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Preface

My copy of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was one of the nicer copies, without wrinkles or markings within the pages. A bust of a Black woman with her eyes closed in a serene expression adorned the brown cover. Her cheeks were rosy. I was a freshman in high school, but she was the first Black woman I had ever seen on the cover of a book. She was beautiful.

The classroom of teenage white boys laughed at the pages. The diction on the pages looked ridiculous and was hard to read. The twang of the CD reader was almost comedic. My young, plump, rose-skinned teacher struggled to gain control of her class every time the n-word was uttered. I couldn't tell you one word of that book, much less a passage or a main idea. But I can remember the shape of Janine and her suffering with ease, because hers both mirror mine and look nothing like mine at all.

I realized the war was never going to end the spring semester of my junior year of college. Assigned to watch James Baldwin's "I Am Not Your Negro" for the fourth time, I realized my white teachers knew approximately five Black people, a reality I tried to escape by taking World Literature instead of African American Literature, only to be assigned James Baldwin yet again. Idly watching my white classmates struggle to conceptualize the endless Black hole that is racial suffering as they discuss yet another foray into torture porn, I wondered, why, always, it comes to this? A well-trained negro, I extend my hand and provide the answers, leading the white lambs onto the grass fields of enlightenment. They graze on my experience until all that is left is dirt, swollen with newfound understanding. From upon my barren hill, I see Black shepherds and their white sheep behind me and to my sides, from the beginning of time and miles wide. James Baldwin's eyes look past me once more. The poster reads, written in white, "I Am Not Your Negro." The quote is incorrect.

Introduction

Teaching literature about people of color has been in the national debate as of late. Critical Race Theory (CRT) became a dog whistle in 2021 where conservatives flouted the academic theory to claim that classrooms were teaching their poor white lambs to hate themselves. Since then, teaching has been under constant attack. Since January 2021, 44 states have introduced bills or taken other steps that would restrict teaching anything deemed Critical Race Theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism, according to an Education Week analysis (Schwartz 2024). Eighteen states have imposed these bans and restrictions either through legislation or other avenues. The issue has even reached higher education, with the introduction of legislation like Ohio's Senate Bill 83, the Higher Education Enhancement Act, which aims to restrict how public universities handle gender and race, putting students, professors, and entire programs at risk.

Banning books is never the answer, as restricting literature has been the pattern of every oppressive regime in history. However, it is true that the mishandling of these subjects is harmful to students, but not in the way it has been presented to the public thus far. While in the classroom, at both the primary and secondary levels, the mishandled discussion of sensitive topics results in the ostracization of students from minority groups and hinders the education of the rest. The problem, typically, lies with the facilitator. Teachers who are unequipped with the tools to foster well-rounded education and nuanced discussion among their students end up failing in a variety of ways, whether that is ramifying the wrong concepts or failing to impart lasting scholarship at all.

The majority of literature concerning minorities are stories of struggle, particularly when considering those typically used for primary school education. On one list of books approved for

Advanced Placement testing, of the 298 titles included on the list, 75 titles were stories whose main protagonists were people of color, equaling about a quarter of the total amount of titles, and of these 75 stories, only one book contained a plot that does not depict conflict directly related to struggles the character faced because of their race. The possibility that such a book would be chosen is slim, as when considering several lists of the most popular books to be taught in the classroom by teachers, if included among titles like The Great Gatsby and Fahrenheit 451, the chosen books about people of color were unanimously about racial struggle. Granted, these stories are important to tell and are great avenues for other students to understand the history and inherent struggle others face that they do not, but these books inevitably put a strain on their peers of color, especially when stories of racial struggle are the only things they can see themselves in. While their white peers are able to enjoy their sci-fi and fantasy protagonists, the students of color's stories are always rooted in harsh, depressing reality.

This pain is only heightened when their teacher mishandles the instruction of these books. The student can be put on the spot if they are isolated in the classroom or feel powerless and silenced by a teacher who encourages or perpetuates disrespectful commentary about the book's subjects. Additionally, books on race, particularly those that are popular in the classroom, such as The Kite Runner or The Joy Luck Club, are deceptively complex and rife with cultural and environmental context that is needed in order to understand the book's themes and message in their entirety. While covering several books a year, many teachers simply do not dedicate the time necessary to break these topics down as their students need. Additionally, several teachers are ignorant of the necessity of providing their students with the entire picture because they lack the inherent understanding of what it means to be a person of color themselves.

To elaborate, I must introduce standpoint theory. Standpoint theory emerged from the Marxist argument that oppressed people have access to knowledge unavailable to the privileged class. Stemming from that perspective, standpoint theory, a feminist theoretical perspective, argues that knowledge stems from social position. This theory is related to epistemology, a branch of philosophy that believes that knowledge is socially situated. Therefore, in societies structured on gender, race, and class, one's social position shapes what one can know. Originally, standpoint theory was to address how research ignores the perspective of white feminists, but over time it has evolved to include race and intersections between race, class, and gender (Harnois 69).

According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Feminist standpoint theory "makes three principal claims: (1) Knowledge is socially situated. (2) Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized. (3) Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized." Standpoint theory acknowledges that a person's gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and physical capacities play a role in the formation of knowledge, capabilities, perception, and the lack thereof. However, beyond analysis and observation, Feminist standpoint theory looks towards how the perspective of those with social disadvantages can change the operations of society for all lives by breaking down the social barriers that effect groups both ways when put into positions of power. Sandra Harding states, "Standpoint theories map how a social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemic, scientific and political advantage" (Harding 7-8).

According to Marxist theory, a standpoint is an achieved collective identity or consciousness born from an individual's social location. In feminist standpoint theory, a person's social position is the starting point of their perspective and the emergence of a standpoint, but a standpoint is earned through “the experience of collective political struggle” (Bowel). Feminist standpoint theory argues that dominant and the dominated can both occupy perspectives, but the oppressed are more likely to achieve a standpoint. A standpoint begins to emerge when those who are marginalized become conscious of their social situation with respect to socio-political power and oppression and begin to find a voice, requiring the collaboration of a group the oppressed to collectively question society together. Those standpoints then “make visible aspects of social relations and of the natural world that are unavailable from dominant perspectives, and in so doing they generate the kinds of questions that will lead to a more complete and true account of those relations” (Bowel). How standpoints affect knowledge is described by the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy as follows:

> For example, the colonized have to learn the language of the colonizer—the New Zealand Māori learned English while use of the Māori language was strongly discouraged, for instance—in order to survive colonization, but the colonizer need not learn the language of the colonized in order to survive. The colonized, then, have some means of entry into the world of the colonizer, and the potential for gaining some understanding of how the world works from that perspective, but the colonizer is generally shut out of the world of the colonized and restricted to a mono-visual view of how the world is. The double vision afforded via the social location of women and other marginalized groups can provide the epistemic advantage of insights into social relations that are unavailable to the non-marginalized.

From this double vision, a person is able to perceive more than those without, resulting in questions that create sites for research, for policy reform and, ultimately, for social change that would not get asked otherwise.

Additionally, in *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins argues that “oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type … oppressions work together in producing injustice” (qt d in Harnois 70). This framework was brought to standpoint theory which previously argued that there was a “women's perspective,” ignoring the differences between women, particularly those who are women of color, which Collins argued helps perpetuate inequality. While there are aspects of growing up as a woman a man will never be able to conceptualize, certainly not on his own, there are aspects of growing up as an Asian woman that a white woman will never know.

Black standpoint theory, then, has an intersectional understanding of oppression and applies that to studies. Applying Black standpoint theory to the classroom, it can be reasoned that white teachers are inherently ignorant of the more subtle sociopolitical concepts presented in most POC literature due to their race, often exacerbated by the area in which they live. Because they lack the same standpoints as, for example, James Baldwin, these white teachers have gaps in their analysis and instruction because they lack the point of view needed to recognize necessary questions, whether they need to be asked of the text or if these questions are what the text is asking. If said teachers make no attempts to remedy these holes, such as informing themselves of the Black perspective as much as possible, the text and their instruction fails to reach its full potential.

We can further apply the Black standpoint theory to the reader-response theory. Reader-response theory, which gained prominence in the late 1960s, focuses on the audience's reaction to the text as much as or more than focusing on the text itself. Reader response theory is connected to poststructuralism, which puts emphasis on the reader as an active role rather than a passive consuming one, meaning that readers actively apply their biases and perceptions onto the text rather than simply consuming the text as is (Browne 2021). Applying Black standpoint theory then argues that the reader’s perception of the text is informed by their social-economic positioning, while the writer of the text themselves are also under the effect of their positioning while writing the text. This results in imbalances when those of different socioeconomic statuses read novels from different cultures, as they will not have the same intrinsic knowledge that the writer has used to create their narrative due to their socioeconomic positioning. This leads to a barrier between the writer's intentions and the reader's ability to interpret, resulting in a misinterpretation of the text or the lack of interpretation and comprehension at all.

The tension between writer and reader is particularly fraught in the classroom. Not only are the identities of the writer and reader at play, but the identity of the teacher is also entered into the conversation. Now, the socioeconomic identity of the teacher is enacted upon the text and is then filtered through to the student who then once more interprets the text. The teacher acts not only as a degree of separation, which leads to its own issues, but as an interpreter and guide, one that can lead students to a path of understanding despite their own biases thanks to the degree of separation, or they can guide students down a path that leaves biases unchallenged, reinforcing their interpretation of the text regardless of correctness. In Brenda Daly's "Taking Whiteness Personally: Learning to Teach Testimonial Reading and Writing in the College Literature Classroom," Daly reflects on realizing they were ignorant despite teaching James Baldwin and Richard Wright in their classroom. They had refused to analyze their whiteness, appointing themselves as a white savior character rather than another member of the mob, unable to see themselves as a possible aggressor.

> Although aware of an emerging specialty called "whiteness studies," I did not begin to study my own white history until I read Jane Davis's The White Image in the Black Mind: A Study of African American Literature (2000). While reading Davis's book, whiteness became a personal issue for me … She explains that in the Black mind—that is, in the mind of African American writers—white people are "weak," "a burden to Blacks," "dismissive," "off -putting, even when friendly," "ignorant of Blacks' having figured them out," and "afraid to confront their own bigotry" (133–36). After reading three pages of this catalog of descriptors, I felt my anger growing: Why should I listen, I wondered, while someone tears down my hard-won self-esteem? …

Their refusal to examine their whiteness bled into their ability to teach the novel, revealing that they had been accidentally encouraging not only a surface level read and analysis of race novels, but also a surface-level reflection on how race interacts with society on a whole:

> I also wondered how, after reading Davis's list, I had managed to avoid seeing myself from the point of view of Black writers. While reading Toni Morrison's Beloved, I recall imagining myself as Amy Denver, the poor white woman who helps deliver Sethe's baby; I too would have stopped to help Sethe. Nevertheless, despite my "whiteness," I certainly didn't identify with white characters who persecuted Sethe. In fact, I expended most of my psychic energy empathizing with the African American characters in the novel. But what exactly is empathy? What was I, a "white" woman, actually imagining as I read? Equally important, I began to wonder what my mostly white students were imagining while reading a multicultural canon. If most white readers cannot fully imagine, let alone empathize with, fictional characters whose race or gender or class is different from theirs, what are the implications for teachers of multicultural literature? I recognized, finally, that I had become angry and defensive while reading Davis's book because it called into question the effectiveness of my teaching.

This relationship might be less fraught at the collegiate level, as older students are capable of picking and choosing how to interact with the text: they can use their teacher's guidance or ignore it in favor of their own, or even search out a different form of guidance via scholarly sources online or otherwise. However, there is cause for concern for those in primary education, particularly in the ages between the final years of middle school into the early years of high school. In these grades, students are most often taught how to analyze full-length novels for themes, motifs, and the like. The instructions students receive at this time unconsciously affect how they approach books for the rest of their lives unless they actively choose to restructure their approach. Additionally, the social lessons you learn as a child inform how you behave and interact with those in the future. While everyone is capable of changing and challenging what they learned in their youth, what we read affects our behavior and cognitive understanding in several ways. A study from a team of Brigham Young University researchers even found that exposure to violence in literature can affect the brain in similar ways that video games do. If the teacher lacks control over the subject matter, and all students read about POC revolves around violence, while students of color constantly engage with literature where they suffer at the hands of their neighbors, the possibility of worsening racial barriers is great.

