

FILM STUDY GUIDE FOR TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD SEEING THE FILM THROUGH THE LENS OF MEDIA LITERACY

MOVIE REVIEW

Many of us will decide whether to commit our time (and money) to see a film based on a review read online or in a newspaper or magazine. A review not only relates the plot, but also tells the reader if the film is well made and worthy of seeing. Because students are sophisticated movie goers, they may agree or disagree with a particular reviewer. Discussions about what they like/dislike, agree with/disagree with are worthy of consideration.

New York Times MOVIE REVIEW February 15, 1963

(download the original review as a handout [here](#))

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD By BOSLEY CROWTHER

There is so much feeling for children in the film that has been made from Harper Lee's best-selling novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*...so much delightful observation of their spirit, energy, and charm as depicted by two superb discoveries, Mary Badham and Philip Alford—that it comes as a bit of a letdown at the end to realize that, for all the picture's feeling for children, it doesn't tell us very much of how they feel.

This is the one adult omission that is regretful in this fine film that Alan J. Pakula and Universal delivered to the Music Hall yesterday.

At the outset, it plops us down serenely in the comfort of a grubby Southern town at the time of the Great Depression, before "desegregation" was even a word. Here we are brought into contact with Scout Finch, a six-year-old girl who is a thoroughly beguiling tomboy; her ten-year-old brother, Jem, and their widowed father, Atticus, who is clearly the kindest man in town.

And for a fair spell it looks as though maybe we are going to be squeezed inside the skin of Scout and Jem as they go racing and tumbling around the neighborhood, shrieking with childish defiance at crusty old Mrs. Dubose, skirting with awe around the dark house where the mysterious Boo Radley lives.

So long as the film is on this level, the director, Robert Mulligan, achieves a bewitching indication of the excitement and thrill of being a child.

It is when the drama develops along the conventional line of a social crisis in the community—the charging of a Negro with the rape of a white woman—that the children are switched to the roles of lookers-on. They become but observers in the gallery as their father, played superbly by Gregory Peck, goes through a lengthy melodrama of defending the Negro in court and giving a strong but adult lesson of justice and humanity at work.

And their roles are still those of bystanders in a subsequent episode when they are attacked by a vengeful Negro-baiter and brought to realize that the strange Boo Radley is not a monster but a friend.

It is, in short, on the level of adult awareness of right and wrong, of good and evil, that most of the action in the picture occurs. And this detracts from the camera's observation of the point of view of the child.

While this still permits vivid melodrama and some touching observations of the children, especially in their relations with their father, which is the crucial relationship in the film, it leaves the viewer wondering precisely how the children feel. How have they really reacted to the things that affect our grown-up minds?

Consider this review from 1963:

" A major film achievement, a significant, captivating and memorable picture that ranks with the best of recent years...artfully and delicately translated to the screen....Its success in the literacy world seems certain to be repeated in the theatrical sphere...all hands to be congratulated..... a distinguished achievement for Peck....Horton Foote's trenchant screenplay. Robert Mulligan's sensitive direction and a host of exceptional performances are all essential threads in the rich provocative fabric of Alan J. Pakula's production." 1

Consider this review, also from 1963:"To Kill a Mockingbird relates the Cult of Childhood to the Negro Problem with disastrous results. Before the intellectual confusion of the project is considered, it should be noted that this is not much of a movie even by purely formal standards." 2

Students can be assigned to write a review of the film, "*To Kill A Mockingbird*." Before they write it, they should probably read other reviews and understand what elements are important when reviewing a film. Students should also note how key words or phrases are often pulled out of complimentary reviews and used in [motion picture promotion](#).

REVIEWS

Variety's [Original Review](#)

Collection of [Original Reviews](#)

Roger Ebert's June 2003 [Review](#)

Film Quarterly's [Review \(2002\)](#)

[Review](#) Marking DVD Release (1998)

Film Site's [Review](#) webpage

Film Review by [James Berardinelli](#)

Other TKAM movie reviews:

<http://www.mrge.com/lookup?%22to+kill+a+mockingbird%22>

Lesson Plans:

Writing A Film Review

<http://www.trinityhigh.com/curric/english/assignmt/filmrevw.htm>

What's A Good Movie Review?

<http://www.highschooljournalism.org/teachers/>

[LessonPlan_Display.cfm?Type=L&LessonplanId=299&AuthorId=173](http://www.highschooljournalism.org/teachers/LessonPlan_Display.cfm?Type=L&LessonplanId=299&AuthorId=173)

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