

## POVERTY, CLASS, AND EDUCATIONAL ACCESS IN *DEMON COPPERHEAD* BY BARBARA KINGSOLVER

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### **Abstract :**

*Present paper examines the intricate relationship between poverty, class structures, and educational access in Barbara Kingsolver's Demon Copperhead, a contemporary reimagining of Dickens' David Copperfield set in economically devastated Appalachia. Through close textual analysis, the study argues that Kingsolver exposes how educational institutions function not as ladders of opportunity but as mechanisms of class reproduction for children living in poverty. The research demonstrates how systemic barriers—manifested through physical school architecture (the literal "chain-link tunnel" dividing academic and vocational tracks), curriculum tracking that limits critical thinking development, and institutional indifference toward foster youth—deliberately constrain educational possibilities for impoverished students. By analyzing the protagonist Demon Copperhead's navigation of these obstacles, particularly his reliance on artistic expression as an alternative pathway when traditional educational structures fail him, the paper reveals Kingsolver's critique of America's educational system as a perpetuator rather than alleviator of poverty. Drawing on sociological frameworks including Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence and Anyon's research on class-based educational experiences, this study contributes to ongoing conversations about educational equity while highlighting Kingsolver's continuation of Dickens' "impassioned critique of institutional poverty" into the 21st century. The research underscores how the novel positions educational access as inseparable from economic justice, arguing that true opportunity requires dismantling the physical, bureaucratic, and psychological barriers that keep children like Demon from realizing their full potential.*

**Keywords :** Barbara Kingsolver, *Demon Copperhead*, Poverty, Class structure, Education, Appalachia, Class reproduction.

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### **Introduction :**

Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* (2022) stands as a powerful contemporary reimagining of Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, transplanted from Victorian England to the economically devastated landscape of modern-day Appalachia. In her acknowledgments, Kingsolver explicitly credits Dickens for providing "his impassioned critique of institutional poverty and its damaging effects on children in his society," noting that "those problems are still with us" (Kingsolver Acknowledgments). This continuity of systemic poverty across centuries forms the backbone of Kingsolver's narrative, which follows the life of Demon Copperhead, an orphan navigating foster care, opioid addiction, and the rigid class structures



of Lee County, Virginia. Through Demon's journey, Kingsolver exposes how educational institutions function not as ladders of opportunity but as mechanisms of class reproduction, particularly for children living in poverty. This paper argues that *Demon Copperhead* reveals how systemic barriers—manifested through physical school architecture, vocational tracking, and institutional indifference—deliberately limit educational access for impoverished students, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty that Kingsolver identifies as “institutional” in nature. By examining the novel's portrayal of school infrastructure, curriculum tracking, and the protagonist's artistic development, this analysis demonstrates how Kingsolver builds upon Dickens' critique to expose the contemporary American educational system's role in maintaining class divisions.

### **The Material Realities of Poverty and Class Markers :**

Kingsolver meticulously constructs the material conditions of poverty that shape Demon's educational experience from the very beginning of his narrative. His opening lines establish his class position with devastating clarity: “First, I got myself born. A decent crowd was on hand to watch, and they've always given me that much: the worst of the job was up to me, my mother being let's just say out of it” (Kingsolver 1). This stark introduction establishes Demon's abandonment not just by his mother but by societal structures designed to support vulnerable children. The novel consistently returns to the tangible markers of poverty that follow Demon through school—most notably his status as a “free lunch kid,” which he recognizes as a visible stigma when returning to school after athletic success: “Most of me is thinking: They don't know me. Free lunch kid” (Kingsolver 12). This single phrase encapsulates the profound shame associated with economic disadvantage in the school environment, where poverty becomes a public identity rather than a private circumstance.

The grocery store interactions further illustrate how poverty becomes a community spectacle. Demon describes how “cashiers at the grocery whenever they saw our address on Mom's food stamps envelope” would comment on copperhead snakes in their “holler,” revealing how economic vulnerability invites unsolicited judgment and stereotyping: “People love to believe in danger, as long as it's you in harm's way, and them saying bless your heart” (Kingsolver 18). This observation highlights what sociologist Matthew Desmond identifies in *Poverty, by America* as the “poverty industry”—systems that profit from or exploit the poor while maintaining a veneer of benevolence (Desmond 78). Kingsolver extends this concept to show how even casual interactions reinforce class hierarchies, with poverty becoming a marker of moral failing rather than economic circumstance.

