

ARTICLE

WHAT IS JOHN DEWEY DOING IN
TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD?

Jeff Frank

ABSTRACT

Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* is taught in countless public schools and is beloved by many teachers and future teachers. Embedded within this novel—interestingly—is a strong criticism of an approach to education mockingly referred to as the “Dewey Decimal System.” In this essay I explore Lee's criticism of progressive education and argue that it tells us something interesting about the novel and about approaches to education inspired by John Dewey.

I had not read *To Kill a Mockingbird* since I was assigned it in middle school. However, recently I revisited the novel because many of my students—future teachers—mentioned that it was their favorite book. From what I remembered from middle school, the book was about the courage of Atticus Finch as he makes the unpopular, though just, choice to defend an innocent black man in court. As well, I remember the narrator, Scout, a very strong young woman who—like her father—follows her convictions, even if these put her at odds with others. What I remembered made me feel as if I understood why my students might like the novel. I worked with future teachers at a Southern women's college.¹ The strength of the female narrator, the pursuit of a better world, and a deep respect for types of virtue—embodied by Atticus—that flourish in the South made me think I knew why Harper Lee's work would resonate with my students.

I began reading the book again hoping to learn something more about my students. Soon, though, I found myself fascinated by the presence of John Dewey in the text. In a book read in countless public schools, in a book treasured by many teachers, why is it that Dewey's educational thought seems to stand as an object of criticism if not downright derision?

The question, at first, seemed trivial, easily dismissed as stemming only from a confluence of who I am, what interests me, and the concerns I had while reading the novel. I think Dewey's educational philosophy is important for future teachers to think about; and I wondered if Lee's novel might—in some way—dissuade

future teachers from taking his thought seriously. As well, I worried that Lee's novel might not stand up to the critical scrutiny I was bringing to bear on it. After all, some critics dismissed the book—in the nicest of ways—as being little more than adolescent literature that would be of passing importance.² Finally, criticizing Dewey is nothing new. As readers of this journal know, and as a few Google searches will quickly demonstrate, there are Americans who feel that Dewey is responsible for just about every ill that has befallen public education in America. And, a more scholarly approach does not always cast him in a more favorable light. Just recently Frank Margonis has argued that Dewey's approach to education was only intended for European American students; as such, adhering to his philosophy will marginalize and mis-educate African American students.³

Despite these initial questions and reservations, I couldn't help but think there was something more to the questions I was caused to ask by rereading Lee's novel. First—and as recent scholarship on *To Kill a Mockingbird* demonstrates⁴—I think Lee's work is not of passing interest; it only gains through critical engagement. Jennifer Murray makes this point nicely when she writes,

Instead of trying to silence the troubling discourses of Lee's work to unify its meaning, our task is to give them voice. . . . By interrogating the "un-said" of the novel's discourses, by allowing the text its roughness, its contradictory impulses and omissions, we might best discover whether the mockingbird really has anything to tell us about history, about otherness, about ourselves.⁵

John Dewey's presence is one of these troubling discourses in the novel. I disagree with Joseph Crespino—in what I have found to be the only discussion of Lee and Dewey in scholarship on *To Kill a Mockingbird*—when he writes,

Lee's indirect reference to him [John Dewey] here encapsulates her vision of the relationship between northern and southern liberalism. Scout does not need the new, "improved" pedagogical techniques of the young teacher [Miss Caroline]; she knows how to read already. She was taught by her father, Atticus, the model of southern erudition. Scout's literacy here is a symbol of the South's ability to analyze its own problems, to deal with them in its own regionally specific way.⁶

While the education passages in chapter 2 of the novel—where Scout is dissuaded from reading because her father is not a professional teacher (an approach her brother Jem calls the Dewey Decimal System)⁷—are clearly meant to poke fun at some excesses of progressive education, the other classroom scenes—and Scout's reflections on them—suggest a more complicated and more interesting interpretation of Dewey and progressive education than Crespino's article allows for. Lee's criticism of Dewey—as I hope to demonstrate over the course of this essay—is not a simple case of Northern versus Southern liberalism. This becomes most clear, I

believe, when we turn our attention away from Scout's initial experience in school and consider the other moments when progressive education is discussed. This brings me to my second point. While criticisms of Dewey are common, I think Harper Lee's criticism is more subtle and important than it might initially appear. As such, thinking through this criticism will—I hope—teach us something important about the novel and about progressive education. Again, while criticizing Dewey is often easy—and often not illuminating—I think Harper Lee's criticism—embedded in a book that is treasured by many teachers and students—is quite interesting and worth our serious attention.