These hurdles align with the fears surrounding critical race theory. Parents fear that CRT only admonishes white people while sympathizing with Black people as the oppressed, and they wish to remove that guilt from their children's lives. Looking at the various ways African American studies are mishandled in the classroom; I can understand how parents can come to this conclusion. Particularly, high school literature that discusses race relations can be detrimental when the teacher is not equipped to disseminate the information the texts provide in a modern context. Such texts must be discussed with nuance to fully understand their complexities, but often teachers are stuck in the protagonist/antagonist mentality where characters are either good or bad. Additionally, as previously discussed, many teachers, particularly white teachers, do not have access to the social knowledge many Black writers utilize in their writings. This, too, leads to the misinterpretation or lack of interpretation of the text, where instead of breaking down the several moving parts that conceptualize how race operates in the United States, the texts are confined into singular protagonist and antagonist categories, locking students into good or bad. Such mechanisms of thought are what lead people to believe that to be accused of racism is to be accused of villainy, and what, too, leads others to believe that absolute perfection of speech and morals is necessary to achieve being a good person. The majority of POC literature, especially African American literature, provides avenues to teach students that neither of these are true, but proper analysis is needed in order to reach these conclusions.

Indeed, there are several complications when it comes to approaching POC literature in the classroom. However, I must reiterate that the solution is not to be rid of it, as that will only worsen ignorance. With time, resources, and education, these hurdles can be overcome. I hypothesize that teachers who take the time to educate themselves on the cultural context of these novels and then educate their students, properly guiding them through the themes presented in the text, can succeed in introducing students to the world's racial context and imparting important lessons not only in how to read and analyze a book, but how race, gender, and socioeconomic status affects us as readers, writers, and people, helping them move forward as students and citizens.

To test my hypothesis, I spoke to fifteen people across a diverse background about their primary school experience with one of the most prominent books in America: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a staple of primary education and is included on just about every single recommendation list by teachers across the United States. Having sold more than 40 million copies worldwide since its release, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been a staple in the U.S. curriculum for years. While not being an African American novel, it is typically the white students' first introduction to racism in literature. While *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been rightfully criticized for how it handles race, in good hands, it can be a good introduction to the matters it introduces. But, as I have written at length, it all depends on the who and the how, a theory that is supported by the interviews.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Before delving into the interviews, it is pertinent to establish what *To Kill a Mockingbird* is, what it attempts to do, what it fails at, and what it could accomplish under the right guidance.

Summary

To Kill a Mockingbird, written by Harper Lee and published in the 1960s, is one of the most commonly taught novels in America. It is typically read in a student's freshman year of high school, if not before, and it is often the first exposure students have to depictions of racism. outside of their U.S. history classes. Nelle Harper Lee (April 28, 1926 – February 19, 2016) was an American novelist and received multiple accolades and honorary degrees, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2007, which was awarded for her contribution to literature, namely for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was her most successful novel. She also assisted her close friend Truman Capote in his research for the book *In Cold Blood* (1966), who she includes in the novel as the character Dill Harris.

The plot and characters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* are loosely based on Lee's observations of her family and neighbors in her hometown Monroeville, Alabama, following young Scout Finch’s life with her adolescent brother Jem and her widowed father Atticus in a small town in Alabama named Maycomb. Atticus is a prominent lawyer, making the Finch family reasonably wealthy, especially in comparison to their neighbors, many of whom are struggling both due to the Great Depression and because of long familial histories of poverty. One summer, Jem and Scout meet and befriend Dill, a young boy who has come to their neighborhood for the summer. Dill becomes fascinated with the Radley Place, a house that frightens the children as it houses Arthur Radley, nicknamed Boo, the neighborhood’s social pariah who has lived there for years without going outside. Much of the novel revolves around the children learning more about Boo Radley, who eventually saves the Finch children from an attack. Otherwise, the novel follows Scout and Jem as they both shift to a new phase of development, going from childhood to adolescence as they begin to learn and understand more about the world they’re living in.

One of the biggest avenues for the children’s development (besides Boo Radley) is the case of Tom Robinson. Tom Robinson is a Black man who has been accused of raping a white woman, Mayella. Atticus agrees to defend Tom in court despite the social backlash, and this decision forces Jem and Scout to learn about how race affects the lives of themselves and others, as they begin to be harassed by children and adults for their father’s decision. Under the weight of harassment, Jem and Scout begin to recognize the line between the Black people and the white people in their hometown through scenes such as visiting their Black maid Calpurnia’s, church.

When Tom eventually takes the stand, it is revealed that he is disabled, one of his arms is much shorter than the other and mostly useless, bringing into question the ability for Tom to rape, beat, and hold down Mayella at the same time. Tom’s testimony reveals that Mayella came onto Tom and then accused Tom of rape to cover up her shame, instead, it is revealed that Mayella is most likely abused by her father, Bill. Despite the significant evidence proving Tom innocent, the jury convicts him. Despite winning the trial, Bill holds a grudge against the Finches for the embarrassment he faced and attempts to kill Jem and Scout while they walk alone one night. Boo Radley, who has built a relationship with the children in the months since the trial through anonymous exchanges, comes to their rescue. As Bo One of the biggest avenues for the children’s development (besides Boo Radley) is the case of Tom Robinson. Tom Robinson is a Black man who has been accused of raping a white woman, Mayella. Atticus agrees to defend Tom in court despite the social backlash, and this decision forces Jem and Scout to learn about how race affects the lives of themselves and others, as they begin to be harassed by children and adults for their father’s decision. Under the weight of harassment, Jem and Scout begin to recognize the line between the Black people and the white people in their hometown through scenes such as visiting their Black maid Calpurnia’s, church.

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Race in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

While *To Kill a Mockingbird* grapples with several characters and subjects, such as classism, feminism, and queerness, the race storyline is rather straightforward. There are two key Black characters in the Novel: Tom Robinson and Calpurnia. There are two additional minor Black figures in the text: Tom Robinson's wife, Helen, and Reverend Sykes, the pastor at Calpurnia's church, who do little in the text besides further endear the children and the reader to Tom. Then, there are the brief mentions of the smattering of Black folk who make up the colored populace of Maycomb: the woman who refuses to welcome the Finch children to the church, those who watched Tom's case, and the many who sent gifts of gratitude to Atticus Finch for his valiant attempt at defending Tom. Every Black guest serves to paint a picture of the pure, hardworking mockingbird populace of this small town.

Calpurnia, their cook and essentially the children's nanny, is implied to be one of the reasons why Atticus takes on Tom's case, as he mentioned that Calpurnia said Tom's family are "clean-living folks" when explaining why he was defending him (Lee 79). Before Calpurnia takes the children to her church for the first time, she is often distanced from the rest of the Black people in town, both by the children and by herself, such as by discouraging the children from using "nigger-talk" (Lee 37). However, Calpurnia helps further the Finch children's understanding of race by agreeing to take them to her church. Amongst a large group of colored people for the first time, the children are exposed to the reality of the lives their colored neighbors live. Surprised by the lack of resources and education among their Black neighbors, the Finch children come to terms that Calpurnia, whom they had known all their lives, is not separate from the rest of the colored folk, but instead living a "double-life" (Lee 127). Although Calpurnia gives the children a glimpse into her second life, the children are barred from crossing the boundary between where they reside and where Calpurnia lives by Aunt Alexandra, showing that even though they are allowed to come into brief contact, there are certain lines they will not be allowed to cross.

As previously mentioned, we interact with Tom entirely through his trial while he is on the stand, as the Finch children do not meet him beforehand. Additionally, they have no chance to speak with him afterward, as he is shot while attempting to escape jail. However, Tom's time on the stand reveals much about his character. Disabled, polite, soft-spoken, and oaf-ish, Tom gives the appearance of an honest working gentle giant in contrast to the image Mayella Ewell paints of her attacker. In order for Lee to gain the sympathy of her readers, Tom could be nothing less than the perfect, harmless, "respectable Negro" (Lee 196). His "Yes suh," "No suh," and simple speech garnered the sympathy of Lee's audience and the people of Maycomb. Her tactics work on the Finch children themselves, as Jem becomes enthralled with the case and devastated when Tom inevitably loses, perplexed at justice failing to reign supreme (Lee 215). Additionally, Dill becomes so distraught by how the opposing attorney treats Tom on the stand that he must leave the courtroom, likely mirroring the discomfort the audience feels at the unjust harassment of Tom, giving Dill, and the reader, a break (Lee 202). However, Scout goes most unaffected by the case, stating that Tom was "just a Negro" (Lee 203). Clearly, the reader is meant to identify with Dill and Jem, feeling both enlightened over Scout's limited view and good because they are not the Ewells of the world.

Midway through Tom's case, Scout meets another character who is another pawn in getting the children to understand race, a white man named Dolphus Raymond. Raymond is known in the community to be a drunken man married to a colored woman; however, he reveals to the children that he only pretends to be drunk in order to give the people of Maycomb a reason they can understand for the way he lives (Lee 204). What he says next about Dill is a direct call out to Lee's audience:

> Things haven't caught up with that one's instinct yet. Let him get a little older and he won't get sick and cry. Maybe things'll strike him as being—not quite right, say, but he won't cry … Cry about the simple hell people give other people—without even thinking. Cry about the hell white people give colored folks, without even stopping to think that they're people, too.

Raymond's interlude is more for the audience than for the children. He challenges those who are still unaffected by Tom's plight to see colored folk as people and not "just negros," and asks why we have allowed normalized tormenting others, likening the ability to shrug off senseless violence to losing innocence. Raymond's section is one of the more blatant examples of what Lee wants the reader to examine and feel about racism.

However, Raymond is not the only white person the Lee uses to get the Finch children to understand racism. Earlier in the novel, we are introduced to Mrs. Dubose, an elderly, racist, old-fashioned woman who admonishes the children from her porch. Jem reaches his breaking point when Mrs. Dubose begins criticizing their father for defending Tom in court, running up and ruining her garden (Lee 106). It is through her that Lee tries to impart an understanding of the racist folks in the South. Lee paints a picture of a woman who although racist and intolerant, is also sick, old, and lonely. Atticus explains to Scout that terms such as “nigger-lover” are used by those like Mrs. Dubose who are “ignorant, trashy” and “poor,” making Mrs. Dubose a vivid example of the troubled racists that reside in small towns in the south, according to Lee (Lee 112). There are other examples of this as well, such as the sympathy we feel for Mayella, who although wrongfully accused a man, was also clearly suffering underneath poverty and the tyranny of her father, but Mrs. Dubose is the one we spend most time with.

Ultimately, when it comes to dealing with race in *To Kill a Mockingbird,* Lee tries to balance treating Black people with sympathy and showing their struggles with showing the multidimensionality of the close-minded people of Maycomb. Although it is a valiant effort, this juggle is where the majority of *To Kill a Mockingbird’s* issues arise.

Problems with *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

To Kill a Mockingbird’s problems can be broken down between the presentation of several of the novel’s main characters.

Atticus Finch

To Kill a Mockingbird has several weaknesses, many of which surround Atticus's character. Atticus Finch has long been a symbol of virtue because he represents Tom to the best of his ability while living in a racist, southern town. Additionally, he does not teach his children to be racist and is generally welcoming to the Black residents of Maycomb, who also hold him in high regard. However, criticisms of the novel often question how virtuous Atticus is and whether he deserves such high regard, especially in a modern context. Atticus may have done his best representing Tom, but he did not do so because he wanted to, but because he was appointed, and even admits reluctance to doing so. He states, "You know, I'd hoped to get through life without a case of this kind," (Lee, 91), revealing that Atticus is no civil rights lawyer. On the matter, Amanda Osheim states, "Once an external force compels him, Atticus responds with diligence and excellence," however, he "must be propelled into action" (Osheim 212).

Arguably, Atticus deserves more credit for his values. One of the few times Atticus depicts strong emotion is when Atticus tells his children that "cheatin' a colored man is ten times worse than cheatin' a white man," (Lee 205). According to Scout, he stated that it is "the worst thing you can do" (Lee 205). This seems upstanding; however, it is immediately apparent to the Black reader that this is not because Atticus views Black people as an equal race deserving respect. What is implicitly suggested by Atticus's language is that cheating Black people is despicable because they are helpless. Although not entirely untrue, it places cheating Black people on the level of cheating a child or beating a dog, erasing the Black person's agency.

