Scout tries dressing up, drinking tea, and making polite conversation about mission work overseas. Noting her own discomfort in this setting, she realizes that she is “more at home in [her] father’s world” because “ladies seemed to live in faint horror of men, seemed unwilling to approve wholeheartedly of them. But...there was something about them [she] instinctively liked.” By playing the role of lady, Scout critiques the superficiality and hypocrisy entangled in the position, and realizes her own point of view. But the performance changes slightly with the announcement of Tom Robinson’s death. Scout watches Aunt Alexandra and Miss Maudie compose themselves, which adds an element of courage and calm to the role of lady, even while it emphasizes that womanhood is only a “surface” (266). When Scout joins the stage again, she is no longer in her own subjectivity, but outside of it: she “carefully picked up the tray and watched [her]self walk to Mrs. Merriweather...After all, if Aunty could be a lady at a time like this, so could [she]” (271). Though Scout is intellectually critical of the role and knows her own discomfort with it, she is able to step aside from her subjectivity and understand the role of a lady as Aunt Alexandra understands it. In reality, their views are not far apart: both

know that a “lady” is essentially a social performance, but here Scout realizes Aunt Alexandra’s need to uphold the performance within her social milieu. Scout’s thinking in this moment demonstrates her burgeoning critical literacy, because she maintains her critique of her environment even while simultaneously engaging with another’s perspective.

Scout’s performances culminate in the novel’s final scene, when she stands on the Radley porch for the first time and envisions the events of the last two years as Boo might have seen them. On the surface, this scene seems the ultimate enactment of Atticus’s advice to “climb into [someone’s] skin and walk around in it,” but it actually re-centers the novel’s earlier version of empathy (33). Scout recalls that “One time [Atticus] said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them,” but for Scout, “just standing on the Radley porch was enough” (321). From that vantage point, she sees herself not as “I”, or even as the distinctive “Scout,” but as one of “[Boo’s] children,” the “sister,” always watched from afar (321). By describing what Boo could have seen during those years, she understands that there are perspectives on the environment that she cannot perceive from the confines of her own worldview. Furthermore, the empathetic experience does not center on a view of the world from Boo’s eyes alone, but on the relationship between her experiences and his. Atticus vocalizes this shift in the novel’s vision of empathy when he validates Scout’s encounter with Boo Radley as an experience of “finally seeing” – not finally seeing as Boo sees, but finally acknowledging Boo as a unique subjectivity in relationship to her own (323).

The arrival at the Radley porch signals the backward reflection over the novel’s events, for Scout and for us as readers. Through the narrative, Scout gathers the foundational qualities of critical literacy. She learns to read, and then she learns to extend those reading skills to interrogate and interpret the live texts provided by her social environment. She realizes her own

subjectivity and her personal criticisms of the social categories she observes. Finally, she understands the validity of others' subjectivities, which sheds light on the boundaries of her own. Thus, where Atticus perpetually delays the vital aim of critical literacy, Scout's intellectual qualities, combined, enable her to act with agency in her surroundings.

Everybody's Gotta Learn: Literacy With Agency

The significance of agency in Maycomb's social structure is not obvious to Scout at first. Together, Scout and Jem work through their confusion on the different "kinds of folks" they know, trying to determine how people are assigned within social categories (258). Jem decides that it is not culture, but literacy that defines one's social position, explaining that,

Background doesn't mean Old Family. I think it's how long your family's been readin' and writin'. Scout, I've studied this real hard and that's the only reason I can think of. Somewhere along when the Finches were in Egypt one of 'em must have learned a hieroglyphic or two and he taught his boy (258).

Scout argues with Jem's reasoning, saying that "everybody's gotta learn, nobody's born knowin'...Naw, Jem, I think there's just one kind of folks. Folks" (259). Like Freire and Macedo, she suspects that the basic literacy skills of reading and writing cannot alone account for social status. Scout disbelieves the existence of fundamental differences in human nature, but she cannot yet articulate the origins of social differences.

