October Sky

The first few moments are pivotal in understanding the setting and political context of the film. The successful launch of sputnik illustrates the highly tense rivalry between the United States and the USSR during the cold war and the US’s consternation following USSR’s breakthrough technological advancement. There seems to be a shared sense of agitation among the American people which prompts a frenzied race to catch up to and surpass the USSR. The educational scene at this time reflects this agitation as there is strong advocacy for mathematics and sciences and an emphasis on excellence over equality. Glimpses of this can be seen in the competitive nature of the National Science Fair and the eagerness of the attending universities to recruit and enroll students who exhibit excellence over others. What is interesting, though, is that the people of Coalwood seem to be emotionally disconnected from this historically significant event. When Miss Riley, Homer’s science teacher, plays the radio report of the successful launch of sputnik to her class, she is met with overwhelming indifference to the matter save Quentin, who is a pariah among the students of the school. Perhaps Homer’s father was representing the attitude of the working-class citizens of the town towards the sputnik incident when he told Homer, who had come to ask him for some concrete to work on his rocket, that sputnik and the race for technological ascendancy was not “real” and that what was “real” was mining and making a living in the town that they lived in. Homer’s father’s soliloquy here captures the essence of the working-class culture’s emphasis on community and the habitus of its members; the habitus that only registers their immediate reality within their tightly knit community as significant and disregard any life beyond their circle as insignificant or “unreal.” This attitude helps explain Homer’s father’s strong aversion towards Homer’s aspirations to leave and make a name for himself elsewhere. To the father, and to many of the people of the mining town, such a future is inconceivable and impossible. Instead, they partake in the working-class counterculture of the town and take pride in their work in the coalmine, valuing the “noble” and masculine work of the miner and scorning (feminine) behavior that deviates from their way of life.

Homer is something of an outlier in this setting. He dreams of escaping the town and dreads the thought of growing up to become a miner. The news of sputnik inspired him to reach for the stars and work towards realizing his goals of success through rockets. The uniqueness of his mindset in comparison to his company becomes starkly clear in his confrontation with his friend after being banned from his father from testing rockets on company property. His friend, whose father works at the mine under Homer’s father, suggests giving up on the science fair and accepting defeat. To him, winning the science fair is beyond what his working-class background permits in his life and among the unattainable. This sentiment is echoed in his statements that he’d always known he’d be a miner and that they were nothing but a bunch of hillbillies without even a slim chance to win. Homer objects strongly to this, pointing out the dangers and lowliness of the mining lifestyle and reframing the science fair as their only opportunity to leave it behind. Unlike his friends, Homer is hopeful. This is likely due to Homer’s relatively advantaged position within the community. Due to Homer’s father’s position as the manager of the coalmine, Homer’s family is economically better off than the rest of the town. He communicates in elaborated code, as can be observed in the many scenes where he refuses to follow his father into mining and expresses his will to find success outside, and exhibits embodied cultural capital, such as deference towards teachers and the ability to negotiate with them. Living in close proximity to the mine that his father runs allows Homer to interact with an adult demographic presumably from early in his childhood, giving him social capital that enables him to negotiate and communicate with his elders at relative ease. These faculties are what lead to him naturally assuming the role of leader in the Rocket Boys. He consistently represents the gang when speaking to Miss Riley or the principal, talks to the journalist covering their activities, and goes to the National Science Fair to present their project on the national stage. Homer also exhibits many learning competencies throughout the film, showing an eagerness to learn as he approaches Quentin and initiating active learning and a good learning habit as he teaches himself math and ballistics while working at the mine. It is these qualities of Homer that account for the uniqueness of his aspirations; qualities that most likely originate in his privileged background.