Before discussing the novel directly, it is important to think about what Lee might mean when she refers to progressive education. The novel is set in 1935, though it is written in 1960. Progressive education in Alabama before 1935 was highlighted in John and (his daughter) Evelyn Dewey's 1915 work *Schools of To-Morrow*. *Schools of To-Morrow* was one of Dewey's most popular books, and it was reviewed widely upon its publication. The structure of the book is interesting. John and Evelyn write about a number of very different progressive schools, and the concluding chapter of the book shifts from a descriptive work—describing what is happening at these schools—to a normative one—discussing how schools might be best arranged. This final chapter, “Democracy and Education,” will eventually be expanded and reworked into one of John Dewey's most important works on education, *Democracy and Education*. This brief discussion is meant to highlight that the schools mentioned in *Schools of To-Morrow* are not necessarily representative of Dewey's mature philosophy of education. Nonetheless, they are often taken that way. Because of this, it is easy to see why Lee might pick up *Schools of To-Morrow* and believe that the descriptive aspect of the schools John and Evelyn discuss are meant to be normative, that is, representative of Dewey's philosophy of education. I say this because I think it is important to realize that David Hawkins has a point when he writes, “It is not easy to criticize Dewey, because when you do you usually find that he has made the necessary qualifications somewhere else in his vast writings.”⁸ So, if we believe that Lee's criticism of John Dewey is based on her reading of one or more of the descriptive chapters of *Schools of To-Morrow*, it is bound to be limited.

Saying this, it is nonetheless interesting to think about the chapter on progressive education in Alabama featured in this book. John and Evelyn visited Marietta Johnson's School of Organic Education in Fairhope, Alabama, and were tremendously impressed by what they observed. Marietta Johnson believed that pressuring children into literacy often had negative effects.⁹ Rather than forcing the same approach to literacy onto each child, Johnson allowed children to explore the natural environment and do things that were of interest to them. If they wanted to read—say, at home, under the tutelage of a sagacious father like Atticus—they weren't discouraged from doing so. Johnson's point is that we shouldn't

rush children into literacy if they do not seem to take an interest in it. John and Evelyn put that same point this way:

Bright and intelligent children often acquire a distaste for the schoolroom and what comes out of it, which they not only never wholly outgrow but which is a real handicap to them as they grow up, often preventing them from taking their college work seriously, and making them suspicious of all ideas not actually deduced from their own experience outside the classroom. . . . The students at Fairhope will never have this handicap to contend with.¹⁰

There is a real irony here. Progressive methods are meant to allow students to develop the type of industry in school that allows them to be successful across the course of their schooling career. This stands in stark contrast to Scout's experience. Miss Caroline is well intentioned, but she does not know that her instructional methods are having the opposite of their intended effect. Instead of making Scout interested in learning, she makes Scout learn to be disinterested in school. Though the methods she uses may be of some use to some students, they clearly fail Scout. The question here becomes: What are we meant to take away from chapter 2's depiction of education? Is Lee critical of how progressive educational programs are enacted in schools, or may she be hinting—albeit very obliquely—at the idea that Scout might have done well with Marietta Johnson, but few schools are like the School of Organic Education?

We will return to these questions later, but I want to turn now to another lens we can use to view and think about education in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In 1941, *Life* magazine ran a story on the Holtville School in Alabama. Although the Holtville experiment happened after the time *Mockingbird* was set, this article would most likely have come to the attention of Lee. The Holtville School set out to do something that Dewey felt was essential: Holtville broke down the barriers between the school and the community.¹¹ At Holtville, students learned to do things that immediately improved the life of the community. When students learned, for example, that a fourth of the meat slaughtered in the county was lost, they established a new refrigeration and slaughtering plant. As well, Holtville created a cannery that students ran for the benefit of the community; they experimented with new forms of farming that also made an immediate impact on community life. *Life* put the point this way: "Holtville High School set out to fit its students for their future life in Holtville. . . . This group action for the good of the group is the best kind of object lesson in a working democracy."¹² Although the Holtville experiment happened after John and Evelyn wrote *Schools of To-Morrow*, it is clear that they would have admired this experiment in democracy. As they write in the concluding chapter of this popular book, "The academic education turns out future citizens with no sympathy for work done with the hands, and with absolutely no training for understanding the most serious of present-day social and political difficulties."¹³ Holtville doesn't offer this "academic"