As her story continues, Scout begins to grasp the differences in social agency among different "kinds of folks." In her third grade class with Miss Gates, Scout notes that "few rural children had access to newspapers, so the burden of Current Events was borne by the town children, convincing the bus children more deeply that the town children got all the attention anyway" (279). Scout realizes that in this setting, she has a certain cultural capital, imparted to

her by Atticus. This capital privileges her above the rural children, who are associated with “reading the Grit Paper...liking fiddling, eating syrupy biscuits, being holy-rollers, singing *Sweetly Sings the Donkey* and pronouncing it dunkey, all of which the state paid teachers to discourage” (280). Scout’s observation attends to differences in discourse, signaling her emerging understanding that not everyone’s discourse is equally valued in her social environment, and that valuation grants students more and less agency for their own success in the classroom.

In spite of the biased valuations of literacy in the school system, the students’ questions, such as those about Nazism and race, suggest that they are already critical thinkers. In reality, many voices in Maycomb indicate subversive elements that are naturally embedded in the local culture. There is a sense of subversion, for example, in the Ewell children’s refusal to attend a school that does not serve them well (31); in Lula’s desire to seclude the African American church from White visitors (135); or in Mr. Dolphus Raymond’s choice to live with an African American woman (183). The practice of reading and criticizing the social environment is inherently, subtly present in Scout’s day-to-day setting. Critical literacy is not the exclusive practice of cultural elites. In reality, the town’s elites, like the Ladies’ Missionary Circle, are actually less critical of the social environment because they are not routinely forced to consider the implications of their worldviews. Many of Maycomb’s astute critics, however, have no opportunities to act on their criticisms in favor of meaningful change, because of their position in the stifling social structure. Scout, by contrast, is particularly well-positioned to become a critic with agency.

Eric Sundquist, examining the relationship between Scout’s setting in the 1930’s and Harper Lee’s in the late 1950’s, muses that Scout represents the “white southern children”

destined to grow into the “supporters of interposition and massive resistance, members of White Citizens Councils, those who spit on the Little Rock students...” (Sundquist 191). This pure speculation is unconvincingly based on the book’s silence about Scout’s adult life. Sundquist does not acknowledge that, due to Atticus’s *laissez faire* parenting, Scout already exists uniquely apart from Maycomb’s social categories. As a girl who wears boys’ clothing and keeps boys’ company, Scout crosses social boundaries on a daily basis, before she is even cognizant of such boundaries. Indeed, Aunt Alexandra chooses to reside with the Finches so she can enforce a degree of adherence to the town’s social categories, convinced that her niece has turned “wild” from the remarkable freedom to meet a variety of people, experiment with various roles, and venture into multiple settings (155). These fundamental characteristics of the narrator lay the groundwork for her potential defiance.

As the story progresses, Scout seeks to exercise her agency across social boundaries early on, when, for example, she wants to visit Calpurnia, “to be her company, to see how she lived, who her friends were” (256); or again when she breaks up the lynch mob with her earnest concern for Mr. Cunningham’s “entailment” and “his boy” (174); or, most notably, when she sits in the “Colored balcony” during the trial (187). Scout acts unaware of the social boundaries she crosses on these occasions, but there are moments when her critical awareness suddenly bursts into the text. When Mayella Ewell is on the stand at Tom Robinson’s trial, Scout suddenly realizes that “Mayella Ewell must have been the loneliest person in the world...Nobody said ‘that’s just their way’ about the Ewells. Maycomb gave them Christmas baskets, welfare money, and the back of its hand” (218). Scout not only comprehends Mayella’s world view, she also comprehends that Maycomb’s collective actions have formed Mayella’s downtrodden and defiant persona, and precipitated her desperate behavior. Sundquist should have no doubt that

Scout will not use her agency for detriment because she understands that a person's actions – even participation in routine community behaviors - can have a lasting effect on another's life.

