

To kill a mockingbird

Business



To Kill a Mockingbird stands as one of the greatest and most important texts in the history of American literature, and this is for many good reasons. The book was written by Harper Lee and published in 1960, and followed by the 1962 Oscar-winning movie adaptation. Set in the American South during the Depression, To Kill a Mockingbird focuses on the themes of racial prejudice and social injustice in the small fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama. While the book is set in the 1930's, the ideas and themes presented in the text were extremely relevant to the social movements of the 1960's and the brave steps that were made towards equality.

When JFK was elected as president in the early 1960's, the U. S. A. entered a new era of politics. Under previous administrations, very little had been done to address inequality and social injustice, but John Kennedy was different in that he was very much concerned in creating a fairer country. Strong African American support for John F.

Kennedy presented a shift of the African American vote, away from the Republican party (Wolper, 1961), and this would have big implications in the fight for social justice. To Kill a Mockingbird did not simply reflect changing attitudes towards race in the United States; it helped change them. Most of the social change occurred by the end of the 1960's, though earlier in the decade there was still a great deal of progress being made, and certainly by the time the movie adaptation was released. Such was the relevancy of the film that it acted to strike a nerve within the American consciousness, and this is something which has lasted right up to the present in one form or another. This has always been an especially significant for America, given the country's history and the plague of prejudice.

What made *To Kill a Mockingbird* such an important novel was that it helped to supplant prejudices that were built upon fear and ignorance. The novel takes a detailed and humanistic look at treatment of African Americans and the attitudes of a fairly typical small town in the Deep South, and helped the white community at large improve their understanding and form new opinions. As far as addressing ignorance and the prejudice that such ignorance often leads to, no other work has ever been so successful. During the final months of the 1960 election campaign, Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested for ignoring race-based segregation laws at a local diner.

John F. Kennedy used his power to put pressure on the governor of Georgia, which led to King's release (Wolper, 1961). This was one of many defining actions which made the presidential candidate, and the wider Democrat party then and into the future, popular with the African American vote. At this time the mood was changing, and African Americans were starting to exercise their newfound power and freedom to stand up against the South's segregation laws and fight for equal rights. It was in 1963 when Martin Luther King gave his iconic speech at the Lincoln Memorial.

This speech crystallized the struggle of the African American people, and made public that it was only right that African Americans be allowed to same opportunities for happiness and success as any other American, and not be secluded and segregated because of the color of their skin. But at this time there were still many people in both the North and the South who, though sympathetic to the cause, found it difficult to relate to the struggle and understand it. *To Kill a Mockingbird* put a name to the face and allowed the wider population to understand the situation much more clearly, aiding the

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Civil Rights Movement at the start of the decade. With the exception of the character Aunt Alexandria, and the response of Mayella Ewell to the questioning of Atticus while she was on the stand, the movie is a very faithful representation of the novel. The movie and the novel are both narrated by Scout, the youngest daughter of Atticus, Tom Robinson is the one who is accused of raping Mayella Ewell, who is then executed once the court finds him guilty. While there are so many screen adaptations that do little justice to the original text, this movie adaptation is not one of them.

All of the important central themes and the most important plot elements are kept, and nothing is altered drastically. The cinematography is very good, and naturally all of the technical aspects of the film, such as continuity, are perfect. There are two overarching messages to the movie adaptation. The first is put by Mulligan (Mulligan, 1962), who states that "... racial prejudice serves as an impediment, not only to the receiver of the injustice but also to the society as a whole is something that people as well as a society should avoid." The other message is that one should always stand up for what one believes in, no matter the situation and no matter the odds. Despite his beliefs, Atticus is realistic enough that he knows he will not be able to gain an acquittal for Tom Robinson, but he still takes on the case.

As put forward by Pullman, Atticus takes this case because he believes that Tom Robinson is innocent, and because he believes in the American constitution – a constitution which gives all citizens in America the right to legal defense (Pullman, 1991, p. 73). The first message of racial injustice presents itself in the movie very quickly with the accusation of Tom Robinson, and develops as existing racial prejudices come to the surface

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throughout the trial. The plot of *To Kill a Mockingbird* brings different races together, which is important because of the previously stated fact that racial prejudice stems from ignorance. For many people in the rural areas of the south, exposure to African American people was very limited, and this meant ignorance and misunderstanding, which in turn led to stereotypes slowly seeping into the minds of people who would under any other circumstances make friends with someone of any other race and not form such stereotypes.