form of education; the students work with their hands, and they understand that the work they are doing in school is responsive to some of the most serious present-day difficulties facing their community. As well, Holtville is very much aligned with John and Evelyn's thinking that "[t]he necessary thing is still, as it will be all his life, the power of adjustment. Good adjustment means a successful human being."¹⁴ Adjustment is the individual finding her way forward as she confronts problems posed by her environment and by her peers. Good adjustment means successfully solving these problems as an individual and solving these problems democratically when she must contend with the will of a group.

As I noted earlier, when we think about Lee's criticism of the Dewey Decimal System, we often recall Miss Caroline telling Scout that Atticus needs to stop teaching her how to read because he doesn't know how to teach reading. But, as Scout progresses through school, her criticism of the Dewey Decimal System changes focus. Lee writes,

The remainder of my schooldays were no more auspicious than the first. Indeed, they were an endless Project that slowly evolved into a Unit, in which miles of construction paper and wax crayon were expended by the State of Alabama in its well-meaning but fruitless efforts to teach me Group Dynamics. 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. Furthermore, I couldn't help but noticing that my father had served for years in the state legislature, elected each time without opposition, innocent of the adjustment my teachers thought essential to the development of Good Citizenship.¹⁵

This passage begins with a jab at the "project method," an approach to progressive education developed by William Heard Kirkpatrick at Teachers College, Columbia University, and then leads to the introduction of the capitalized term "Group Dynamics." Here I think we can see Lee—through Scout—criticizing the idea of "adjustment" and progressive approaches to education championed by Dewey, and enacted at Holtville, that focus on how to fit the individual for productive social life. As Scout continues her reflections, she wonders how it is that her father became so well adjusted absent progressive education. This leads to the question: Is an explicit focus on fitting an individual for social and democratic life more efficacious than an education where an individual is free to pursue his or her own passions and interests independent of any social utility that these may initially appear to have? Put otherwise, is Atticus—someone who is free to study and read along lines of his own interest—better fit to serve our democracy than an individual who is explicitly taught to think about his or her relationship to the life of the collective—be it one's own local community (Holtville) or one's community writ large (Deweyan democracy)?¹⁶

Before pursuing this line of questioning—which I take to be central to how we might understand Lee’s most interesting contribution to thinking about education—I want to consider one more possibility. In his biography of Harper Lee, Charles Shields writes briefly about the contrasting forms of education her parents received. Her father, A. C. Lee, “was an independent reader. At sixteen, he passed the examination to teach, and for three years did so, at a school near Mariana, Florida.”¹⁷ By contrast, her mother, Frances Finch, attended the Alabama Girls’ Industrial School, a progressive school founded by Julia Tutwiler. Shields makes the case that Lee’s father becomes the model for Atticus Finch, while “deliberately or not, [Harper Lee] rebelled at everything her mother valued.”¹⁸ It is unclear how much Lee’s mother valued her education, but Shields implies that her education—where she devoted her time to the study of music—may have accounted—even if in some small way—for the difficulties that Lee’s mother faced throughout her life, and which led to a strained relationship between mother and daughter. This is pure speculation. Though Tutwiler believed that education should prepare each student for living meaningful lives outside of school, she is an advocate for teachers receiving a liberal arts education (not, that is, teaching teachers to follow any educational system).¹⁹ As well, when we look at the course of instruction that Frances Finch followed while at the Alabama Girls’ Industrial School,²⁰ it does strike one as “academic” in the sense that John and Evelyn Dewey are critical of in the conclusion to *Schools of To-Morrow*. As such, this brief biographical digression may say very little about Lee’s feelings about progressive education and John Dewey. Nonetheless, I think it is worth mentioning so that readers of this essay might consider its significance, and because I believe that if Shields is correct, then some of the mixed feelings Lee has when writing about Scout’s education might have a root in aspects of her own life. I will not consider this point more fully in this essay, but I include it here because it might prove an interesting line of inquiry that others might wish to follow.