As Scout becomes increasingly aware of her social environment and her subjectivity in relation to it, she exercises her agency more consciously. For example, she insistently befriends and defends Walter Cunningham. Aunt Alexandra shudders at the very idea of friendship with a country boy, but Scout deliberately defies the class boundary, saying that Walter is from “good folks” (255). The term intentionally appeals to Aunt Alexandra's social ethos, under which “good folks,” regardless of their personal merits, are not worthy of association if they lack cultural capital similar to her own (256). Scout's mimicry, however, transforms the term “good folks” to include anyone she desires to know better and to befriend (256). Under this redefinition, even Boo Radley becomes “good folks,” though he is Maycomb's oldest recluse and social outcast. Scout befriends Boo as soon as they meet; she leads him to the porch, takes his hand, lets him visit Jem, tries to “understand his body English,” and walks home with him (319). Her contact with Boo, whom she spent many afternoons heckling, marks the new and critical consciousness of her actions.

At the narrative's close, Scout understands social boundaries as artificial rather than imperative, and so willingly defies those boundaries. Her actions are certainly small and personal ones that only vaguely resemble challenges to hegemonic discourses, but she is still eight years old. They are precursors to the moment when, as a teenager or a young adult, Scout exercises her agency on a much grander scale: she tells her story, layering her narrative with commentary on discourses of division, justice, and morality, and the processes by which we learn to internalize or resist them.

Scout as Narrator: Constructing a Critique of Literacy

After chronicling Scout's journey into consciousness, an examination of Scout's narrative style affirms her continuous practice of critical literacy beyond her eight-year-old self. The narrator Scout, years more mature than the child Scout she chronicles, speaks with a voice distinct from that of her childhood counterpart, a voice that transforms the events of her early education in light of a new understanding of her environment and herself. She unites her knowledge and reactions as a child with an astutely ironic, biting, or poignant view of the same scenes, and this double voice becomes a conversation with her educators. As Atticus or her schoolteachers speak to the child Scout, the narrator Scout responds with a critical tone, making her teachers' strengths and limitations accessible to readers through her descriptions, juxtapositions, and textual ironies. We hear that critical tone when, for example, the narrator draws a sharp contrast between her expectations of school and its reality; when she describes Miss Caroline as a nonsensical and counterproductive teacher, and Miss Gates as a hesitant and hypocritical one; or when she juxtaposes segments of Atticus's speech to reveal the contradictions of his pedagogical discourse. This style of dual narration accomplishes two purposes: first, it chronicles how Scout, as a child, develops her critical literacy; and second, it exemplifies how she practices that literacy, years after her formative education.

The older Scout's narrative process, combined with the younger Scout's learning process, forms a coherent critique of the practice and pedagogy of literacy in Maycomb, in keeping with Freire and Macedo's theory of critical literacy. In parodying the harmful attitudes surrounding literacy practice in Maycomb's school, Scout denounces the functional systems of reading and writing as the sole definers of literacy. In rendering her relationship with Atticus, she expands the definition of literacy to include the critical work of interpreting the environment as a text, and

exposes the problems inherent in reading live texts with an unexamined subjectivity. Finally, in reflecting on her classroom encounters and her own acts of performance and agency, Scout qualifies literacy as a purposeful practice that has an active presence in daily life. Essentially, Scout's practice of "reading" the environment concomitantly demands the practice of "writing" the environment. Literacy must move beyond the passivity that was so troubling in Atticus's character, and enter into the dialectical relationship between observation and participation that promotes Scout's development as a critical thinker. Scout's critical literacy is not limited by setting, but one which can be practiced in any environment – the living room, the front yard, the courtroom, and, yes, even the Maycomb schools.