Atticus clearly has racist views himself, and although this does not condemn him because of the time period, it does show that regarding him as a completely just man ignores his implicit racism, which can lead to ignorance of implicit racism in modern behaviors as long as they are coming from activists.

Additionally, Atticus (and Lee, by extension,) takes a "both sides of the spectrum are deserving of kindness" stance. Atticus believes that "you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view" (Lee 30) and instills this virtue in his children. However, he limits this to the white residents of Maycomb. For instance, he only gives his children a vague explanation as to why Mrs. Dubose calls him a "nigger-lover" as an insult and insists that she "has problems of her own" (Lee 112), and even forces his children to keep her company. This downplays the very real power and meaning that the word holds, presenting a very poor example of how to talk about race. Malcolm Gladwell sates, "Finch will stand up to racists. He'll use his moral authority to shame them into silence. He will leave the judge standing on the sidewalk while he shakes hands with Negros. What he will not do is look at the problem of racism outside the immediate context of Mr. Cunningham, My Levy, and the island community of Maycomb Alabama."

Mayella, too, had problems of her own, as a lonely and abused child. Yet her actions sentenced a man to death, but Atticus does not ask his children to deeply consider the perspective of Tom, Helen, or even Calpurnia. In fact, Scout only truly understands what he means at the end of the novel with the white Boo Radley (Lee 283). Atticus's empathy towards racists ignores the very real danger the ignorant pose to others. Osheim states that Atticus "does not realize that empathy cannot completely grasp another's intentions" (Osheim 210). He believed Ewell was only acting out of hurt feelings and embarrassment and would be "satisfied" by his outbursts, completely blind to the malice of hateful men (Lee 255). Atticus even states, "The Ku Klux's gone," and "It'll never come back" (Lee 148), a statement that wasn't true then and still isn't true in the present. Atticus's view that the world is secretly on the side of morality blinds him to danger until it is far too late and completely obscures reality not only for himself but for his children, and the same can happen today with modern issues, particularly with politics.

On top of this, Atticus, and the novel in general, categorizes most of the racists as part of the lower class (Lee 112). Atticus' response to his children's questions oversimplifies the gravity and magnitude of racism and implies that racism is a function of manners or class. While there possibly is worthwhile commentary on how class affects racism, there are a great number of rich white folks who say the n-word in private and in their minds in the past and in the present. Atticus distancing himself and his children from the poor, racist "white trash" allows the audience who identifies with Atticus to distance themselves, too, which leads to a compounding effect that allows Lee's readers to gradually feel as though they are not responsible for racism when in reality all white people benefit from the institution of racism.

Atticus is particularly problematic because the white reader prefers to identify with his logical attitude and heroics rather than with the Ewells or the rest of Maycomb, resulting in leaving their own biases and history unexamined. It gives the white reader the safety of an "us" and "them," where they can engage with the novel peacefully believing they are as far removed from the white trash as Atticus is. Macaluso notes that even as a teacher, he used the novel to "discreetly deflect uncomfortable and complex discussions of race and racism by focusing on the characterization of its white protagonists" (Macaluso 281) and notes that the ending itself sidestepped race by concerning itself with Boo Radley rather than reflecting further on Bob Ewell (Malcaluso 281). Malcaluso also brings up the concern that he and his students would dissociate themselves from the people of Maycomb because they "would never do that, so therefore we are not racist" (Malcaluso 281). Viewing Maycomb as some far-away reality matches Atticus's perception of the Ku Klux Klan. We treat Maycomb as if it is over, but the reality is that small racist towns still exist all over the U.S., and the villagers of Maycomb are our neighbors, family, and legislators. Racism is not a relic of 1960, but something that the world continues to grapple with here and now. Atticus, Lee, and we, cannot treat racism, even to the degree of lynching and the KKK, as a thing of the past, as that delusion only serves as armor to those who seek to separate the world on the basis of race. Doing so fails to hold society responsible for racism as an overarching concept that affects the very way the world runs rather than acts committed by a small group of people.

Scout Finch

Another issue of the novel is that it takes place from Scout's perspective, as she was at an age where she wasn't "old enough to understand some things yet," (Lee 77), resulting sometimes in a lack of analysis, insight, or reflection on the part of the narrator. Although this is expected and accepted because the book is based upon Lee's lived experience, and she sometimes remedies this gap with interludes such as "it was not until many years later that I realized…" (Lee 91), writing from this perspective still limits what the readers are allowed to see. For example, because Scout is barred from ever visiting Calpurnia's home by her aunt, the audience never sees a major portion of the lives of the Black residents of Maycomb.

Additionally, Scout's limited perspective centers the whiteness in the deconstruction of race, perpetuating that the most important voice on racism is white. Scout herself is largely unconcerned with Tom Robinson, especially in comparison with her peers Jem and Dill, leading to an extra level of detachment from the race issues in Maycomb, making her wholly unfit as a narrator for a race relations novel. Thankfully, that is *not* what *To Kill a Mockingbird* is. As the narrator of the reflection of a woman who remembers what living in the South as an unconventional girl was like, Scout is perfectly fine. However, when using the novel to talk about race, it is rarely pointed out that Scout is an unreliable narrator, and rather a poor one, to notice and break down these issues.

The Black Residents of Maycomb

The Black characters in the novel are largely one-dimensional, simply serving as pawns for the development of the children. They never interact with the children on as deep as a level as with Mrs. Dubose or Boo Radley, as their father Atticus only encourages them to climb into the skin of other white people. Tom's perspective is briefly mentioned as something that is later explained to Scout during the trial (Lee 198), but that is the only time we are truly given the why for the actions of the Black people of Maycomb, partially because they don't do much besides being good, honest, poor people.

Indeed, the novel does more to humanize racists than Black people, practically reverting these men and women to babes. Black people do nothing, have no agency, and are powerless. The novel categorizes them as mockingbirds: "Mockingbirds don't do anything but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us" (Lee, 93). The Black people of Maycomb, too, cause no trouble, mind their own, stay in their place, and are particularly kind to those like Atticus, exemplified by the gracious gift they send him (Lee, 217) or the way the Reverend treats the children (Lee, 124). Additionally, when Tom's verdict comes in, the atmosphere is described as the time when "the mockingbirds were still" (Lee, 214). Tom is also actually shot and killed senselessly by seventeen bullets (Lee, 239). Although Boo Radley is the only character outright called a mockingbird (280), the symbolism is clear.

However, likening Black people to animals, even in a positive manner, is dehumanizing and frowned upon. Additionally, painting Black people as these meek creatures who only want to serve is to weird to say about Black people. This also inadvertently implies that in order for Black people to be deserving of justice they must be good law-abiding Black folk who prefer to serve. Human rights are not conditional, nor do they need to be earned by good behavior.

Reducing Black people to mockingbirds robs them of their agency, and their reliance on white people in the novel reeks of white saviorism. Issac Saney states, "Perhaps the most egregious characteristic of the novel is the denial of the historical agency of Black people. They are robbed of their role as subjects of history, reduced to mere objects who are passive hapless victims: mere spectators and bystanders in the struggle against their own oppression and exploitation."

The fact that the only time Tom takes his life into his own hands- when he attempts to escape prison- robs him of his life, is bizarre. Black people are not lambs in need of white people's protection. Although it is true they needed the compliance and support of white people, they are capable of taking progressive action themselves.

The Mockingbirds

Finally, we must discuss the novel's titular character, Boo Radley. Although Boo Radley is supposed to exist alongside Tom as a parallel character, he ends up replacing him instead, both in the novel and in the minds of readers. Patrick Chura points out that Boo's action of killing Bob Ewell is acknowledged by Atticus and Sheriff Tate not just as a rescue of the Finch children also as a “symbolic retribution for the death of Tom Robinson” (Chura 16). It is notable that another white man is the one to bring justice while being allowed to continue to live the life they have led so far, once again disallowing any of the Black characters the ability to bring justice by their own hands.

Although Boo Radley is not a bad vehicle to understand the concept of not judging a book by its cover, his existence as the novel’s true mockingbird is a complete distractor away from Tom Robinson’s storyline. Boo’s fantastical nature and Scout’s fascination with him over Tom makes him a far more memorable character. Additionally, breaking down Boo Radley is far simpler than dissecting the racial storyline in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, meaning that teachers are more likely to focus on discussing Boo Radley rather than the racial issues in the novel. Although it is not uncommon for teachers to focus only on certain motifs in the novel they are teaching, doing so is impossible with *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as pushing Tom to the side means leaving the novels racism unchecked and undiscussed. Students could leave the book thinking nothing of the innate racial ussies of the text presented by the author's bias, or could leave the novel even admiring Atticus, which ramifies the wrong lessons.

Additionally, focusing on Boo Radley is simply weaker. Boo’s story is incredibly simple and lacks substance due to the text mainly concerning itself with covering how Tom’s case affected the town and the racial tensions between its residents. Boo is more of a side plot point, a magical fairy who appears between race scenes too add narrative flavor. Lee spitting the novel between Boo and Tom weakened both of their stories, but Boo’s is surely worse off, limited to quick exchanges and mostly existing to save Scout and Jem at the end.

Ultimately, at the end of the novel, nothing has really changed, only Scout is a better person. While *To Kill a Mockingbird* was revolutionary for its time, these issues beg the question on whether it is still useful in a modern context. Since *To Kill a Mockingbird*'s creation, several novels by Black people have been written that are guaranteed to present how racism operates with more accuracy and depth than any white person can, yet *To Kill a Mockingbird* has remained on a pedestal for generations.

Strengths of *To Kill a Mockingbird*

However, it is not as though the book is irredeemable. Though fraught with problems in the way it presents racial issues, it ultimately condemns racism and those who participate in it. The novel also goes to great lengths to sympathize with the suffering of the Black people of Maycomb, taking care to showcase their conditions. The reader is essentially meant to identify with Jim, who goes through a journey of realizing how unfair society is towards Black people and how that affects his perception of the world. The author wants to have her white audience witness the colorfulness of Black life through their interactions with Calpurnia, place us on Toms side, get our hopes up during the trial, and then smack us with the reality of the futility of the fight for those who are Black going against a justice system that is built to keep Black people in chains. The writer would have us go through the same crisis that Jim goes through, the same distress that Dill feels, in a manner that is unique to the abilities of literature over history.

Literature provides an avenue to discuss racism in a deep and nuanced way differently than what history classes provide, and many teachers try to utilize this opportunity by using Tom Robinson's trial in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a gateway to race and class studies. Although clumsy, it is a good novel for beginners, thanks to the simplicity in which it presents its ideals and social issues, often explaining the context to the reader outright. The issue lies in both that not all students are beginners at race studies - many of them face the themes of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in their daily lives - and that several, if not most teachers are not *To Kill a Mockingbird* for what it could be.

The question to ask now, then, is how are teachers handling *To Kill a Mockingbird*? I hypothesize that the combination of the teacher's standpoint and perspective affects their teaching method and the impact *To Kill a Mockingbird* has on their students. White teachers who lack the sociopolitical knowledge needed will fall into the weaknesses of *To Kill a Mockingbird,* focusing on Boo Radley and failing to deconstruct the views of the characters like Atticus Finch, resulting in Tom Robinson and the novel's racial commentary being forgotten, leaving students unchallenged. Teachers who possess alternative standpoints, particularly Black teachers, will delve deeper into the text and provide the students with the necessary tools to analyze the text to its full potential, resulting in engaged students who remember the novel's goals and racial commentary, proving that when used correctly, *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be a useful text in the modern classroom.

Student Interviews

To find the answer to my question on whether teachers are using *To Kill a Mockingbird* well and how their socioeconomic position affects their instruction, I interviewed fifteen respondents about what they remembered from their primary education revolving around *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The pool of respondents was moderately diverse, inducing white, Black, and Asian perspectives. The majority of respondents were from Generation Z, ranging from ages 18-25, with a few outliers. There was also a range in school size, from extremely small student populations to decently large, and although most respondents went to school in Ohio, a few were from other locations, such as Texas. However, it may be imprudent to note that none of the respondents were from densely populated and generally liberal states, such as California or New York.

The interviews lasted between thirty minutes to an hour but usually took about twenty minutes. I recorded each interview to be able to transcribe them into text, and after the data collection stage had been completed, I analyzed the material by first reading through all the interviews to highlight any patterns between the interviews and impertinent statements. Then I organized the questions and answers into a table to cross-compare each response I got from the respondents.