The question I devote the rest of this essay to is the relationship between education and what Lee calls “Group Dynamics” and “Good Citizenship.” Again, while the Miss Caroline episode represents a relatively straightforward criticism of the excesses of progressive education, I don’t think it is particularly challenging or illuminating. It is clear that Miss Caroline’s belief that Atticus cannot teach reading because he has never been taught to teach reading is absurd—Scout, in fact, can read and has little to learn from Miss Caroline’s teaching methods—but it is not the case that Dewey would endorse Miss Caroline’s so-called teaching methods. More, when we look at a form of teaching Dewey does look favorably upon—Marjette Johnson’s approach—we can see that Scout would most likely, I believe, gain from being in a school like the School of Organic Education. This is why I think it is more important to focus on the question of whether or not progressive education can more effectively educate individuals for citizenship than other forms of

education (instead of focusing on how Lee portrays literacy education in *To Kill a Mockingbird*). While progressive education takes the development of citizenship as one of its central foci, it might be the case that an explicit focus on creating good citizens has the opposite of its intended effect.²¹ Listen to another dimension of Scout's thinking (in chapter 26) on the education she received:

Once a week, we had a Current Events period. Each child was supposed to clip an item from a newspaper, absorb its contents, and reveal them to the class. This practice allegedly overcame a variety of evils: standing in front of his fellows encouraged good posture and gave a child poise; delivering a short talk made him word-conscious; learning his current event strengthened his memory; being singled out made him more than ever anxious to return to the Group.²²

Lee capitalizes the words "Current Events" and "Group." The intended effect of having students focus on what is happening in their world is to empower future citizens to take an active part in their community. But—as Scout so astutely points out—there is a great difference between intentions and practice. Instead of making students active participants in civic life, "Current Events" reminds students that it is better to be a part of the "Group" than an individual who is able to think for her- or himself.

The significance of this passage is only compounded when we recall that the "Current Events" being discussed in Scout's class are related to Hitler. When discussing Hitler, Scout's teacher (Miss Gates) is vehemently opposed to any form of prejudice, but Scout remembers that Miss Gates also believes (recalling what she saw on the day of Tom Robinson's trial) that black Americans should be consigned forever to second-class citizenship. This strikes me as one important dimension of Lee's thinking on education. Teachers are often hypocrites. While the ideals of equality and democracy are easy to mouth, children are not oblivious to—and Scout, in particular, is acutely aware of—the fact that ideals pronounced in school make little impact on the conduct of life. Teachers say one thing in school and live another way outside of school. In a sense, this is John Dewey's point. School is disconnected from society. If we aspire to a democratic culture that stands in stark opposition to Hitler's Germany, then our schools have to be places where children learn how to enact that culture. But, again, Scout can see that the culture of American schools is one that doesn't value individuals who will stand up for what they believe. Instead, the people she knows—most notably her father—who do stand for something, chafe, as she does, against the culture of school. Despite the best efforts of the progressive movement, Scout seems to believe that individuality is something that cannot be fostered in school. By necessity, schools are about the "Group": there is one teacher and thirty students. A teacher cannot give her attention to each student, and so each student learns how to wait and how to find her place in the "Group."²³ Students who stand out—like Scout—will all too often be perceived as problems.

Scout would rather be a problem than a member of a “Group,” and this is why she continually asks Atticus if she can stop attending school. While Scout’s goal is certainly not to be a problem, she will not give up on who she is and what she believes in order to conform to the expectations of teachers (who, as we’ve seen, can be hypocrites or seemingly mindless adherents of a “System” that doesn’t make sense of what is actually happening in the classroom). We can see the importance of this line of thinking in two very important ways. First, Scout saves Atticus from a mob of men hoping to intimidate him and, ultimately, determine Robinson’s fate outside of the law. On that night, Scout is able to appeal to an individual, Walter Cunningham’s father, and in so doing she is able to break the mob. As Atticus notes, “So it took an eight-year-old child to bring ’em to their senses, didn’t it? . . . That proves something—that a gang of wild animals *can* be stopped, simply because they are still human.”²⁴ We can become “adjusted” to the life of the “Group”—be it an angry lynch mob or even Hitler’s Germany—but what is needful, at least as I hear Lee suggesting through this passage, is for all of us to be reminded of our humanity—a humanity that we share in common, but which is uniquely ours as individuals. Walter Cunningham’s father is able to choose the better rather than the worse as an individual, not as a member of the mob. This is not to say that adjustment is not important or that we shouldn’t be mindful of how we relate to others in a democratic society. The issue is emphasis: if we focus on fitting ourselves to the group, or preparing to become a member of a democratic whole, we can find our individual sense—our values, our principles, our conscience—subsumed within a system that makes the collective far less than the sum total of its individual parts.