The argument for Scout as a revisionist of literacy practice counters those critics, including Sundquist, Freedman, and Hovet, who declare the novel an unsettling defense of liberal gradualism because "little seems changed in Maycomb" at the novel's end (Hovet 77). The sense of stagnation is undeniable: Atticus is re-elected to the legislature unopposed; Boo Radley recedes into his house, never to come out again; Scout continues to participate in school practices that hardly extend her intellectual skill; and the social institutions that condemned Tom Robinson remain unexamined by Maycomb's citizens. But if the reader has grasped the nature of the narrative's construction, the very sameness of Maycomb at the novel's end is as unsettling as Atticus's classism, or Miss Caroline's punishment of a student for being literate. Harold Bloom describes *To Kill A Mockingbird* as "a representative voice from a time before Americans began to question authority in every form," but to the contrary, the construction of Scout's narrative indicates her willingness to deviate from the teachings of authority figures in her life and ultimately to critique the limitations of those authority figures (Bloom). Scout articulates a

coherent evaluation of her environment that indicates the need, and indeed the possibility, for change that is present in Maycomb.

Beyond the Allure of the Sentimental Text

That Scout's text holds "emotive sway" over its readers is in some sense ironic, given that, as both a character and a narrator, Scout engages in a good deal of critical thought, but very little emotion (Sundquist 183). During the events that seem most psychologically intense, Scout processes her surroundings through her intellectual confusion, rather than through her emotion. After Tom Robinson's trial, her brother Jem's "face was streaked with angry tears as [they] made [their] way through the cheerful crowd," but Scout does not understand his reaction, just as she did not understand why Dill "had started crying and couldn't stop" earlier during the trial (242, 225). Unlike Jem and Dill, Scout is just discovering knowledge of the truths, problems, and injustices in her environment, which she realizes through the practice of her developing literacy. As a child, she reads and questions her environment when "it [is] confusing," and develops her understandings into the criticisms that she narrates years later (186). If this story were Jem's, we would drown in his angry tears; if it were Dill's, we would be blinded by his idealism; if it were Atticus's, we would be deafened by his didacticism. This story is uniquely Scout's because her relatively unemotional eye does not obscure or undermine her criticisms of Maycomb society.

As Scout grows into consciousness of her surroundings, she departs from the style of unexamined, emotive reading that Sundquist and Baldwin denounce. As she subtly critiques her educators, she models the practice of critical literacy as an alternative approach to that style of reading. Her narrative exposes the limitations of teaching basic literacy alone, and the futility of approaching texts as transparent and inherently valuable learning encounters. Her commentary

on literacy potentially impels readers and teachers of *Mockingbird* beyond the allure of the sentimental or self-interpreting text, and beyond the project of literary message hunting, which can only reduce the novel to a fable of racism, heroism, or childhood in a distant time and place. Scout vigorously favors literacy that poses “dangerous questions,” that disrupts the familiar and revises the known, that has intellectual ramifications and real world significance. Thus her text functions as a call for readers and teachers to undertake the practice of critical literacy that ultimately renders her story an emotionally powerful narrative of coming into consciousness.

Addendum: Extending Scout's Literacy to the Literature Classroom

Mockingbird holds a prominent position in a canon of school literature for young adults, and thousands of curricula exist, online, in bookstores, and in the dusty archives of English departments around the world, and each most likely proclaims the great merits of this novel as an instructional tool. The decision to include *To Kill A Mockingbird* in a middle or high school literature curriculum seems by now a “natural” choice. Robert Scholes, however, cautions that curriculum is never a natural choice. Rather, it is always an inherently ideological one, particularly in the case of a politically and culturally potent work such as *Mockingbird*. He notes that a classic work’s “very naturalness, its apparent inevitability, makes it especially suspect,” as a text that risks becoming overly coded with values and ripe for trite interpretations (Scholes 58). In light of Scout’s practice of critical literacy, however, and her criticism of various forms of literacy pedagogy, the novel itself potentially informs the teaching of *To Kill A Mockingbird* in English literature classrooms. Such curriculum might be difficult to find in a mass-marketed version, but the curricula of two practicing English teachers, published in two popular language arts journals in recent years, fulfill *Mockingbird*’s internal desire to function as more than a self-interpreting text.