Table 1. Interviewee Information

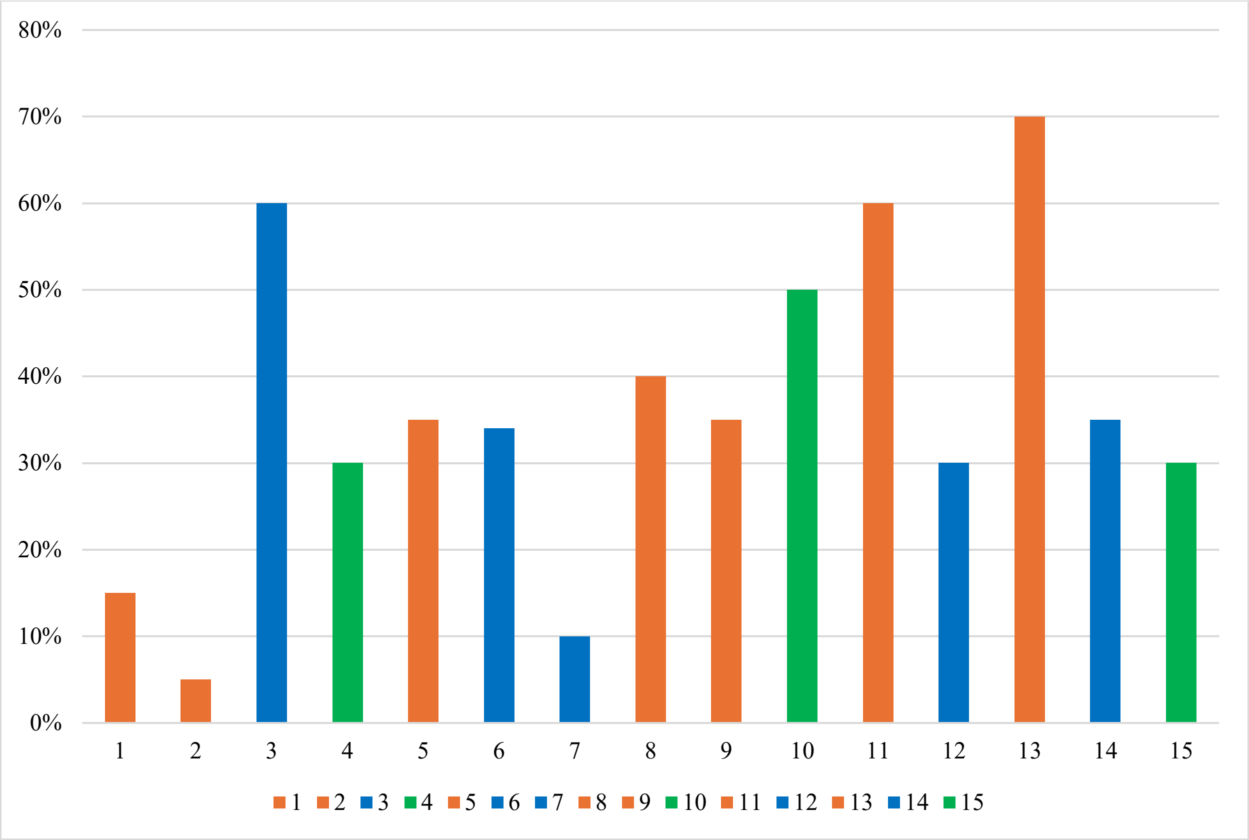
Interview Number	**Interviewer Demographics**	**School Information**	**Teacher Demographics**	**When the novel was read**
1	20, white, cisgender female, straight, grew up middle class	Located in Perry Heights, Ohio, the only public high school in the area. Predominately white with a few Hispanic and Latino students.	White, female, around 40-50 years old	9th grade honors English
2	19, African American & Puerto Rican	20 Minutes outside of Cleveland, Ohio. Very white, located in a suburb town. I was one of the few Black people there. When my siblings graduated it was even worse.	A white cis man	8th grade, which was part of the high school
3	19, white, queer	Near Toledo, Ohio. A public school that spanned through K-12. The graduating class size was 89. Just less than 50% white, which was diverse for the area.	White, a cis woman, mid 40s	9th grade honors class.
4	19, white, nonbinary	Located in Twinsburg, Ohio. 50% white as one of the more diverse schools in the area.	A Black cis woman	9th grade English.

5	20, white, middle class, queer	Located in Oxford, Ohio. Racially speaking, not particularly diverse, predominantly white. Class demographics were diverse.	White woman, possibly in her 30s.	10th grade English.
6	18, mixed race, predominately white but part black. Trans, nonbinary, queer, neurodivergent.	A school just outside Cincinnati which used to operate as a sundown town. By the time of graduation it was 1% Asian, at maximum 2% Black, 96% white, and then everything else.	A nice white cis gay man.	10th grade English.
7	20, white woman,	Vinton County, Ohio, a very small school.	36-40, white, male, cisgender	9th grade English
8	19, white, woman	A school located in South Carolina. 80% white, with a was a very notable distinction between the demographics of upper-level classes, like the AP vs the CP.	8th grade teacher was Black, and Junior year teacher was white.	8th grade in middle school and again in AP Lang jr. year
9	21, white, queer, grew up middle upper class	Catholic school located in Cincinnati, Ohio. Mostly white and middle to upper class. I knew one Black person and one Vietnamese person.	White, young, fresh out of grad school.	8th grade English.
10	22, Black, cis male	Located in Bexley, Ohio, mostly Black	She was white, a very good teacher	9th grade English
11	20, woman, white, lesbian, group up catholic	A Catholic schools located in Akron, Ohio. The middle school was majority upper middle-class students. Highschool was a little bit more diverse in the economic background, but still majority white.	Middle school, a white woman in her upper 50s. High school, a white woman in her early 50s.	8th and 9th grade English.
12	18, Straight, cisgender, South Asian	Located in a suburb in Columbus, Ohio, 20 minutes outside the city. The school was going through a demographic shift from being majority white to including black people and refugees.	In 8th grade, a white woman, during 9th grade, a white man	8th and 9th grade.

13	42, white, disabled, dyke, grew up upper middle class, neurodivergent	Western Massachusetts public schools. Usually around 105 students in a class. The town was around 75% white. Predominately wealthy. The school was still participating in what remained of the desegregation busing program.	White woman.	7th or 8th grade English.
14	24, white, grew up lower middle class	Located in Columbus, Ohio, the high school was a white minority school as it was in one of the more underserved neighborhoods and students could get in via lottery or grades. The middle school was the opposite, majority white, affluent, and Chrisian.	A white woman in high school and a white man in middle school.	7th grade and 9th grade English
15	20, white, Jewish, queer, trans, neurodivergent.	An arts school in the middle of Daytron, Ohio. Very gay, very queer, mostly lower income, very inner city, majority black, with lots of diversity.	Older, probably 60s, white woman who was relatively liberal	9th grade honors class

Respondents mostly fell into three categories. The first category holds students whose teachers did a general study of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Those students usually remembered Scout Finch, Boo Radley, the ham costume, or not much of the book at all. Students in this category had a chance to remember the trial, but nothing else of the other people of color in the book. The second category holds students whose teacher went into some detail of the racial issues in the novel. Those students remember several details about the trial and Atticus and much less about Boo Radley and Scout, if at all. Participants in this category are also more likely to remember the other scenes involving race issues in the novel. The third category holds participants who remembered the racial issues in the novel due to outside factors. This includes racial incidents happening in the classroom and those who grew more conscious of the race issues of the novel after aging, leading their reflection to focus more on how their teachers failed them and less about remembering what happened in the novel, if they could remember any of the novel at all. In all three groups, no participants remembered the name of Tom Robinson.

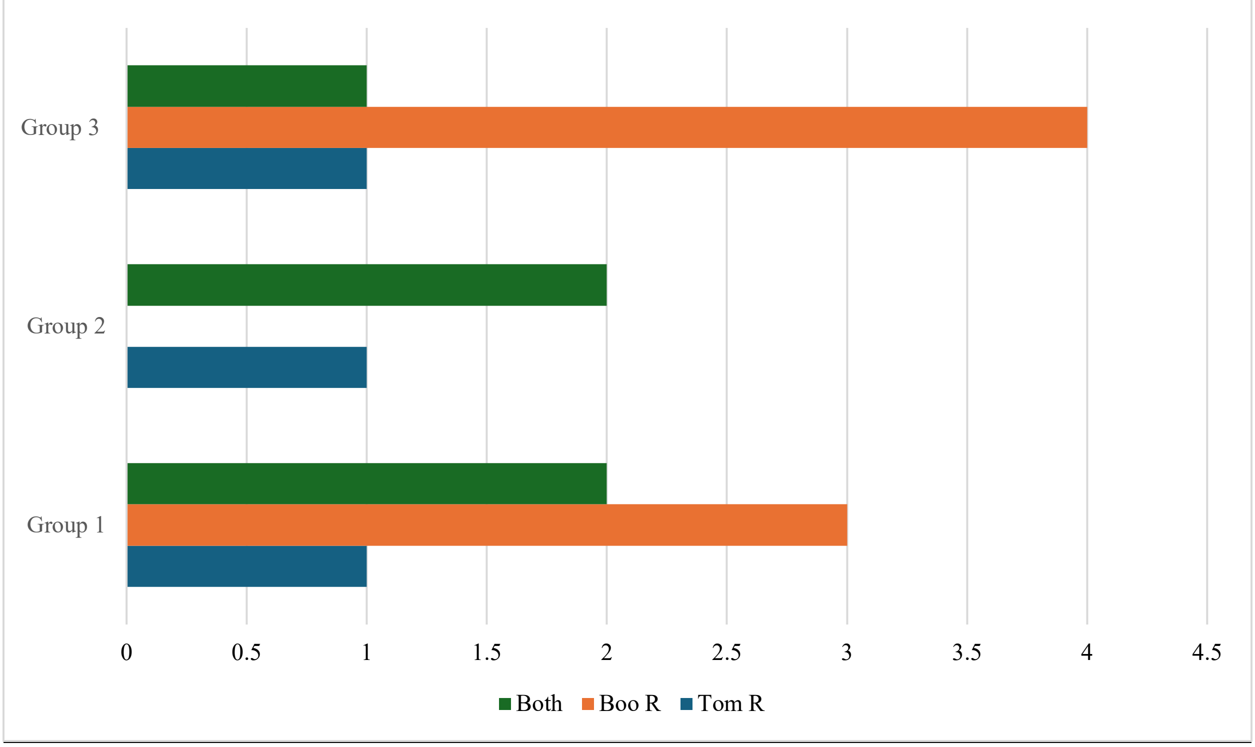
Figure 1. Amount of Plot Remembered



Key:

🟧 Group 1
🟩 Group 2
🟦 Group 3

Figure 2. Plot Lines Remembered



Group 1

Group 1 holds seven of the interviewees. As previously mentioned, students in this group remembered Scout Finch, Boo Radley, the ham costume, or not much of the book at all.

Q: What is your first thought when you hear the title of the novel?

1: I don't really remember anything about the book. The only thing I remember is the part where it has like the N word in it.

2: I don't really remember the book, but when I hear the title think about how the title didn't make any sense.

The lessons of students in this group usually revolved around the white characters in the novel or making sure the students kept up with reading in class.

Q: Do you remember what your lessons were like? What did your teacher talk about/focus on?

> **1:** We had to write a paper on who was the mockingbird. If I said that the mockingbird was Boo Radley, I forget what the significance of the mockingbird was in this situation, but my teacher like gave us all Fs if we didn't say that the mockingbird was scout or something like really basic.
>
> **5:** I don't think that she was the most effective English teacher that I had, not just for this book, but like for a lot of the things that we read. I think she had us doing these chapter by chapter like study guides as we read that was just, answer these questions about the plot or about the characters or something. And then we would have like quizzes about what we had read. We were not very good at the quizzes. We just weren't as attentive to doing the reading as much as we should have been.
>
> **11:** I remember in high school, we talked a lot about Boo Radley, like that was a huge point of the book, and I can't remember specifically what it was, I think it something about like, not knowing people and jumping to conclusions and how something about like how turning people into monsters when we don't have information about them. But I remember being like, Boo Radley? That's who we are talking about?