This brings me to the second point, and what I take to be the crux of the matter. If Atticus stands as representative of what it means to be educated (or, at least, more educated than someone who is produced by the “Dewey Decimal System”), then what are we meant to learn from his example? There is certainly a great deal of debate when it comes to Atticus. While I believe it is safe to say that in the popular imagination—and in literature about what it means to be a lawyer—where Atticus is held up as a moral exemplar, this reading has been called into question.²⁵ While I think criticisms of Atticus are useful and have their place, I find it challenging when Atticus is treated as a person and not as a character in a novel. That is, while we can see that if Atticus were a real person really called on to defend Robinson in court, then there are things we might have wished he had done differently (in particular, we will want to see Atticus more fully engaged and listening to the concerns of his client, his client’s wife and his client’s community; that is, we will want him to be more racially sensitive than he appears in the novel).²⁶ But Atticus is a character in a novel, and what this character has to teach is lost—I feel—when we treat Atticus as a real person—as someone an aspiring lawyer should hope to become. When we think about Atticus as a character in Lee’s novel—and this is also something that

has also been a focus in the scholarship on the novel—we are forced to think about the role of principles, most notably moral principles, in the novel.²⁷

When we think about Atticus, do we think about a man of principle, or a man who does what is right because he has a certain type of character? That is, is it more important that Atticus defends Robinson out of a sense of duty—he does what he does because that is what the law requires—or because he is the type of person who can put himself in another person's shoes? I think this is a difficult question to answer. We have to wonder if Atticus's empathy—alone—would have compelled him to defend Tom. Or, is it the principle of the thing—that he was selected to defend Tom—that matters? Would empathy be enough, or is it the principle that is motivating? Tim Dare answers the question this way: "Atticus supporters present him as the *phronimos*, an expert in practical reason sensitive both to general principles and the particularities of cases. Atticus is one who knows what to do not by applying general principles, but by being the sort of person he is, by having the sort of character he has."²⁸ If this is the case—if it is his principles and not his character that are paramount—then Dare may be right when he concludes, "Atticus does have an important lesson for professional and legal ethics, but not one about the importance of character over rules and principles. On the contrary, Atticus allows us to see the importance of the principles of law he defends so eloquently in Tom's case and abandons so tragically in Boo's case."²⁹ Dare believes that Atticus is exemplary because his principles compel him to take on Tom's case. But Dare also feels that Atticus should have brought Boo Radley's case in front of a court. While Boo would have been exposed to the prying eyes of the public through trial, it is important, according to Dare, that he get his trial: that principles of justice are not overridden by Atticus's personal knowledge of, and gratitude toward, Boo.

Not everyone agrees with Dare's reading. Claudia Johnson believes that Atticus—in turning against his principled nature when it comes to Boo—is making the best decision possible given the situation.³⁰ As well, Gregg Crane actually makes the interesting point that the decision to spare Boo a trial demonstrates that Atticus is very much in line with John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy. Crane writes, "To arrive at his decision not to subject Boo Radley to criminal investigation for the death of Bob Ewell, Atticus Finch must surrender his rule-making and rule-enforcing rationality to an intuitive sense of what is right."³¹ What all three of these readings share, I think, is a belief that Atticus is foremost a man of principle. Where they differ is how they interpret the ending of the novel. Dare believes that Atticus should have followed his principles—and brought Boo to trial—while Johnson and Crane believe that it is important, given contextual and situational differences, to adjust these principles. As such, they believe that Atticus made the best decision possible when he decided that Boo did not have to stand trial. When we begin thinking about this line of questioning in the literature, we do have to wonder about the character of Atticus. If we see him as a character worthy of respect,³² is

it because he is principled or because he is able to adapt his principles given context and situational differences?