Abigail Foss, an eighth grade teacher in the United States, notes that she felt “uncomfortable with the mandatory approach taken to the novel,” and “a legacy of resistance to the compulsory reading” surfaced among her students. In an effort to turn a stale curriculum into a meaningful experience that would live beyond the classroom, Foss designed a unit that centered on three concepts: education, subject positions, and privilege, all of which are concerns related to Scout as well as to critical literacy (395). Though Foss’s curricular activities seem to stray from the novel itself, her students undertake a number of practices that Scout would deem

effective for developing critical literacy. First, Foss broadens her students' interpretive horizons by directing their attention to the texts of their environment, from which they write narratives of their educational experiences. Next, she engages them in an examination of their own subjectivities as they create maps of their social identities. Finally, she poses a series of very dangerous questions when she engages her students in a privilege walk, followed by a discussion of the experience.³ Foss's curriculum matches Scout's emphasis on reading the environment and examining one's subjectivity. Her curriculum pursues a consciousness-raising approach that seeks to make students aware of the world and their position in it.

On the other side of the world, Marian Spires, a Year 10 teacher in Australia, felt similarly to Foss, in that teaching and studying *Mockingbird* "is almost a fact of life that we accept without question" (Spires 53). Motivated by this feeling of ennui, Spires turns the focus of her unit into an examination of past curricula that the school had used for teaching the novel.⁴ The guiding question for her unit is "Why has *To Kill A Mockingbird* sat on our Year 10 English course for the last ten years?" (Spires 55). Students first examine their environment as a text, creating a survey for older people who have read the novel, so that they can access its perceived cultural and literary significance. Then, the students examine and critique essay topics that previous English teachers assigned, thereby becoming critiques of their school's pedagogy and its limitations. Finally, each student writes two essay topics of his own, in a rare moment of freedom that allows the student to be an agent of his own education. In contrast to Foss's

³ In a privilege walk, the teacher reads a statement regarding race, class, religion, etc, and the students take one step forward if the statement is true for them. In the end, students of dominant backgrounds stand ahead of students of minority backgrounds. The exercise is intended to make students aware of their position in the social structure (Foss 400).

⁴ Spires's idea echoes Freire's idea of curriculum-as-text, which proposes that we can understand how a text is interpreted and used in a classroom, by treating the curriculum in which it is embedded as a text itself. In the case of literature courses, curriculum is a form of literary criticism: a text about a text, encoded with beliefs about the purpose, practice, and outcomes of reading. Within a literature curriculum, "the organization of knowledge, social relations, values, and forms of assessment" indicates "a set of underlying interests that structure how a particular story is told" (Freire 19).

curriculum, Spires's unit does not focus on developing students' awareness of their subjectivities or the ambient social structure. Instead, she helps her students to become like the questioning and critical Scout with regard to their education, by critiquing the values promoted in particular forms of reading and teaching, rather than taking those values for granted as "right."

Interestingly, both Foss and Spires relied on the work of Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo in formulating their curricula, but neither teacher seems aware of the organic connection between *Mockingbird* and the concept of critical literacy. Their curricular designs currently enable students to undertake Scout's invitation to journey into greater consciousness, but they are potentially strengthened by a reading of Scout's text in terms of critical literacy. In their current form, each teacher addresses the aspect of critical literacy most pertinent to her setting: for Foss, the examination of social structure seems most effective for students who have little exposure to non-dominant discourses; for Spires, the critique of an unquestioned curriculum seems most effective for students who are stifled by a fixed school canon. Though their activities vary widely, both Foss and Spires know that, for Scout's readers to capture the intellectual and emotional power of critical literacy, they must not only read about her experiences on the page, but have those kinds of eye-opening experiences themselves.

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