Kingsolver's dedication powerfully frames the novel's purpose: “For the kids who wake up hungry in those dark places every day, who've lost their families to poverty and pain pills, whose caseworkers keep losing their files, who feel invisible, or wish they were: this book is for you” (Kingsolver Dedication). This dedication establishes the novel's commitment to making visible the systemic erasure of impoverished children—a theme that resonates with Kathryn Edin and H. Luke Shaefer's research in *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*, which documents how welfare policies actively render the poor invisible through bureaucratic neglect (Edin and Shaefer 112). Demon's experience of being simultaneously hyper-visible as a “free lunch kid” yet invisible as a person with potential exemplifies what



Edin and Shaefer term “administrative abandonment”—the systematic withdrawal of state support coupled with constant surveillance (118).

### **School Architecture as Class Dividing Mechanism :**

Perhaps the most potent symbol of institutional class division in *Demon Copperhead* is the physical layout of Lee High School, which Kingsolver describes with architectural precision to reveal how educational spaces codify opportunity. Demon explains the school’s literal crossroads: “Lee High is where kids like us come to our crossroads of life: walk up the steps of the big brick box and turn right, through the front door into the classrooms. Or left, down the long chain-link tunnel, past a thousand army and navy recruitment posters, into Lee Career and Tech. Nothing arty down there, trust me” (Kingsolver 47). This spatial division represents what Pierre Bourdieu would identify as the “symbolic violence” of educational institutions—physical manifestations of class sorting disguised as neutral organizational structures (Bourdieu and Passeron 48). The “chain-link tunnel” functions as a literal and metaphorical passage to limited futures, while the “big brick box” represents the academic track accessible only to those with economic and cultural capital.

The vocational track’s environment further reinforces this class division through its dehumanizing conditions. Demon describes how students in his track moved “together, a big slow herd, from Howdy Doody math to remedial everything and a lot of study halls where our reading material was Hot Rod Magazine, Muscle Machines, Car & Driver. Or Allure and Cosmo if girls, because we had females among us” (Kingsolver 32). This description reveals what Jean Anyon documented in *Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work*—that working-class schools emphasize “following steps,” “copying,” and “answering questions” rather than critical thinking or creativity (Anyon 69). Kingsolver shows how the curriculum itself becomes a mechanism of limitation, with vocational education framed not as preparation for skilled work but as containment for students deemed unsuitable for academic pursuits.

Demon’s self-description as “inked with the shit-prints of life: thrashings, lies told, days of getting peaced out on weed, months of going hungry” (Kingsolver 53) reveals his internalization of these class boundaries. His awareness of the “education of how many batteries drained, bags of garbage hauled, hours clocked in and out, makes the difference between a one and a ten” demonstrates what sociologist Annette Lareau calls “accomplishment of natural growth”—the informal education working-class children receive about economic survival rather than institutional navigation (Lareau 102). Kingsolver masterfully shows how Demon must negotiate between his authentic self and the persona required to transcend his class position, feeling “every minute like somebody’s going to call me out, tell me I’ve got no business walking around that place in expensive new shoes, and should go back to whatever shithole I crawled out of” (Kingsolver 53).

### **Art as Subversion and Alternative Pathway :**

Within this constrained educational landscape, Kingsolver positions artistic expression as both a refuge and a potential pathway out of predetermined class trajectories. Demon’s artistic talent becomes his most valuable asset, offering an alternative to the vocational dead



ends mapped for students like him. His relationship with Ms. Annie, the art teacher who grants him special permission to take art classes throughout high school, represents a rare institutional exception that challenges the school's rigid tracking system. As Demon explains, "So I had more than I deserved. Ms. Annie, for another example. In high school art was a real class, for juniors and seniors, but she gave me special permission. I could take her class all four years if I wanted" (Kingsolver 47). This exception highlights what education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings identifies as the "funds of knowledge" approach—recognizing and validating students' existing cultural and creative assets rather than viewing them through deficit models (Ladson-Billings 78).