I tend to believe it is Atticus's principled nature that makes him a character worthy of our respect. Atticus does his best to be a good father, he does his best to be a good lawyer, and he does his best to be a good member of his community. In all of these roles he does not adjust himself; he lives by principle. When speaking with his brother about what it means to speak with a child, he says, "When a child asks you something, answer him, for goodness' sake. But don't make a production of it. Children are children, but they can spot an evasion quicker than adults, and evasion simply muddles 'em."³³ This way of parenting is upsetting to his sister and to other members of the community—there is a sense that he is not giving Scout the type of education a young woman requires—but Atticus stands firm in his beliefs. When he does waiver, attempting to adjust to Aunt Alexandra's expectations, at the end of chapter 13, we can see why it is important that he has his principles to stand on. Without these principles, he would alienate Jem and Scout and cause them to live up to expectations that he himself does not hold. As a lawyer, I think this point is even clearer. We can imagine many lawyers failing to take on Tom's case, even though they are legally compelled to do so. Finally, as a member of a community, we can see that Atticus always attempts to see the best in everyone, and he finds ways to be neighborly while also remaining truthful to his own values. For this he gains the respect and trust of his community, even though his ways are often at odds with those of the group. For this reason, I see something tragic in the ending of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I think Atticus would have put his own children on trial if he thought they had killed Bob Ewell in self-defense, just as I think he would have put Boo Radley on trial if Sheriff Heck didn't demand, in his role as the law, that Atticus drop the matter. While Atticus could have fought Heck on this point, I don't think his acquiescing to Heck's demands represents anything like a pragmatic adjustment. If anything, it is another tragic reminder of how difficult it is to live our principles. Living our principles, Tom would not be convicted; living our principles, citizens would not come to Boo's trial to gawk with no real interest in discovering the truth. Although principles are difficult to enact, it doesn't mean that adjustment is the outcome. Atticus stands by his principles, knowing that they will often be challenged and subverted by the exigencies of lived experience.

This leads me back to education. I believe that Harper Lee's criticism of John Dewey-inspired progressive education is that it does not do full justice to the role that principles play in life. For Lee, as shown through the character of Atticus, adjustment can lead to conformity if not mob rule. Being principled, by contrast, leads to the possibility of standing against community ways of living and thinking that are harmful to individuals and to the community. Prominent pragmatic philosopher Robert Brandom makes something of a similar point when thinking about how pragmatists responded to the Civil War. Brandom makes the compelling case that

pragmatists—especially after the war—were more interested in conciliation than they were in justice.³⁴ With respect to the law, he argues that “[Justice] Holmes, in particular, expressed his pragmatic view that talk of principles always masked the collision of social forces,”³⁵ and so Holmes shifted the focus of pragmatic legal thinking away from principles and to procedures for adjudicating between competing interests and perspectives. This shift in focus had a major and extremely negative impact on black Americans. Brandom argues that instead of sticking by principles that the Court felt many Southerners might find hard to accept, the law adjusted its principles to pernicious racial beliefs in the hope of bringing the country together after the Civil War, and so paved the way for Jim Crow and separate educational institutions for black and white Americans. Brandom goes on to say, “It is arguable that this period in American history—this latter-day Great Compromise—did as much damage to race relations in the United States as slavery itself had done.”³⁶

This is a brief snapshot of a very detailed and provocative argument. I share it because I find it intriguing that a leading pragmatist philosopher would raise such pointed questions about the political and social impact of pragmatic thought. If Brandom is correct in his analysis, then we should be very concerned about what happens when we trade adjustment for principles. This strikes me as Lee’s concern when it comes to education. It is not a matter, as Crespino argues, of Northern versus Southern liberalism. It is rather, as I read it, a matter of the potential negative influence that Dewey-inspired education has on the development of individual citizens. We don’t need adjustment, especially when adjustment comes at the cost of injustice and cruelty. We need young people of principle—people who will live by their beliefs, even as these beliefs make them seem maladjusted to the culture they find themselves in. Scout feels this way in school, and Atticus, to some extent, feels this way as a member of the Maycomb community. But, for all of this, these maladjusted characters are somehow also the voice of reason in the community. Atticus is Maycomb’s representative, even after the court case; Scout is able to keep a mob from killing Tom and her father, and it is her voice that has inspired countless readers of the novel to rethink their own assumptions about what it means to live a better life.