Across the board, in this group they felt that their teachers delving deeper into the text, particularly concerning the racial issues in the book, would have improved their experience and impacted them positively.

> **Q: Looking back, is there anything you would have wanted done differently?**
>
> **5:** I feel like I would have liked more class discussion or secondary sources and additional resources or commentary about what we were reading, especially about Black literature that we were reading. It seemed like she just decided we should like "make of it what you will." With things like that it like it's becoming more and more clear that with literature that might be harder for white students to relate to or understand the complexities of, I feel like there needs to be more engagement of like other sources and other perspectives. Otherwise, we run the risk of what happened with me, I just don't remember a whole lot.
>
> **8:** I think I kind of wish we had talked about the racial issues more, because even though I'm sure we touched on them, I don't remember, and because that was definitely a classroom of all privileged white people, I feel like we probably should have been taught a little bit more about that, especially because of the school and the backgrounds that all of us were coming from. We're not used to reading that kind of literature, or we're not used to seeing those kinds of stories in our lives, and I feel like if I had been taught a little bit more, I would have remembered a little bit more. And then maybe I wouldn't have had

> to teach myself things later on in life, right? If it had just been incorporated into the classroom a little bit more, especially because that was part of the book.

Because of what their teachers focused on, these students knew little about what happened during Tom Robinson's case despite it being a significant portion of the book. Some could not even remember who he was when provided with the name, while participants in the other groups could remember Tom once prodded.

> **Q: What comes to mind when I say the name "Tom Robinson?"**
>
> **1:** Literally nothing. Is that a character?

To Kill a Mockingbird did not have much of an impact on the students in this group at all. All of them recognized that their education was lacking, their teachers not prodding their students to examine the text beyond surface level. As participant 8 puts it, if these teachers included a deeper discussion about how race functions in the novel, this opening the floor for examining how race functions in society overall, she would not have had to learn these lessons on their own once outside that environment.

Not only is misusing *To a Kill a Mockingbird* a disservice to students socially, it is also a disservice to them academically. Because the commonly accepted way to use *To Kill a Mockingbird* leaves the novel unchallenged, Teachers are not incentivized to push their students beyond simply reading the work rather than analyzing it. Students who were provided effort from their teachers not only remember more about the case of Tom Robinson, but they also remember their dedicated teachers and their lessons fondly.

Group 2

Group 2 includes three students who were satisfied with the education their English teachers provided revolving around *To Kill a Mockingbird.*

Q: What is your first thought when you hear the title of the novel?

10: I think of a memory I have, a very sacred memory. When I first think of the book, I remember that first day, I think it was at least the fifth day of class, we were talking about the book and the lessons you can learn from it. I kind of remember all the class coming together, just basically talking about their whole feelings about the book, how they thought about it, what they thought about it and what they learned from it.

The lessons for students in this group revolved around commentary around historical relevance and how race functions in the novel.

Q: Do you remember what your lessons were like? What did your teacher talk about/focus on?

15: It was mostly meta textual discussion about whether or not the book is white savior-y because of Atticus Finch, and just the ways the presents him with this kind of hyper competence.

10: Most students, of course, being young, made fun of the fact that the book had the N word, but it made us think that, Okay, from the time that the book is set it in, it makes sense that they would use that word often. You had to put yourself in that situation and think like, okay, I'm in this time period and this is how I will react. And we thought through being there as a person of color or just being a person who's white, and recognizing, okay, I could definitely see how these characters react this way and how they would react to certain situations.

As stated previously, these students were satisfied with the way their teachers handled *To Kill a Mockingbird.*

Q: Looking back, is there anything you would have wanted done differently?

4: Well, you know, I think she handled it really well. She was one of my favorite teachers throughout high school. I had her multiple times. She wasn't afraid to talk about controversial things in a way that we could understand. I think she did a really good job as a teacher.

10: No. She was kind of the first introduction to me loving reading and writing. So, you know, the fact that she tried to hone in the lessons she did, and then me being young and not sometimes paying attention, but also still catching the key lessons from it. Yeah. It helped me develop into the kind of person I am today so I kind of thank her for that.

Group 2, although small, is proof that teachers who dedicate the time and effort to providing historical context and analyzing the book on a deeper level with their students will have a positive, lasting impact. It is notable that all the teachers in this group are all from diverse schools, which would incentivize teachers to provide students with education with the values of diversity in mind. However, it is also of note that not all the teachers in this category are Black. The Black teachers may possess standpoints that allows them to see the necessity of breaking down race in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but white teachers are just as capable of providing satisfactory commentary and education if effort is given.

Groups 1 and 2 parallel each other, but group three also presents how mishandling *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be harmful and even traumatic for students.

Group 3

Group three holds five students that, although their teachers did not provide education surrounding race relations, they remembered more about the law case or Tom Robinson because of an uncomfortable event that happened in the classroom. Notably, students of color in this book commonly had a tense of distaste towards the novel.

> **Q: What is your first thought when you hear the title of the novel?**
>
> **7:** The scene where she dressed up as a ham. I didn’t realize what came up until now.
>
> **12:** The cover. I'm honestly not the biggest fan of the book. I just, I mean, I think it's good literature, but I do think I kind of get a little hurt when people are like, “this is such a good book” because I feel like it’s the white savior perspective.

Like Group 1, white students in this group often did not think much of the book, as their teachers did not provide education that revolved around Tom Robinson or the race relationships in the novel.

> **Q: Do you remember what your lessons were like? What did your teacher talk about/focus on?**
>
> **14:** I remember, I think in middle school, it was mostly just trying to teach us how to read an assigned book. I don't really remember much of that. Highschool, I remember there was a little more nuance to it. I don't remember a lot, but they did not go too in depth into what it all meant… I was like, is it like a metaphor? They didn't go too much in depth about the nuance of crime and the display of the disparity between how people are treated in situations of crime based on race and time period and location. It was mostly just like explaining what a lynch mob was to us and why that happened, getting a very bare bones kind of explanation of why he went to jail anyway.

However, these students remembered the social issues in the book because of uncomfortable moments in the classroom concerning race, either at the hands of their teachers or because the teacher failed to prevent and shut down hateful behavior.

> **Q: How did your teacher handle the racial issues in the book?**
>
> **7:** We read it aloud a lot and kind of reenacted the scenes, which was a little weird because, you know, we were all very white. And because of that, we had to replace most of the slurs with African American, which while respectable, it did feel very clunky and it was hard to follow along the book with it, because people would always pause to make sure that they, like, replace the right thing. And it was just, I remember it feeling like a very weird activity for this book specifically because it's only one we did it with the entire year. And we had like tests on it and stuff, but I vividly remember the teacher having to stop someone as soon as they started saying N word.
>
> **3:** She did read the N word. Kind of unprompted to us. In the honors classes, most of them were almost fully white. My honors class had one boy who identified as Black in it, and she asked him before reading the chapter if he wanted to read that part, and he said he felt that that was inappropriate, and he didn't want to read that word in class. She read it after he said that he found it inappropriate. It kind of started something because the whole class was like, what? She apologized for it later, but she still stands by the fact that she thinks that all English teachers should just read it no matter what, no matter the situation, which I don't know how to feel about that. Well, I know how I feel about but I don't know how to feel about that from her perspective, but I personally don't like see it as necessary. I think you could just have your students read it on their own right. It was jarring. I feel like that is part of the reason I remember the book so well, because of that situation.

Students in this group, along with wishing that their teachers provided them will a more well-rounded education, also simply wished they were not put in these uncomfortable situations by their educators and classmates.

Looking back, is there anything you would have wanted done differently?

> **6:** I wish there were more voices of color in that room. I remember being the only one who's like, hey, I don't read this as like empowering or even a sort of kind, the way that they depicted Black life. But all my classmates were like, wow, I've never thought about this. It was an uncomfortable dynamic.
>
> **14:** I wish that my middle school teacher had not said the N word, and then also maybe explained to us that you're not supposed to. I definitely already knew because my parents had told me that's a word that you're not supposed to say, but I think maybe that was not the case for a lot of students. So yeah, I wish that they had at least done that, because they said it reading the book and did not even really acknowledge that's not a word that you're supposed to say. I think maybe they were scared of that conversation or maybe they didn't care. In high school, I think that it was the right amount of context for me as a white student, but I think maybe they didn't do enough. Maybe it should have been a little bit less of trying to slowly introduce the white students in the room to racism. Acknowledge that most of the students in that classroom are not white, and maybe push into the nuance a little bit more, because most of those concepts, I'm assuming, are not new to the people who had already been experiencing racism and seeing those things happen to people in their community. Like, I could have gotten it. Fourteen-year-olds are fourteen but they're also teenagers.

Participant 14 puts it well. While all the participants read the novel young, they were all capable of doing the same analysis as their peers in group two. However, their socioeconomic positioning and the positioning of their teachers prevented them from doing so, the majority of members from groups 2 and 3 having white teachers in predominately white neighborhoods. Their teachers lacked the necessary perspectives to reveal the necessity of a robust lesson plan for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. However, it is possible for these teachers to learn. While a white teacher will not gain the Black standpoint, they can still gain understanding of that perspective and use that to positively impact their students, as demonstrated in group 2.

Despite the small pool, each interview continued to yield the results I expected. Given proper time and attention, the students were able to dissect and understand the racial issues in the book, resulting in a positive impact on their understanding of race relations and their ability to remember the novel in general. In contrast, those who did not give the race issues in the book proper attention resulted in students who barely remembered the book or their lessons at all, resulting in them gaining nothing from their experience or, in a few cases, the wrong things. Although none of the participants took away a harmful message due to their teacher's lack of thoroughness, there were a few who experienced mental harm from their teacher's ignorance, which is just as undesirable. Clearly, underprepared teachers and a flimsy lesson plan for *To Kill a Mockingbird* are detrimental to education. However, I recognize that these students experienced *To Kill a Mockingbird* four years ago at minimum. The discourse around teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* for the very issues we have discovered has only increased in recent years as the world's racial awareness continues to grow.

How Teachers are Using *To Kill a Mockingbird*

To get an idea of how teachers are currently using *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one can easily look towards the internet. Lesson plans for *To Kill a Mockingbird* are easily accessible online in To get an idea of how teachers are currently using *To Kill a Mockingbird*, one can easily look towards the internet. Lesson plans for *To Kill a Mockingbird* are easily accessible online in multitudes, both paid and free. These lesson plans span from semester long to only a few weeks depending on the teacher's needs and the expectations of their district. Teachers rarely focus on one novel for the entirety of a semester for various reasons. Teachers may follow a planned list that has been established by the district, or they may need to focus on getting their students to pass standardized tests. Regardless of what the reasons may be, few teachers currently dedicate the time required to break down a book in its full context.

Issue One: Necessary Historical Context

Part of the issue is that a history lesson is required in order to use *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a race novel. History lessons not only aren't the average English teacher's responsibility, but they are also difficult to make concise and satisfactorily well-encompassing. Additionally, all education is not equal. There are different expectations and textbooks from state to state, one classroom may have more basic information about the history of racism than another. Adding regulations from district to district, teachers are unable to assume the amount of knowledge their students hold. Under normal circumstances, this generally means dedicating time to reviewing the basics before getting into the material of the year. The same attitude would be needed when the teacher establishes the historical background of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, if done at all. While surveying lesson plans on the internet, I found most older lesson plans lack this establishment of context.

Issue Two: Boo Radley

Additionally, several lesson plans focus on Boo Radley rather than Tom Robinson’s case. As established in both the analysis of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the interview results, focusing on Boo Radley has little impact on the students and skips over race, either during the lesson or in the student’s mind. It is a disservice to the text to discuss Boo Radley without the context of Tom Robinson, and a disservice to the students to leave them unchallenged and unengaged with the text on a deeper level when the avenue to do so is accessible.

Improvements Have Been Made

However, modern lesson plans of *To Kill a Mockingbird* are more aware of the weaknesses of the way the novel used to be taught. Every recent lesson plan (from the year 2020 and up) focused on centering the discussion on race and the trial, in contrast to the older lesson plans that had more variety. These lesson plans also often included a day spent learning about Lee and her time period. Meanwhile, older lesson plans for late generation Z and older (the cutoff being around 2016) focused on a wider variety, such as focusing on Atticus Finch or Boo Radley. This suggests that the curriculum surrounding *To Kill a Mockingbird* is improving towards what the interviewees wished their teachers included. Granted, every district adopting these alternative lesson plans will not happen quickly, as they are few in comparison to the long-established lesson plans from previous years, particularly in small, rural areas, but there is hope for an improvement of how *To Kill a Mockingbird* is used in the classroom.