Lack of knowledge and understanding makes it easier for the individual to become overrun by generalizations and assumptions, and this can have very serious consequences. In the movie adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus points out this very fact to the jury and the other people present at the trial: “ Confident that you gentlemen would go along with them on the assumption, the evil assumption that all Negroes lie, that all Negroes are basically immoral beings, all Negro men are not to be trusted around our women. An assumption that one associates with minds of their caliber, and which is in itself, gentlemen, a lie, which I do not need to point out to you. And so, a quiet, humble, respectable Negro, who has had the unmitigated temerity to feel sorry for a white woman, has had to put his word against two white peoples. The defendant is NOT GUILTY, but somebody in this courtroom is.

” (Mulligan, 1962). Audience members in theatres around the United States may not have agreed with this statement put forth by Atticus, because they had limited encounters with and little knowledge of African Americans, expect for knowledge of the stereotypes. Their only access to these people was through a tinted window, and as such they held incorrect opinions. The <https://assignbuster.com/to-kill-a-mockingbird-essay-samples-2/>

brilliant thing about the movie is that it states the fact that people with limited knowledge often form stereotypes “ go along with them on the assumption”, and is thus acting to break down these stereotypes. To Kill a Mockingbird helped to reset the American opinion of race, and helped prepare the country for the subsequent strides it made towards social justice – events which had an impact on practically everything to do with American society in the 1960s.

This is one of the reasons why the book and the film are such great accomplishments. The second message is that of standing up for one’s beliefs. As mentioned, Atticus is fully aware that his case is something of a lost cause, and yet this does not cause him to change his mind, or act with any less purpose and passion during the trial. This is no doubt one of the reasons why this character is one of the most loved in American cinema. The superb acting of Gregory Peck makes the events in the courtroom completely believable, and this actor helps to clearly communicate Atticus’ beliefs and his dedication in defending Tom Robinson. The positive effects of this message have not decreased with time; it has been over 50 years since the film was made and the message is still very clear and relevant.

Scout is the narrator of this movie – the daughter of Atticus – and she acts as the audience’s window into the mind of Atticus. She is a very bright and inquisitive character who tries to understand her father and the case of Tom Robinson. As the mother died when Scout was very young, Scout uses the accounts of her father and Jem to understand what she can. While Atticus is bold enough in the courtroom, in person he is fairly reticent and he has

difficulty expressing his feelings. As such it is Scout's duty to narrate the story.

The choice to use Scout as an adult as the narrator is a clever choice because it both allows Scout to understand her father and the community in which her father lived (which she found to be confusing when she was a girl), and allows the audience to understand at the same time. Another theme is loss of innocence, which happens to Scout as she grows up and understands the true nature of race relations in America. Atticus says " As you grow older, you'll see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you something and don't you forget it – whenever a white man does that to a black man, no matter who he is, how rich he is, or how fine a family he comes from, he is trash." (Lee, 1999 p179). This sort of conversation would have been very strange to Scout as a young girl, and the fact that she remembers such things shows how significant they were to her. Such words came from a father who was an eternal stream of reverence, wonder and puzzlement to the girl.

To Kill a Mockingbird, in both the original text and the movie adaptation, is not only an excellent work of fiction and entertainment, but an important cultural assessment which demonstrates the importance of treating people fairly. It was an incredibly timely novel given the peak of the Civil Rights Movement which happened in the 1960's, and it is certainly not a stretch of the imagination to assume that works such as To Kill a Mockingbird had a positive part to play in this movement and in the progression of the United States towards a more fair and positive future for all races. Today, African Americans no longer face the same prejudices that they faced in the early

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and middle twentieth century, but the issue of race is still very much alive today in America. As such, To Kill A Mockingbird remains very relevant, and should still be studied in class to help younger people understand the problems of yesteryear, understand the progress that has been made, and understand what type of attitudes are necessary to ensure a positive future – a future where everyone is free from prejudice and free from the toxic effects it has on the human consciousness. WORKS CITED

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