Demon's artistic development parallels his creation of an online persona, "Demon Copperhead," through which he uploads drawings to a website. This digital extension of his artistic identity becomes what Henry Jenkins identifies as a "participatory culture"—a space where marginalized youth can claim visibility and develop skills outside institutional constraints (Jenkins 3). Kingsolver writes: "I was far from the football field and Lee County lore now, and had gotten mainly this involved me getting out of her way so she could click furiously at the keys while I lost myself in the dramatic oceanscape of her left arm. I could upload my drawings to the site, and in this fashion I started my enterprise" (Kingsolver 38). This passage illustrates how digital spaces can function as alternative educational environments, though Kingsolver is careful not to romanticize this as a simple solution—Demon notes that like most ventures, it "made no money whatsoever for the first year" (Kingsolver 38).

The novel's reference to "The Origin Project, cofounded by Adriana Trigiani and Nancy Bolmeier-Fisher, enriches our schools and inspired my fictional Backgrounds project" (Kingsolver Acknowledgments) connects Demon's artistic opportunities to real-world educational initiatives. This reference grounds Kingsolver's narrative in actual efforts to expand educational access through arts enrichment, aligning with Elliot Eisner's research in *The Arts and the Creation of Mind* which demonstrates how arts education develops cognitive flexibility and problem-solving skills essential for success in any field (Eisner 23). By making art Demon's pathway, Kingsolver argues for the necessity of creative education as a means of disrupting deterministic class trajectories.

### **Foster Care System and Educational Instability:**

Kingsolver further complicates the educational landscape by situating Demon within the foster care system, which introduces additional layers of institutional instability that undermine educational continuity. The novel's acknowledgments note the author consulted "experts on subjects ranging from foster care and child protective services to the logistics and desperations of addiction and recovery" (Kingsolver Acknowledgments), indicating careful research into how the foster care system impacts educational outcomes. Demon's experience reflects what researchers Mary Bruce Webb and Fred Fowler document in *Educational Outcomes for Children in Foster Care*—that youth in foster care change schools three times more frequently than their peers, resulting in significant educational disruption (Webb and Fowler 56).

The dedication's reference to children "whose caseworkers keep losing their files" (Kingsolver Dedication) points to the bureaucratic chaos that characterizes foster care's impact on education. Demon's educational journey is marked by constant transitions between schools and homes, each move requiring him to renegotiate his position within new institutional hierarchies. This instability prevents the development of sustained relationships with educators who might recognize and nurture his talents. As sociologist Ruth Nicole Brown observes in *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Epistemology*, educational success for marginalized youth depends on "consistent, caring adult relationships" that foster care systems routinely disrupt (Brown 124).

Demon's status as an orphan further compounds these challenges, as he lacks the familial advocacy that might help navigate educational systems. When he achieves athletic success, he notes how his background remains invisible to admirers: "While sleeping it off, I'd been crowned king of Lee County. The next Friday was to be no such walkover. Riverheads, away. I got serious in the weight room" (Kingsolver 12). This moment reveals the tension between his public persona and private reality—a disconnect that prevents others from understanding the structural barriers he faces. His awareness that he remains "still your jackshit homeless orphan, just faking it in nice clothes" (Kingsolver 52) demonstrates what scholar Victor Rios calls "the stigma of orphanhood"—the internalized belief that one's background permanently disqualifies them from success (Rios 89).

#### Conclusion :

Demon Copperhead critiques American education as a system perpetuating, not alleviating, institutional poverty. Kingsolver, updating Dickens, shows schools functioning as mechanisms of class reproduction, predetermining students' futures through physical design, curriculum tracking, and neglect, contradicting the ideal of education as an equalizer. The novel argues meaningful educational access demands systemic change addressing poverty's material realities and reimagining schools as inclusive spaces that recognize all students' potential, as seen in Demon's artistic development fostered by educators who defy institutional constraints. Ultimately, Kingsolver links true educational opportunity inextricably to economic justice, requiring the dismantling of physical, bureaucratic, and psychological barriers that prevent impoverished children like Demon from realizing their capabilities.

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