However, amongst this discourse, there are many questioning whether *To Kill a Mockingbird* should be used in the classroom at all. As established, the novel has ample issues, and if being used as a novel to teach about race, there are several other works written by Black people that the classroom could utilize instead that would automatically resolve many issues with Lee's work, seeing as her novel is informed by her limited perspective. Then we must ask, what could *To Kill a Mockingbird* be replaced with?

Replacing *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Replacing *To Kill a Mockingbird* would be quite a difficult task. The most egregious issue would be the education department's limited funds. Most schools have enough years old copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* to supply the classroom if not multiple classrooms at once.

Schools hardly have the funds to order several new copies of a different book, making the possibility of introducing contemporary books on race to the curriculum currently out of scope for most school districts. However, there may be an opportunity to use books that have been staples in the American school system. Not only do school copies of these books already exist, but it is possible to find free editions online for students to use. Thanks to the digital age where many classrooms are already moving away from paper, the internet can be used to open up the possibilities.

For this undertaking, I read several books by Black authors that are considered essential American literature that are also commonly taught in the high school classroom. However, each of these novels had issues of their own, and the novels often shared problems. One of these problems is that the Black authors of these novels are writing them from their socioeconomic standing as discussed in Black standpoint theory, giving these novels subtle contexts that the average white teacher has no access to, making these novels harder to teach. Additionally, these novels are stories of struggle, which is a common thread amongst Black literature. Although stories of struggle are worthwhile and are necessary for both sharing the reality of the Black experience as well as processing the horrors of daily Black life, these conversations and concepts can be hard to process within a group, especially for children who are the minority group in their majority white classroom. Finally, these novels are all incredibly complex even for the adult Black reader, making these novels poor choices as an introduction into race, gender, and class.

The Other Novels

While *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not the best novel for race studies, other books that are more suited because they feature Black perspectives as the central perspective also have their issues.

Native Son

Native Son was written by Richard Wright, an African American writer and poet who published his first short story at the age of 16. Later, he found employment with the Federal Writers' Project and received critical acclaim for *Uncle Tom's Children*, a collection of four stories. His book *Native Son*, published in 1940, and was the first book by an African American writer to be selected by the Book-of-the-Month Club. He is also well-known for his 1945 autobiography, *Black Boy*, which depicted his life in the South.

Native Son features Bigger Thomas, a poor young Black man living with his family in 1930s Chicago. Bigger is mentally burdened with a hopeless attitude due to the lack of control he has over his life and his ability to rise above his economic station, aware that he has little possibility of achieving anything beyond low-wage labor, which affects his willingness to work at all. Instead of taking a job set up by his mother with a rich white man, Bigger meets up with his friends to plan the robbery of a white man's store. However, it is revealed that Bigger has a fear of white people not as individuals but as a collective force, and overwhelmed by this fear, he violently attacks a member of his gang to sabotage the robbery. Additionally, Bigger realizes his job opportunity with the rich white man, named Mr. Dalton gives him an opportunity to free himself from his impoverished life without the possibility of getting sent to jail, so he accepts the job of being the Dalton's driver.

Mr. Dalton, who is also Bigger's landlord, sees himself as a benevolent philanthropist because donates money to Black schools and offers jobs to "poor, timid **B**lack Boys" like Bigger, despite running run-down slums that take advantage of the impoverished like Bigger's apartment. Additionally, it is implied he only does so because his blind wife has sympathy for, and a fascination with, Black people. Mary, Mr. Dalton's daughter, also has similar sympathies and delusions of being a savior, and she puts Bigger on edge with her overly friendly behavior towards him, attempting to befriend him instead of keeping their professional relationship. Mary and her communist boyfriend Jan force Bigger to drive them to the South Side of Chicago where he lives on his first day of work, wanting to bond with him and experience his way of life, but only end up embarrassing Bigger in his community due to the judgement he receives for allowing these white people to parade him around in such a manner.

The three drink, Mary and Jan getting exceptionally drunk. When Bigger helps the drunk Mary to her bedroom, he is aroused by Mary's body, which is the epitome of the desirable white form often depicted in media and movies, and begins to kiss her. Mary's mother comes into the bedroom, and in a frenzy to not be discovered, Bigger presses a pillow to her face to silence Mary, accidentally smothering her. Bigger tries to conceal his crime by burning Mary's body in the Daltons' furnace and decides to try to use the Daltons' prejudice against communists to frame Jan for Mary's disappearance. Additionally, Bigger takes advantage of the Daltons' racial prejudices to avoid suspicion, playing the role of a mindless Black servant who would be unable to commit such an act. However, instead of regret, Mary's murder gives Bigger a sense of power and identity he has never known as it is the only thing he has created by himself and is the only time he has had power over white people.

However, Mary's bones are discovered, and several signs point towards Bigger being the culprit, leading to a massive manhunt for Bigger, who is now on the run. The manhunt becomes an excuse for the police to terrorize Bigger's hometown, the police harassing any Black man regardless of if they fit Bigger's description. The public, who have learned about the case, have already made their conclusion of what happened, making the result of his eventual trial guaranteed. Bigger eludes the police for as long as he can, but he is eventually captured.

Although Bigger faces the death penalty, he is unrepentant all the way to the end, because although he dies, he dies a man with power over the white man, a power they needed to put down, a stark contrast of the hopelessness he felt at his social position at the beginning of the novel.

When considering *Native Son*, the most accessible and dominant topic of discussion is whether or not Bigger Thomas is redeemable. Puzzling out how we feel about Bigger Thomas feels like the penultimate question; after all, it is his novel, his murders, his trial, and his death that we witness and must make sense of. However, *Native Son* itself does not want to concern the audience with determining the guiltiness of Bigger Thomas. What Richard Wright wants us to understand is what has made this man into a monster and our role in his guilt, and to look past the actions of man and do something about the root that perpetuates evil. Wright lays out this point through Jan’s final conversation with Bigger, as well as through the arguments of Max, Bigger’s lawyer that Jan provided. Bigger is a product of his environment, and part of the blame for Bigger’s crimes belongs to the fearful, hopeless existence that he has experienced in a racist society since birth. Max warns that there will be more men like Bigger if America does not put an end to the vicious cycle of hatred and vengeance, which is ultimately what the novel is making commentary on.

Whether the novel does so well is a point of contention. In "’Boys in the Hood’ Black Male Community in Richard Wright's ‘*Native Son’*", Aime J. Ellis states that while “Wright was uniquely situated to capture the overwhelming fear and frustration among the Black urban poor” (Ellis 182), many question Bigger Thomas’s ability to represent the “collective psyche of poor urban Blacks during the 1930s” (Ellis183). Namely, people point out Bigger’s seclusion, as the community Black people have with one another while in poverty is seen as “a necessary dimension has been cut away” (Ellis 35). In the novel, Bigger Thomas is alone, feeling a distance between him and the Black people around him. After killing Mary, he finds himself describing the others as “blind” on several occasions, feeling as though he has gained knowledge of life that they are not privy to.

Ellis, however, pushed back against this criticism, stating that *Native Son* depicts how young Black men created a social community and “ultimately made sense of a world filled with racial terror” (Ellis 183). She states: “Most often obscured in the critical scholarship of *Native Son*, Bigger's deeply emotional conversations with his homeboys constitute a site of Black male community that allows them to purge the psychic pain of urban blight as well as symbolize an intimate space for sharing their dreams, aspirations, and joys” (Ellis 184). Additionally, Ellis states “Bigger's humanity is inextricably tied to the pursuit of his freedom, inextricably bound up in each violent assertion of Bigger's rage” (Ellis 186) connecting Bigger’s violent tendencies to something more positive, suggesting that his violent lashing against society can be a place of empowerment, as is suggested by the novel.

However, all this discourse is on a scholarship-level and requires an understanding of poverty, how the Black community operates whilst in poverty, and how race operates on a large, societal scale, not to mention the necessary historical context. These complex topics as well as Bigger’s exaggerated, violent nature, as Bigger is essentially a caricature created to make a point, may be too complex as an introduction to race studies since it requires so much prior information as well as decent literary comprehension and analysis skills. Additionally, for students who are not beginners, the extremely depressive nature as well as the violence of the novel could make them uncomfortable in a classroom with white peers, especially if the conversation is limited to determining whether Bigger was “good” or “bad”.

Teaching Points

Would the average reader understand the nuances of Bigger’s violent behavior upon first read? Furthermore, would they associate his violence with anything other than unproductive rage and terror? Bigger has trouble admitting his reactions and true intentions to himself, would it be reasonable to believe that the white reader would be able to pick up upon the nature of his rage and fear themselves? *Native Son* is not written to be easily understood, although it does intend to educate. The novel is much more well suited for the last year of high school or for college classes, but certainly could not reasonably be a replacement for *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Invisible Man

Ralph Ellison published his bestselling first novel *Invisible Man* in 1952, and the novel is seen as one of the most influential works on the African American perspective. The first part of his novel, which was originally published as a short story, is particularly notable and is often used in the classroom instead of the full work.

This novel begins with the narrator, who notably never receives a name, claiming he is invisible. However, this notion is metaphorical, not physical. Rather, his invisibility is the result of others' refusal to see him. That is, society has rendered the narrator invisible, which is a commentary on the public’s treatment of young Black men. Because of his invisibility and alienation, the narrator has become removed from the world.

The first section of the novel and the initial short story features the young man's life in the South in the late 1920s or early 1930s, the narrator lived in the South. Due to his academic success, he is invited to give a speech to a group of important white men in his town. However, upon arrival, it is revealed that the function is actually a "battle royale" fight against other young Black men. Blindfolded, the narrator must fight his peers as the white audience jeers them on, the young Black men turned into an embarrassing spectacle. After the fight, the white men have the young Black youths scramble over an electrified rug for gold coins that are later revealed to be fake. After white men pay the boys a small pittance after abusing them for their entertainment, and the narrator is finally allowed to give his speech. However, his speech is used as another avenue for ridicule, as the white men hackle him any time he uses words over three syllables. The men ultimately reward the narrator with a scholarship to a prestigious Black college, but the young narrator dreams that night that the scholarship is actually a piece of paper with a command.

This first section of *Invisible Man* is the representative of the rest of the novel. Despite the narrator's intelligence, he is treated as less than human, commodified by the white people around him and powerless to change their minds. All he can do, all they allow him to do, is resort to violence and groveling for scraps based on false promises, reflecting the lives of many young Black men who chase dreams of becoming equals with white men on the basis of their academics, only to be faced with the reality that they are still viewed as nothing of value and no different from uneducated Black people. Their value is not as individual people but as a commodity.

The narrator learns this lesson throughout his life as depicted in the book. As a student in college, he is tasked to drive the visiting trustee Mr. Norton around campus. Norton, who is fascinated with Black people and is disillusioned with being a savior, learns about Jim Trueblood, a poor, uneducated Black man who impregnated his own daughter. He insists on talking to him despite the narrator's protests, but after hearing Jim's horrific story, Mr. Norton feels faint and needs a drink, unable to handle the concept of Black people who are not virtuous nor seeking help, which was beyond his fantasies, blinded by his naivety surrounding race relations.

Back at the college, the narrator listened to a sermon by the Reverend Homer A. Barbee on the subject of the college's founder, a Black man, whom the blind Barbee glorifies. After the sermon, the narrator is chastised by the college president Dr. Bledsoe. He scolds the narrator for showing Mr. Norton the slave quarters and taking him to the Golden Day, stating that he should have lied instead of doing Mr. Nortons bidding. The narrator, who used to admire Dr. Bledsoe, is shaken by this. Bledsoe expels the narrator but the narrator fights back, screaming that he will tell Mr. Norton. Bledsoe makes a deal, deciding he will send the narrator to New York City with seven letters of recommendation addressed to the college's white trustees.

The narrator travels to 1930s Harlem, where he looks unsuccessfully for work, the letters of recommendation providing no aid. The narrator goes to the office of one of the letters' addresses, a trustee named Mr. Emerson, where he meets Emerson's son. Emerson's son attempts to persuade the narrator to stop his path and to leave the college behind because he has several Black friends and knows that the narrator has been betrayed. The young Emerson helps the narrator to get a low-paying job at the Liberty Paints plant and he works as an assistant to Liucius Brockay, an old Black man working as an engineer in the basement of the factory.

