

Film Adaptations: To Kill a Mockingbird

The Book

Author: Harper Lee (1926–2016)

First published: 1960

The Film

Year released: 1962

Director: Robert Mulligan (1925–2008)

Screenplay by: Horton Foote

Starring: Gregory Peck, Mary Badham, Phillip Alford, Brock Peters, Robert Duvall

Context

Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) was so highly acclaimed upon its publication that not only did it win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1961, but it was also quickly adapted into a film, which was released on Christmas Day in 1962. Both the book and film were critical and commercial successes, and their themes of social justice, loss of innocence, and moral integrity continue to resonate. So do the characters: young, outspoken tomboy Scout; her brother, Jem; and their lawyer father, Atticus Finch, whose strength, compassion, and calm demeanor propelled him to icon status.

Although Lee gave few interviews after the novel's release, many critics believe she drew her inspiration for it from her own childhood in the 1930s, as well as from current events in the 1950s. Lee was raised in the small southern town of Monroeville, Alabama, on which Maycomb, the fictional Alabama town in which the story is set, is loosely based. Critics also believe that certain characters were based on Lee's friends and family members. Her father, Amasa Coleman Lee, a small-town lawyer who served in the Alabama state legislature, is thought to have inspired Atticus Finch. Lee's childhood friend Truman Capote, himself the renowned author of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958) and *In Cold Blood* (1966), is believed to have inspired Scout's friend Dill.

Additionally, the Tom Robinson story line was likely based on two events of racial injustice in and around Monroeville that Lee and her family would have been familiar with. First, in 1919, before Lee was born, her father defended two African American men, Frank and Brown Ezell, who had been accused of murder. Amasa, then a young lawyer with no criminal trial experience, was appointed by the judge and given less than two weeks to prepare; the men were convicted and hanged, and then mutilated

after death. Then, in 1933, when Lee was seven years old, a local African American man named Walter Lett was accused of rape by a white woman. He was found guilty and sentenced to death; the sentence was later commuted to life in prison, but not before Lett suffered a mental breakdown. It was later discovered that multiple white residents had sent letters to the governor claiming that Lett had been falsely accused.

The novel's Robinson trial was probably also influenced by the horrific murder of Emmett Till in 1955, which Lee would have been aware of after the case drew national attention. Till, a fourteen-year-old African American boy from Chicago, was vacationing with family in Mississippi when he was accused of wolf whistling and making a pass at a white woman at a local store. He was subsequently abducted, beaten, mutilated, and then murdered by two white men. The men were charged with murder but were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury in little more than an hour, despite evidence that clearly contradicted their stories.

Critics point to numerous similarities between the Till case and the Tom Robinson story line. Both began with accusations of an African American man initiating a relationship with a white woman. Although the accusations were unfounded in both cases, they were enough to cause both men's deaths. Also, both Till and Robinson had a disability: Till had a speech impediment that might have been misinterpreted as a whistle, and Robinson has little use of his left arm due to a childhood accident, which would have rendered him incapable of some of the acts he is accused of. Both men were convicted by all-white, all-male juries after a short deliberation, resulting in miscarriages of justice.

By weaving together significant childhood experiences and then-current events of racial injustice, Lee wrote a moving story that continues to be read and studied in schools across the United States.

Film Analysis

The film adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* faithfully addresses the central issue of racial injustice through the trial of Tom Robinson (Brock Peters), staying close to the source material. Likewise, it presents a convincing adaptation of the novel's theme of coming-of-age, mostly centered on Scout (Mary Badham). However, Lee also offered substantial commentary on restrictive gender roles, and the movie does less to address that aspect of the novel. Most of the changes made in the adaptation work well, resulting in a successful, cohesive film that conveys the same general tone as the original novel. Still, by playing down Scout's struggle with adhering to prescribed gender roles, the film is overall less complex than the book.