As I mentioned at the outset, none of this is meant to be a criticism of John Dewey. Instead, I find Lee’s criticism of Dewey-inspired education worthy of our attention because it helps us ask interesting question about what type of education fosters the development of representatives like Atticus and Scout, representative even as—or maybe because—they stand at odds with the group they find themselves in. In his closing statement at Tom’s defense, Atticus makes the point that the phrase “all men are created equal” has been “taken out of context, to satisfy all conditions. The most ridiculous example I can think of is . . . the people who run public education.”³⁷ Public schools, according to Atticus, believe equality means leveling down students to the lowest possible level. A society that levels down cannot serve

the truer meaning of the phrase: we are created equal before the law. Tom deserves a fair trial because a court is a place where principles should prevail. But, because American education promotes, according to Atticus, the debased view of equality that “promote[s] the stupid and idle along with the industrious,”³⁸ our principles of justice are inoperable because the individuals sitting on juries conform to the group will instead of the truth. By promoting a false view of equality—that is, individual excellence in academic and other pursuits leads other students to “suffer terrible feelings of inferiority”³⁹ and so should be discouraged—public education causes us to lose sight of the fact that when excellence is discouraged, we all suffer. Without representative men and women like Atticus and Scout, juries have no conscience and so men like Tom Robinson are not equal in the place where equality is most demanded: the court.

To close, trying to think through the presence of John Dewey in *To Kill a Mockingbird* has, I hope, caused us to ask interesting questions about education and about the novel. And, in a work treasured by teachers and students, I remain intrigued that many of the points made about education by Lee through her characters should trouble educators. In particular, I worry that Atticus’s characterization of public schools may serve to underestimate a real issue that he seems to write off as something like a “self-esteem” issue. When students are not given the support and individualized attention required for them to be successful, something is wrong. The survival of the fittest has no place in school; each student—if given the right environment—can flourish. At the same time, I do not mean to imply that students who happen to have particular excellences should be forced to keep their excellences from public view; I especially don’t mean that they should feel as if they need to hide or underplay their excellences. This is Dewey’s point. Schools should not prepare us for social life as it currently stands; they should be experiments in social living. We live in a world where each of us has our own strengths, even excellences, and school should be a place where we can learn how to live as individuals with unequal—or different—talents, but school should also be a place where we can cultivate this form of inequality even as we create a community that allows equality, something that forms the foundation of our democracy, to flourish. Lee is correct, I feel, to draw our attention to what happens in education when adjustment is put before principles. She forces us to ask the question, If education does not help students develop principles, when the exigencies of social life become a reality for them, will the adjustments they make promote—or hinder—democracy? Although moving away from principles may be motivated by a desire to create a richer democratic life based on conciliation and mutual adjustment for the greater good, we might wonder if this move actually leads to a stronger democracy. To put it otherwise, are there cases where we should not adjust ourselves; when we should stand by principles, even if they put us at odds with our community? If Lee is right, being at odds is often the answer. Far from alienating us from our community, we

become its representative, a representative of the life that it would—if it only had our example—aspire to.⁴⁰ The education that leads to this outcome remains a great and extremely important question. Lee’s novel, I believe, compels us to think about this question, and because of this, I believe it remains a novel that is worth thinking with, a novel that has a great deal to teach us about teaching, schooling and education.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank my students at Sweet Briar College, especially Marian Huber, for reminding me of the power of this novel.
2. A good example of this is Harold Bloom’s introduction to his *Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2006).
3. See Frank Margonis, “John Dewey’s Racialized Visions of the Student and Classroom Community,” *Educational Theory* 59, no. 1 (2009). For an overview of this issue, see Jeff Frank, “Reconstructing Deweyan Growth: The Significance of James Baldwin’s Moral Psychology,” *Education and Culture* 29, no. 2 (2013).
4. Alice Hall Petry, *On Harper Lee: Essays and Reflections* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2007).
5. Jennifer Murray, “More Than One Way to (Mis)Read a Mockingbird,” *The Southern Literary Journal* 43, no. 1 (2010), 88–89.
6. Joseph Crespino, “The Strange Career of Atticus Finch,” *Southern Cultures* 6, no. 2 (2000), 19.
7. Jem’s comment is doubly funny because Melvil Dewey, and not John Dewey, is the creator of the Dewey Decimal System used in libraries. As well, trying to systematize Dewey’s philosophy is something that he resists in almost everything he wrote, especially and explicitly in *Experience and Education*.
8. David Hawkins, *The Roots of Literacy* (Boulder, CO: The University Press of Colorado), 109.
9. For more on Johnson’s approach to education, see her book *Organic Education: Teaching Without Failure* (Fairhope, AL: Marietta Johnson Museum of Organic Education, 1996).
10. John Dewey and Evelyn Dewey, *Schools of To-Morrow* (1915), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 8, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 226.
11. For more on this topic, see William B. Lauderdale, “The Holtville School: A Progressive Education Experiment,” *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 40, nos. 1 & 2 (1978), and William B. Lauderdale, “A Progressive Era for Education in Alabama,” *Alabama Historical Quarterly* 37 (1975).
12. “Democracy in U.S. Schools: Holtville, Ala.,” *Life*, X (January 13, 1941), 68.
13. Dewey and Dewey, *Schools*, 404.
14. *Ibid.*, 397.
15. Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: Grand Central, 1960), 43.
16. Something like this line of questioning finds a very interesting response in the work of Stanley Cavell, particularly his *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1991). Cavell is extremely critical of Dewey’s approach to democracy and interest, and he contrasts Dewey’s approach with that of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