After an accident at the factory, the narrator awakens in the paint factory's hospital having temporarily lost his memory and ability to speak to doctors conducting experiments on his body. In this dream-like sequence, we again see the white populace using Black bodies to their benefit, the doctors caring little about the narrator as an individual. After the narrator recovers and leaves the hospital, he is taken in by the Black community, and after witnessing the eviction of an elderly Black couple from their apartment, he gives an impassioned speech against the eviction. His moving speech gets him noticed by the brotherhood, a political organization that works to help the socially oppressed, a stark contrast from how his first speech was ignored by the rich white men.

Trained by the white members of the Brotherhood, the narrator is assigned to Harlem, where he meets his narrative foil Ras the Exhorter, a Black nationalist leader who believes in the separation of white and Black Americans, believing that Black people need to fight for freedom against all whites. Regardless, the narrator has seemingly found a place where he is of value, only to receive a warning that he must remember his place as a Black member of the Brotherhood. Once he becomes too successful, he is removed from his position. In his first sexual encounter, which is with a white woman, she uses him not as a person but as a character in here racial rape fantasies. Finally, it is eventually revealed that the Brotherhood only views Harlem and Black people as tools for their greater interests, and that they have now abandoned Harlem, betraying the residents.

The final conflict in the novel is when the narrator finds himself amidst a riot, started by Ras, where neither the police nor the Black people of Harlem are safe to be with now that he has been abandoned by both sides. While fleeing, he falls into a manhole, and reveals he has stayed underground ever since, having given up hope that he could ever be seen.

Invisible Man is an incredibly complex book. The setting is very important, as it references what Harlem was like at the time as well as the tension between the several civil rights movements and social groups, which were at a high during this period. On top of the historical context, the social context is fraught. There is the tension between Black people who are able to get their education and those who cannot; tension between Black people who want a partnership with white people and those who want to remain sperate; tension between Black people who are willing pawns in the white people's game and those who want to make real change; and more. On the other side of things, there is also of course the racial tension between white and Black, as well as exploring the difference between white people who truly want to help and those who are only self-righteous.

In "The Unintended Consequences of Teaching Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," Mary Lynn Navarro details a teacher's journey with *Invisible Man*, first as a student and then as a teacher. She remembers what it was like when she was first introduced to the work by her African American professor James Haskins, who was frank about race realities, using his own life as an avenue for his students to understand the racism portrayed in the book. The writer also reflects on the high school she attended, which was mostly white and segregated not by government law but by social law. Navarro wanted to emulate Haskins who survived in these conditions and was a "brave educator" (Navarro 88).

Years later, Navarro is a teacher herself. She teaches a class of adult students of color and utilizes resources outside the classroom in tandem with *Invisible man*, such as museums and exhibits that discuss Black culture and history. However, in 2011, while teaching high school students the same novel, Navarro no longer had access to these sites and realized how much she had been relying on them to substantiate her lessons. This leads Navarro to realize she had not been actually engaging with her students and constructing their knowledge and was instead transmitting her interests. Additionally, she found that her new students, generations apart from her when he first read the work, have a different perception of the story. The “more mature” students reported feeling “fatigued by rehashing slavery, Jim Crow, [and] the struggle for civil rights” (90). She realized that teachers rely on asking students to use “critical thinking” as a guise to ask students to think like they do, revealing even more problems with teaching *Invisible Man* and novels of this caliber in the classroom.

Teaching Points

The novel is built upon subtle social cues and context, and while it is an excellent exploration on the ever-twisting and intertwining issues of race relations, and how it even splits the Black community apart, it certainly is not appropriate as an introduction to the subject. On top of its complex nature, the novel toes the line between reality and science fiction in several places, making it a confusing and complex read through diction alone. Using this book in a high school classroom well would likely need several months of dedication, which would be difficult to achieve. Like *Native Son*, *Invisible Man* is just too complex for a *To Kill a Mockingbird* replacement.

The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye is one of the more commonly used novels on this list. Toni Morrison, an American novelist and editor, has several of her texts in the classroom, including *Sula,* and *Beloved.* Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970. All her novels share a similar narrative style and explore what it means to be a Black woman in a racist society, and they all share similar problems when considering their place in the primary school classroom.

The Bluest Eye is told from the perspective of several different characters who live in the same neighborhood, a small community in Lorian, Ohio set during the end of the Great Depression. There is nine-year-old Claudia and ten-year-old Frieda MacTeer who live with their parents. Although the parents can't spend much time with the girls, more focused on keeping the family afloat, the home is still stable and loving. The MacTeers take in Henry Washington and the second point of view of the novel, a young girl named Pecola. Pecola's home is unstable and must live with the MacTeer's because her father has tried to burn down their family's house. Pecola is where the namesake of the novel comes from; she loves Shirley Temple because of her pretty blue eyes, believing that whiteness is beautiful and that she, in contrast with her dark skin, Black hair, and Black eyes, is ugly.

When Pecola eventually moves back in with her family, she believes that her tumultuous home life would improve if she had blue eyes, because then she would be cherished and loved like the pretty white wealthy girls around her. Meanwhile, the world affirms her idea that she is ugly, as she is often teased or ignored, even by her friends. When we switch narrators, we learn that Pecola's parents faced struggle in their loves. Pauline, her mother, was isolated because of her disability. A fan of cinema, the movies she watched only reaffirmed that she is a part of the ugly "other", a sentiment that has been passed down to her daughter. She feels trapped in her life and encourages her husband's abusive behavior as a way to control her life's narrative. Cholly, Pecola's father, was abandoned by his parents and his guardian died when he was a teenager. In a particularly graphic memory, he was also once humiliated by two white men who found him having sex for the first time and made him continue while they watched. When he eventually found his father, a broke gambler, he was cast aside once again. His trauma and lack of stability turned him into a reckless man like his father, a state in which he met Pauline, He too feels trapped in his life, which leads him to drink.

After discovering how Pauline came to be and how they are in the present, we return to Pecola in her home, where Cholly rapes her. When Pecola tells her mother what happened, she disbelieves Pecola's story and beats her. Hopeless, Pecola goes to Soaphead Church, a man who claims to have powers and whose perspective we jump into. Soaphead's head is twisted, he, too, a result of a complex history. Pecola asks him for blue eyes, and he manipulates her to get her to kill a dog he dislikes, promising this will grant her the eyes she desires. After her baby dies prematurely and she is raped again by her father who too eventually dies after running away, Pecola loses grip on reality and descends into madness, believing that she has finally gotten her deepest wish: the worlds bluest eyes.

Teaching Points

Toni Morrison's style is simple and easy to read, flowing well from sentence to sentence, which is ideal for younger readers. Additionally, the concepts Morrison grapples with, poverty, community, the standards of white society, are more plainly laid out, such as the inclusion of explaining how Pecola's abusive parents have been formed by society by being failed by it.

However, it is of no surprise that *The Bluest Eye* and other Morrison works have been banned in several states due to the subject matter it includes descriptions of rape, sex, pedophilia, and violence. While I appreciate that Morrison does not shy away from these subjects, it is likely unrealistic to expect every classroom to adopt *The Bluest Eye* like *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Additionally, being up-front with such a devastating novel could be detrimental for Black students, as there is ample opportunity for both white teachers and students to mishandle or make-light of the contents of the novel. All in all, while *The Bluest Eye*, and similarly the rest of Toni Morrison's works, are more promising prospects of novels to include in the curriculum, they are unlikely to be implemented.

Their Eyes Were Watching God

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston's is another novel also very commonly used in the high-school classroom. Published in 1937, the novel is notable because of its use of African American vernacular in the text, as the entirety of the novel is written in the speaker's dialect. However, this does make the text a bit more of a challenge to read and is better understood out loud, and many teachers use read-along CDs to combat this.

The novel explores the journey of Janie Mae Crawford, a Black woman living in the early 20th century. The narrative the main character Janie's reflection on her life and her journey of self-discovery as an attractive mixed woman living in 1930's Florida. Raised by her grandmother, who was once a slave, Janie's worldview is controlled by the memory of hardship. To make sure her granddaughter is secure, Janie's grandmother marries her off young to a much older man with money at status named Logan Killicks. However, Janie, bright and imaginative, is miserable under Logan's cold and oppressive rule.

She meets Joe Starks, an attractive man with dreams of building his own community for Blacks, and she runs off and marries him. Jody soon becomes the mayor, postmaster, and storekeeper, and landlord of Eatonville, investing money into the community and bringing infrastructure. Janie is his right-hand woman but becomes stifled in the position he has created for her, as it isolates her from the rest of the community. Eventually their marriage dissolves, culminating in Joe beating her. Soon he becomes ill, and upon his death, Janie is finally free, with no man nor guardian to attempt to dictate how she should live her life.

Eventually, she meets Tea Cake, a man younger than her by twelve years. Janie marries Tea Cake nine months after Jody's death, sells Jody's store, and leaves town to go with Tea Cake to Jacksonville, chasing the spark between them and the truest love she has felt. However, Tea

Cake and Janie encounter many difficulties, but after overcoming them they move together to the Everglades, where they work during the harvest season and socialize during the summer off-season. Tea Cake and Janie become a staple of the community, but a terrible storm ravages the Everglades two years after Janie and Tea Cake's marriage. While fleeing the flood, a rabid dog bites Tea Cake, and although Tea Cake and Janie escape the storm with their lives, Tea Cake eventually succumbs to rabies. Mad from the sickness, Tea Cake attacks Janie with a pistol, forcing Janie to kill him in order to survive. After being found not guilty during the murder trial, Janie returns to Eatonville once more. Despite the life she has lived, Janine ends the novel confident and at peace with herself, despite the malicious rumors the townsfolk spread about what happened between her and her late love.

Of all the Black Literature novels I have reviewed and thus far mentioned, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the best. The narrative is thrilling and interesting, meaning young readers are more likely to pay attention in the story. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is also the novel that focuses on Black pain the least, although racial tensions are absolutely a feature in Janie's life and affect it, it does not absolutely rule it, whereas in novels like *Invisible Man* and *The Bluest Eye*, whiteness dominates the lives of the Black people within it. In comparison, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is more of a linear narrative work about a Mixed Woman trying to find her way in the world. It features community, love, poverty, while still featuring race in a way that generates ample conversation that helps readers understand the ways race functions in society, such as how race affects mixed people in the community.

Teaching Points

However, like our other Black Lit novels, Their Eyes also features many issues. Although the novel does not focus on the struggle of Black vs. White, it is still a story of struggle, which can be painful for Black children in white classrooms as we have established. Additionally, the frank nature of the novel means that sensitive subjects, such as domestic violence, are presented in a straightforward manner, which could garner concern among parents. The novel also requires historical context, featuring many issues of historical importance, such as the community attempting to find success after becoming free from slavery and the ways that manifested. *Their Eyes* also explains little of how white society impacts and forms the ideals and decisions of the many characters of the book since it is so deeply rooted in the Black communities Janie resides in, making it not the most optimal peace for an introduction to race relations. In all, *Their Eyes* may be better suited to a second semester read, rather than a first.

Contemporary Literature

There has been a call to adopt more contemporary literature pieces in the classroom instead of using older Black literature. These titles include *The Hate U Give*, *Slay*, and *On the Come Up*, the foremost two I have read for the purpose of this research. While I cannot speak on all the contemporary Black Lit suggestions, *The Hate U Give* and *Slay* share very similar issues that I fear their fellow novels may also share. Both novels feature a female Black main character who are out of place in all-white academies. Both girls are involved in conflicts that garner national attention; Starr, the main charter of *The Hate You Give*, becomes involved in a police brutality case when her best friend gets shot in front of her; and Kiera becomes involved in a high-profile lawsuit when her all-Black comes under-fire for being exclusionary. Both girls feel stuck between two worlds and have to deal with the inevitable rift that Black V.S. white imposes on their lives, eventually embracing their Blackness and their community instead of attempting to ride the line.