If it is Homer’s background that made him special, it is worth analyzing why Homer’s father, who played a large part in setting the environment for Homer’s upbringing, was so opposed to Homer’s dreams of leaving town and going to university. Homer’s father is a conflicted man for many reasons. Financially, though not wealthy, he is stable and in a better position than a majority of his fellow town members. Due to his role as an arbiter between the workers at the mine and the owners, he displays good manners (embodied cultural capital) in the presence of upper-class businessmen and is accustomed to speaking in elaborated code and explaining his positions comprehensively. When Homer visits him to ask him for concrete to use on his project, the father clearly explains to him why he is against Homer’s ventures, saying that mining is the heart of America and far more important than developing rockets. These characteristics give an impression of culture and upper-class sensibilities. However, Homer’s father is decidedly working-class in his demeanor. He takes great pride in his work in the mine and is strongly attached to the town of Coalwood, only taking kindly to those that leave on sports scholarships. He noticeably favors Jim, Homer’s masculine footballer brother, and exhibits countercultural machoistic tendencies in confronting O’Dell’s abusive stepfather in a display of “might makes right.” The parenting approach he employs is the working-class “accomplishment of natural growth.” There wasn’t a single portrayal of a discussion about school and academics between the father and his sons. Homer is able to devote much of his time to developing rockets because his father shows little interest in structuring the boy’s life involving himself deeply in Homer’s out of school activities. The mixture of working-class and upper-class tendencies in Homer’s father signifies their position right on the border of the two classes in the social hierarchy. Homer’s father is of working-class origins who adheres strictly to the values of his people, but his relative financial success and the cultural capital that he acquired on the way transferred to his son and caused a rift in their values.

The conflict between Homer and his father intensifies as the movie progresses. As Homer becomes more knowledgeable and gains recognition by teachers and peers for his work on rockets, he strengthens his conviction to win the National Science Fair and win a ticket to university. At the same time, his resentment of the mine seems to amplify and drive a wedge between his relationship with his father. This can be interpreted as the two’s habitus gradually moving apart. At the start of the film, although already different, the two’s habitus isn’t so far apart as Homer can be seen trying out for football to please his father and hopefully find a path to university in a way his father approves. Once he starts building rockets, however, his plans for life slowly change as Miss Riley takes him under her wing and encourages his endeavors, giving him the goal of winning the science fair. Interactions like these change his worldview and open him up to new possibilities. His success, seen in the town’s people coming to support and watch his launches and ultimately resulting in a newspaper article written about it, only emboldens him and convinces him that rockets are his destined path. For the father such a path is inconceivable. As is customary in blue-collar families, he wants his son to take on after him and become a miner. When Homer steps up in light of the father’s mining injuries, the father voices his gratefulness for Homer and repeatedly expresses to Homer how proud he is of him. In one scene he tells Homer, “I was born for this and you were too,” smitten as he works alongside his son at the mine. Their fallout as Homer changes his mind and quits mining to return to pursuing rockets is only natural. It is only when Homer’s mother points out the father’s excessive obsession with the mines that he becomes aware of his closed world, his limited habitus, and opens his mind to accept Homer’s differing habitus, resulting in the reconciliation of two disparate worlds.

The friction between Homer and his father is not the only conflict worth examining in the movie. Miss Riley and the principal are shown as opposing forces in the film, their approach towards teaching and their beliefs in stark contrast with the other’s. The former’s method of teaching can be likened to concerted cultivation. She actively involves herself in the Rocket Boys’ endeavors, offering them guidance and protection from the principal who repeatedly tries to sabotage their challenge. Her language is predominantly elaborated code as she is never portrayed commanding obedience in an authoritative manner, and her habitus is more upper-class than her rival. This difference is illustrated best when the principal confronts Miss Riley and tells her to stop giving the children hope of a better life and accept the fact that most of them will end up in the coalmines. She responds by saying she cannot just lay back and say nothing while the children become miners. She quickly becomes Homer’s sole influence, her birthday present for him (a book on rocket science) signifying her guidance and transmission of cultural capital and habitus to him. Antithetical to her is the principal and his influence on the children’s lives. The principal employs a method of teaching much like the natural accomplishment of growth characteristic of blue-collar parenting. He is not shown to actively encourage students and his only interaction with students are confrontational and corrective, consisting of him reprimanding the students in restricted code. Furthermore, as portrayed in the example given earlier, he shares the same constrained worldview that Homer’s father and the other miners have. The two teachers represent two contradictory functions of education: one encourages students and expands opportunities while the other reproduces inequality and ossifies class differences. (Total words: 1793)