17. Charles L. Shields, *Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), 36.

18. *Ibid.*, 39.

19. Jerry Aldridge and Lois McFadyen Christensen, *Stealing from the Mother: The Marginalization of Women in Education and Psychology from 1900–2010* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

20. Available here: <https://ia600600.us.archive.org/12/items/ninthannualcat190405alab/ninthannualcat190405alab.pdf>

21. There is an irony when we consider that Dewey writes, “Frontal attacks are even more wasteful in learning than in war,” when—in practice—many approaches to progressive education took just this approach when attempting to inculcate citizenship. See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (1916), in *John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979), 176.

22. Lee, *Mockingbird*, 326–27.

23. For a fascinating discussion of this point, see Philip Jackson, *Life in Classrooms* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990).

24. Lee, *Mockingbird*, 210.

25. See, for examples, Crespino, “Strange Career”; Monroe Freedman, “Atticus Finch—Right and Wrong,” *Alabama Law Review* 45 (1994): 473–82 and Eric J. Sundquist, “Blues for Atticus Finch: Scottsboro, Brown and Harper Lee,” in *The South as an American Problem*, eds. Larry J. Griffin and Don H. Doyle (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995).

26. A criticism in the literature is that Atticus defends Tom out of a sense of obligation to the law, not because of his views about race and racism. While some claim that this critique is based on presentism—that is, Atticus is doing the best he can given the time when he lived and the culture he is a part of—others believe that Atticus not only should know better, but is culpable for perpetuating injustice given his feelings and thoughts about race.

27. See, especially: Tim Dare, “Lawyers, Ethics, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” *Philosophy and Literature* 25, no. 1 (2001): 127–41; Claudia Johnson, “The Secret Courts of Men’s Hearts: Code and Law in Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*,” *Studies in American Fiction*, 19, no. 2 (1991): 129–39.

28. Dare, “Lawyers, Ethics,” 132.

29. *Ibid.*, 140.

30. Johnson, “Secret Courts.”

31. Gregg Crane, “The Art of Judgment,” *American Literary History* 23, no. 4 (2011), 759.

32. Contrast this idea of respect with that of emulation. I am not interested in arguing for Atticus as one we should aspire to be; I am more interested in discovering what lessons we might take away from the novel based on his character as portrayed by Lee.

33. Lee, *Mockingbird*, 116.

34. Robert Brandom, “When Philosophy Paints Its Blue on Gray: Irony and the Pragmatist Enlightenment,” *boundary 2* 29, no. 2 (2002).

35. *Ibid.*, 27.

36. *Ibid.*, 28.

37. Lee, *Mockingbird*, 273–74.

38. *Ibid.*, 274.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Again, I think Stanley Cavell's work is fascinating on just this point, and Cavell finds his approach to moral and political life in contrast to Dewey. As such, it might be interesting to think about how *To Kill a Mockingbird* might stand as an example of what Cavell calls Emersonian perfectionism.

Jeff Frank is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. Email: jfrank@stlawu.edu.