Some changes, such as time compression, changes in location, and added scenes, are expected and necessary when adapting a book to film. Screenwriter Horton Foote noted in a 1973 interview that the "sprawling quality" of the novel, while suited to its medium, would not make for a good film. The filmmakers condensed the film's story line into one year, rather than the book's several, to keep the story focused and cohesive. Foote also believed it was important to limit the action to the town of Maycomb rather than including the several other locations noted in the book, such as Finch's Landing, where Atticus, Jem, and Scout visit Aunt Alexandra at the Christmas holiday. The narrowed time frame and limited shifts in location make the film a clear study of small-town life and the characters within it.

This restructuring also necessitated additional scenes, including a scene in which Atticus (Gregory Peck) sits on the porch listening to his children, inside the house and in bed, discuss their mother and how much they miss her. Though the scene is not in the book, it provides necessary insight and background information, such as the fact that the children's mother died when Scout was two years old and, since she cannot remember her mother, Scout relies on Atticus and Jem (Phillip Alford) for stories about her. Atticus, overhearing their conversation, learns intimate details about his children's lives and is clearly moved. These changes both streamline the story and provide meaningful character details that add emotional heft.

Other changes, though perhaps necessitated by time limitations, are more problematic. In condensing the book for the movie, several community members, mostly women, are eliminated or have their parts greatly reduced. Atticus's extended family, for example, particularly his brother Jack and his sister Alexandra, are neither mentioned nor introduced. Alexandra moves in to Atticus's household during the second half of the novel in an effort to rein in his children and to provide them with the motherly presence they lack. Leaving this out altogether significantly alters the film's progression compared to the book.

Similarly, Mrs. Dubose (Ruth White), the Finches' mean neighbor, has a greatly reduced presence. She is seen only briefly near the beginning of the film: when Scout and Jem run by her house, Mrs. Dubose yells at Scout and calls her ugly; when the children walk back with Atticus she continues yelling, but Atticus is kind and gracious and compliments her. Mrs. Dubose's role is much more extensive and meaningful in the novel. Jem decapitates her flowers in anger after she criticizes his father for defending Tom Robinson; as punishment, Jem and Scout go to her house every day after school to read to her. In the book, Mrs. Dubose is representative of the racist members of the community who criticize Atticus's defense of Tom Robinson, and Atticus hopes that Jem's punishment will cause him to learn the tolerance Mrs. Dubose lacks. None of the characters in the movie address racism in quite the same way. Other female characters, such as Miss Maudie Atkinson (Rosemary Murphy), who has a wonderful relationship with the children, and even Calpurnia (Estelle Evans), the African American housekeeper who is like a second mother to them, also have much smaller roles. Since these

characters contribute greatly to the growth and development of both the children and the community in the novel, their loss is significant.

The loss of these women characters notably contributes to the film's lack of attention to restrictive gender roles compared to the novel. One of the reasons Atticus brings his sister, Alexandra, to stay with them is because Alexandra has continually expressed her concern that Scout is not behaving like a respectable Southern girl should. Alexandra criticizes the way Scout dresses in overalls rather than dresses, gets into fights at school, and generally runs wild with her brother. According to Alexandra, Jean Louise (Scout's real name, which her aunt prefers to call her by) needs a mentor to show her how to behave like a lady, with the comportment and manners befitting someone of her economic class and ancestry. Alexandra's presence is a constant reminder to Scout that she is forced to conform to others' ideals of femininity, and Scout's reluctance to listen to her aunt's advice and instruction embodies her struggle to be independent, without conforming to the expected gender roles society demands. Meanwhile, in their reduced film roles, Calpurnia and Maudie have fewer opportunities to talk with Scout and encourage her independence while also helping her understand and differentiate between societally defined manners and basic courtesy. Though the film does depict Scout as a tomboy, it does little to delve into her struggle with restrictive gender roles. The few exceptions, such as one small scene in which Scout fusses about having to wear a dress the first day of school—a scene that is not in the book—are more comic relief than the major theme from Lee's novel.