The issue of providing schools with these books aside, *The Hate U Give*, *Slay*, *On the Come Up*, and the majority of the other suggestions are all YA novels, which means they are typically written in a particular style and are more concerned with appealing to young audiences. This means they are of a different standard than the classic literature of the classical literature of the other novels typically taught in the classroom. Although I believe in breaking the barrier of what is considered "worthy" of the classroom, or indeed "Literature" at all, this is a hurdle contemporary novel must get past, whereas established works have already been approved.

Additionally, I am concerned about the content of these books. Both *The Hate U Give* and *Slay* struggle with the construction of their stories and their delivery of complex topics. In Vincent Haddad's, "Nobody's Protest Novel: Novelistic Strategies of the Black Lives Matter Movement," Haddad points out that while *The Hate U Give* is successful in asking for empathy, the book reproduces narratives of Black criminality that is often used to justify these crimes despite trying to call that out in the novel. Haddad defines the book as a "Everybody's Protest Novel," a term coined by James Baldwin, in which the novel more conforms to what is accepted as radicalism rather than disturbing the framework. Starr becomes a heroic national figure that the nation wants to pay attention to, like Martin Luther King, rather than showcasing the story of true victims of police brutality: the "nobody" victims who fall through the cracks due to their stories not becoming sensationalized.

The Hate U Give, written by Angie Thomas, problematically positions itself alongside reality, including real people in the novel. This has the effect of fictionalizing activists and the

BLM movement by association, further seasonalizing and appropriating people's trauma for the sake of narrative. In particular, Haddad discusses the scene in which Starr throws a canister back at the police, which is a direct reference to a famous photo of a man named Edward Crawford doing the same during a real BLM protest. Haddad explains that the book is written based on the police's account of the scene, which directly disavows Edward Crawford's account of what happened during that image. Such account was used to justify the violence and charge Crawford with assault. Haddad states that the novel does things like this several times, disciplining Black criminals for not conforming to law and order. The novel has limits on how it can imagine justice, condemning violence and certainly not entertaining the dissolution of the police force, as the scene where King gets taken away reaffirms the police's legitimacy. Additionally, King and "his boys" are completely one-dimensional villains and their scene of arrest parallels Khalils in a "substitution of justice." The optimistic end to the novel is in disconnect with reality according to Haddad, and reaffirms the narrative that activists do not have any concrete strategies to offer.

The gang members of Starr's neighborhood are not the only characters shackled by stereotype by *The Hate U Give*. Sarr herself has an obsession with sneakers and describes her complexion using several stereotypes. Kiera from *Slay,* written by Brittney Morris, is very similar. While she does not have stereotypical hobbies, the misuse and overuse of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and the bludgeoning of "Black" references in her game is almost cringeworthy.

Additionally, Kiera's boyfriend Malcolm is the picture of the stereotypical male radical/Black nationalist. Black nationalists have a pattern of being negatively portrayed in fiction, and *Slay* is no exception. Malcolm refers to Kiera as a queen, a familiar verbiage for Black nationalist men. On the one hand, it can be uplifting, which it often is for Kiera, who feels like a goddess with him (Morris 9). On the contrary, it can also be a subtle indicator of the belief that Black women have a servile role to their Black kings, sowing the expectations that they are homemakers who bear sons. It is increasingly apparent that Malcolm believes Black women should act as supporters through his discussions with Kiera.

Black nationalists also emphasize alternate education outside white media, which Malcom exhibits. Malcolm is an avid reader of books written by Black men about the advancement of the race. The criticism of Malcolm only reading literature that focuses on uplifting Black men is valid, as it is a key issue with the Black nationalist movement. Additionally, he believes “American history is white history, and therefore anti-Black” (Morris 10). This is painted as unreasonable because he criticizes Kiera for studying for an American history test; however, Malcolm is not entirely incorrect. It is well known that American history books leave out many details about enslavement and revolutionary Black figures and presents a doctored version of Civil Rights activists. Yet, this passage presents Malcolm’s discontent with the American educational system as misguided.

Concerning Kiera’s videogame *Slay*, Kiera does not share it with him because Malcolm believes that Black-only creations and celebrations, such as Black Panther and Black History Month, only serve as distractors from the fact that Black people do not have control (Morris 13). Most importantly, he states, “Separate is not equal. That doesn’t even come close to leveling the field” (Morris 13). Again, Malcolm’s beliefs are not entirely ungrounded. He unfairly dismisses the merit of having those celebrations and spaces. Still, the conversation that an increasing number of for-Black creations does not come close to rectifying the systemic injustices in America is incredibly important.

According to this stance, Malcolm would argue that Black people should be able to play mainstream games with all the same opportunities as white players, which is reasonable argument. However, Malcolm is not allowed to make this argument. Instead, he is characterized as a videogame hater altogether, his characterization veering far away from the possibility of having a nuanced view of what the image of Black liberation looks like.

Possibly, the ability to see the merit in Malcolm's arguments is Morris's intention, and Malcolm is commentary on how reasonable beliefs can be taken to such extremes that they end up harming those they are supposed to uplift. However, that conversation lacks usefulness when it is limited to the reader's speculation, as Kiera never analyzes Malcolm's views, chalking it up to "he'll never get it" for the entirety of the book (Morris 13). The lack of a nuanced view of the Black nationalist movement is repetitive and reductive, which is directly reflected in Malcolm's character, as he repeatedly has the same conversations over and over until he is banished to prison after being revealed as the real antagonist of the novel. Malcolm's turn into violence devalues his arguments entirely, disallowing his values to be allowed complexity or discussion in-universe, which reflects outwardly on the reader. This twist also undermines the struggle between Kierra and the white community, leading the book practically fumble the message that Black people deserve an online space for a narrative that pits Black people against each other instead.

Talking Points

Slay and *The Hate You Give* are important novels deserving of readership and respect. In Ebony Thomas's, "Young Adult Literature for Black Lives," Thomas asserts that young Black people getting to tell their own stories after a history of oppression is important. There has been a historical adultification of Black youth, thus, literature for Black youth is lacking. The existence of these books to criticize at all is important, and although I am critical of their content, these novels are successful for good reason. The struggle of these teens has touched many hearts, and they give Black girls the ability to see themselves as the heroes of their own stories. However, despite this, I believe these novels mixed messages and confused conclusions make them unfit for the classroom. In comparison, older literature like *To Kill a Mockingbird* knows exactly what their messages are meant to be, and is easier to tease out of the text.

Conclusion

To Kill a Mockingbird has been a staple in the classroom for generations, and it is doubtful it will ever leave. The novel has its issues, and those who want to remove the novel from the curriculum or from the conversation on race altogether are not unfounded. However, replacing *To Kill a Mockingbird* is un unrealistic expectation. Not only do few schools have the funds to do so, but it is also unclear what *To Kill a Mockingbird* could be replaced with. Novels considered Black Literature are often far more complex than *To Kill a Mockingbird* in content and context. You would not expect a student to balance a chemical equation before they have seen the periodic table, much less understand what elements are or where they come from. Likewise, we should not throw students *Native Son* before they've come in contact with the base concepts of how race, poverty, systematic oppression, gender, and so on, interact. Likewise, modern Black novels grapple with these subjects from the perspective of the confused, which can further confuse the audience. The strength in *To Kill a Mockingbird* in comparison is that the way the novel interacts with these concepts is simple and easy to explain.

Most importantly, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has the propensity to be a novel that is easy to expand upon. As it stands, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not a good book on racism. Instead, It is a book about developing empathy written from the perspective of a white girl in 1930s Alabama.

Treating the novel for what it is opens the possibilities of that the curriculum of this novel can be. Instead of the surface level question of "what does the text convey," we can ask, "why does they text say," "how does the text say," and "where do the ideas of the text come from," taking analysis of *To Kill a Mockingbird* outside of its textual confines. It opens the door for asking how an author's social economic positioning affects the text, the meaning of unreliable narrators *and* unreliable authors, and how these relationships affect the readers point of view. Then it opens the ground for seeking sources of life in the South from Black authors, allowing students the ability to compare and contrast different perspectives *after* they have established some knowledge of the subject from a source that is easier for them to understand.

The question, then, it what *To Kill a Mockingbird* do for students who need no introduction to how race has affected the fabric of our lives? However, although it is criticized how much the novel sympathizes with racists, it is worthwhile to understand differing perspectives regardless. Although I and many readers with Lee focused on other things, insight provided from *both* sides is valuable. Insights from the white perspective when treated as such instead of as a universal perspective is worthwhile for students of color, as they then can then apply such a perspective to other aspects in their life, since *To Kill a Mockingbird* also opens the conversation how the image of People of Color has been controlled by white media for years, and what this means for other bodies of work, including pieces from the modern day, encouraging the deconstruction of the media we consume.

However, it is clear that updating how we treat *To Kill a Mockingbird* is not immediately accessible. According to the National Center of Education Statistics, 79 percent of public-school teachers were white and non-Hispanic. A teacher's socioeconomic positioning presents a real barrier in their ability to teach due to the lack of innate knowledge that comes with growing up as a Person of Color in America. White teachers are less likely to recognize racial subtext or whether their lessons are falling short, and those that have took many years to do so, even if they thought themselves progressive. The majority of teachers are not equipped to have these realizations on their own. It is not impossible for white teachers to bring *To Kill a Mockingbird* to its full potential, far from it. However, we first need to recognize that our English teachers have a deficiency in their education, and then rectify it, so they can better serve *all* students. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is starting point, both in as a text to read and analyze and as a conversation starter on restructuring how English teachers handle race stories in the classroom.

To Kill a Mockingbird is not a memoir nor a social justice manifesto. It is an inside look at the innerworkings of a small southern town during the 1930s. Scout represents children who have begun to question their environment, prodding young readers to question their own morality. How would you feel if your parents were ostracized by your community? How do you treat the mentally ill? How would you deal with an old enfeebled nasty person who cursed you out? How does it make you feel to see Black people not being respected as human beings? These questions can expand into, what civil rights laws were passed in the 60s and what sacrifices were made? How many people were murdered in these struggles and what were their names? How does this novel reflect what happened in real life? What aspects from this novel can we still see today? Many questions can be pulled from *To Kill a Mockingbird* if given planning, thought, and a chance. When it was written it was done to spoon feed some sense of racial tolerance to children in a way that the parents of the day found acceptable. Now it should be used to challenge students to analyze the hidden narrative underneath its simplistic storytelling.

When teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* or any novels dealing with race, here are the questions I suggest a teacher ask:

1. What is my sociopolitical position? What standpoints do I possess? Which ones am I missing and how does that affect my interpretation of the work?
2. What is the general sociopolitical position of my students? What standpoints do they possess? Which ones are they missing and how does that affect their interpretation of the work?
3. What is the sociopolitical positioning of the author of the text? What standpoints do they possess and how do they affect the author's creation and intent of the work?
4. What historical context is important to understanding the subject of the novel?
5. In what ways could the novel potentially put my students of color in harms way, and how do I prevent this?
6. Does the novel have any hidden subjects or messages? Is the novel clear about what it wants to convey to the audience?
7. How can I apply the text to a real-world context?
8. What is the discourse surrounding the novel, and how does this discourse reflect on the text?

There are more potential questions to ask, but just these eight questions can help a teacher prepare to be able to best use a text for the classroom while negating the many issues teaching about race in classrooms proposes.

It's important to point out problematic aspects in novels, so that the students don't take away the wrong messages from it, but the right ones. Doing so with *To Kill a Mockingbird* is possible given the right materials, questions, and enough time. It has happened before, as proven by the interviewees. The next step is getting this method to be standard rather than occasional. Starting with *To Kill a Mockingbird,* it is possible to apply the same strategies to other works, eventually giving education the ability to comfortably expand the diversity of the novels that are read in the classroom with the knowledge that teachers are sufficiently prepared to face and dissimilate the material.

Properly handling these novels can only be beneficial for all parties. The younger we learn about the way the differences between us intrinsically shape our lives, the less pressure it puts on the people from these groups to constantly explain their existence. On the other hand, others will be more secure in their interactions with others, secure in the knowledge that they will be less likely to be lost in discussions of race.

The way to deal with race is not to eradicate it from our classrooms in fear of offense. It is also not to tout the same authors and figures over and over again to be emblematic of an entire race. Our conversations can be so much more. Let's face race by looking it in the face.

"What white people have to do is try and find out in their own hearts why it is necessary to have a 'nigger' in the first place, because I'm not a nigger. I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need it."

― James Baldwin, I Am Not Your Negro

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