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*To Kill a Mockingbird: Then and Now*

Success is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “the attainment of wealth, position, honors, or the like,” and, using that definition, there is not a doubt that Harper Lee’s one and only finished novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was an unqualified success. There has, however, been a very definitive shift over time in what makes her novel so appealing and loved by readers of all ages. The reception of *To Kill a Mockingbird* when it was released in 1960 was by no means unfriendly, but neither was it the resounding approval that the book has since attained. Due in no small part to the movie adaptation that was released in 1963, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has gone from being a light and enjoyable summer read to a must-have in high schools and colleges across the nation and is now touted as a book that conveys a deep and timeless meaning about social justice and courage.

When *To Kill a Mockingbird* was first published it was seen as a sweet and fun book, and that was about all. Reviewers commented on the likability of Scout as a narrator, but also on the implausibility of the writing style. Phoebe Adams, a reviewer for the *Atlantic*, went so far as to call the book “sugar-water served with humor” and suggested that readers set themselves in a hammock and get ready for some “pleasant, undemanding reading” (Adams). Another review by Frank H. Lyell, writer for the *New York Times*, suggested that the style of the story was at times “processed, homogenized [and] impersonal” but quickly added that the book “could be the basis of an excellent film” (Lyell). The book was seen as just that – a book, not a work of art. It was enjoyable, it was easily readable and lovable, and reviewers everywhere agreed that it would sell, but only a few seemed to hit on the fact that it could have any sort of deeper meaning – and those

few only skimmed over the surface. The Kirkus Review noted that the story seemed to have “shadows of a beginning for black-white understanding” and “incidents touching on the children’s ‘growing outward,’” (Kirkus Review) but even this review did not begin to convey the deeper meaning of social justice and courage that is all over Lee’s novel.

It was not until 1963, when the movie adaptation of the book was released, that people seemed to see that there was so much more to the book than they had given it credit for. According to *Turner Classic Movies*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was one of those rare screen adaptations that “pleased fans of the book and its author as well.” Gregory Peck was universally hailed as an outstanding Atticus Finch and his speech in the courtroom, given whilst defending Tom Robinson, was (and still is) seen as a phenomenal representation of “the timeless theme of social justice” (McGee). Some film critics noted that the film brought out the “adult awareness of right and wrong, of good and evil,” and gave “a strong but adult lesson of justice and humanity at work” (Crowther).

Part of the reason that this movie was so well-received could very easily be due to the events of the time. 1963 was quite a year for the South, and the world saw many “Southern racial problems making national headlines with stories of sit-ins, freedom rides, and mass demonstrations” (McGee). The surrounding events in the world made the movie more relatable for viewers and seemed to bring *To Kill a Mockingbird* up from a pleasant, hammock read to a deeply insightful story about human nature and social justice. *To Kill a Mockingbird* did not, however, receive merely the short-lived fame that sometimes accompanies movies that are simply ‘relatable,’ but went on to become one of the best loved American classics. It is “a time capsule, preserving hopes and sentiments from a kinder, gentler, more naïve America” (Ebert). It

is a reminder of a time when things were slower and simpler and also a reminder of some of the dangers that were accompanied with that time.

As the years have gone by, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has received ever-increasing praise and acclaim, and readers have readily come to acknowledge that its message is one that holds great meaning even today. It is not merely the story of a summer in Alabama, but a story of “prejudice and ignorance of equality everywhere, not just in court.” It is a story that teaches “how people used to think of race in the past, and how foolish this way of thinking was.” It is a story that uses Boo Radley to show “a perfect example of the effects of judgment based on race, family, and colour.” It is a story that is touching, “simply for being so remarkably real” (*The Guardian*).

It is a story that teaches courage as not many stories before it have. With lines such as, “It’s when you know you’re licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what” (Lee, 105) it is no wonder that the *American Film Institute* voted Atticus Finch as the number one American hero. That is an example of the types of lines and the ideas that have touched the heart of readers across the nation. That is an example of why readers love and appreciate *To Kill a Mockingbird* a little bit more every time they read it. That is an example of why this story has endured – not only endured, but thrived.

From being merely a pleasant read to being a top-ranked social commentary, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has seen it all. As time has gone, by the reading public has recognized more and more of what a beautiful message this story has to tell: a message of courage, a message of social justice. It has been flaunted by the *Guardian* as “a lasting story, with characters that are remembered long after the last page is read.” The book was brought alive by the movie and the movie was beautifully rendered because of the book. Each enhanced the other and brought out a

deeper meaning that was residing within. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is, without a doubt, a great American novel and, as time goes by, it will only increase in the estimation of readers worldwide.

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