The film expertly uses cinematic techniques to convey and strengthen its themes. For example, the porch, a common feature of Southern homes, becomes symbolic of small-town compassion. In the novel, Atticus often instructs his children to put themselves in another's shoes to truly understand them. Thus, in the film, the porch becomes a bridge to the community and a place for reflection. When Scout runs off crying after a rough first day at school, Atticus follows her to their porch, and they discuss the meaning of compromise. Other examples include Atticus's trip to Helen Robinson's (Kim Hamilton) house to tell her about Tom's death, during which she collapses on her porch, and the balcony scene at the courthouse, in which the balcony—functioning here as a porch stand-in—is the only place the African American spectators are allowed to watch the trial from. Porches and related structures are used more than two dozen times in the movie, including in the first and last scenes, serving as the places where characters consider community events and injustices.

Significance

To Kill a Mockingbird celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 2010 for the novel and 2012 for the movie, and the occasions were commemorated with special book and DVD editions including interviews and behind the scenes segments. Both the book and its adaptation have been highly acclaimed since their releases. The novel earned Lee the 1961 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and the film won three 1963 Academy Awards, for best actor (Gregory Peck),

best art direction for a black-and-white film, and best adapted screenplay. It was also nominated for five other Oscars: best supporting actress for Badham, best director, best original score, best black-and-white cinematography, and best picture.

The film, which cost approximately \$2 million to produce, grossed over \$13 million at the box office in the year following its release. It remains wildly popular and well regarded, with the acting of young Mary Badham and Gregory Peck often noted as highlights. However, it is not universally loved, as some critics, such as Roger Ebert, find it naïve and overly idealized in its depiction of 1930s race relations. The novel continues to be read in schools across the United States, and although the it has sometimes been included on banned books lists because of its use of racial epithets, many readers and audience members understand that explorations of racial injustice are necessary and important, and the inclusion of racial epithets, while upsetting, is an accurate reflection of the time period.

Further Reading

Chura, Patrick. "Prolepsis and Anachronism:

Emmet Till and the Historicity of *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2000, pp. 1–26. *Literary Reference Center*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=3344567&site=lrc-live. Accessed 10 July 2017.

Leerhsen, Charles. "Novel Achievement." *Smithsonian*, June 2010, pp. 82–91. *Academic Search Complete*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=50684071&site=ehost-live. Accessed 10 July 2017.

Bibliography

Daniels, Anthony. "Harper Lee's Loving-Kindness." *New Criterion*, vol. 33, no. 10, 2015, pp. 16–20. *Literary Reference Center*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=103029772&site=lrc-live. Accessed 10 July 2017.

Ebert, Roger. Review of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, directed by Robert Mulligan. *RogerEbert.com*, Ebert Digital, 11 Nov. 2001, www.rogerebert.com/reviews/to-kill-a-mockingbird-2001. Accessed 10 July 2017.

Foote, Horton. "An Interview with Horton Foote." Interview by David L. Middleton. *Virginia Quarterly Review*, vol. 89, no. 1, 2013, pp. 148–57. *Literary Reference Center*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=84916990&site=lrc-live. Accessed 10 July 2017.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. 40th anniv. ed., HarperCollins, 1999.

Philpot, Chelsey. "The Long Life of a Mockingbird." *Horn Book Magazine*, May–June 2011, pp. 51–55. *Literary Reference Center*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=60126084&site=lrc-live. Accessed 10 July 2017.

Sarat, Austin, and Martha Merrill Umphrey. "Temporal Horizons: On the Possibilities of Law and Fatherhood in *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2013, pp. 30–48. *Academic Search Complete*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=83808888&site=ehost-live. Accessed 10 July 2017.

Shackleford, Dean. "The Female Voice in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Narrative Strategies in Film and Novel." *Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1996–97, pp. 101–13. *Literary Reference Center*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=9710112979&site=lrc-live. Accessed 10 July 2017.

Watson, Rachel. "The View from the Porch: Race and the Limits of Empathy in the Film *To Kill a Mockingbird*." *Mississippi Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 3–4, 2010, pp. 419–43. *Literary Reference Center*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=62008968&site=lrc-live. Accessed 10 July 2017.

Marybeth Rua-Larsen

Copyright of Novel Into Film is the property of Salem Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.