

To Kill A Mockingbird: Introduction

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD: SEEING THE FILM THROUGH THE LENS OF MEDIA LITERACY

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INTRODUCTION

To Kill A Mockingbird is undoubtedly one of the most popular novels used in

American literature classrooms. Teachers also use the Academy Award nominated 1962 film in order to help students understand many of the themes of the novel. The film was deemed “culturally significant” by the United States Library of Congress and selected for preservation in the National Film Registry in 1995.

This web site is designed to help teachers and students look at the film through a different lens. Using [media literacy](#) as the central core for examining the film, it is hoped that teachers and students will re-examine the film, using the “language of film” as well as the “key concepts of media literacy.”

Screen Education: Why Study Film?

The study of film has been primarily relegated to colleges and universities that had film programs. But now, middle and high schools see the value of film study and analysis, primarily due to the recognition by the [National Council of Teachers of English](#) (NCTE).

The use and study of film has become more commonplace in American classrooms and with the advent and ease of Video

Cassette Recorders (VCR), and now Digital Video Discs (DVD), teachers are comfortable using film as an instructional tool. Teachers know well that students respond to film: their students are, for the most part, film goers, and talk about the latest releases and what genres they like best (i.e. science fiction, comedy, drama, etc.) Because many schools now include video production courses, teachers and students are keenly aware of the many facets of producing a non-print text, including editing, lighting and post-production, just to name a few.

“Improving students’ film literacy raises their awareness of the power of the human mind to interpret clues, and through this awareness students learn to think critically and analytically as well as to engage in creative expression. Therefore, any student who actively tries to understand a film is indeed involved in a process of criticism and creative expression, which helps him or her to develop skills to effectively read both films and other media products.”¹

“Visual language is too much with us to be ignored. Films are too powerfully popular with young people to be shunted aside or squelched. Films are simply an overwhelming presence that won’t disappear. The sincere teacher who wishes to help students to observe and interpret their world cannot exclude electronic media—least of all its voice, the film. Film study will absorb or overcome various obstacles and grow.” ²

The Novel/Film Relationship ³

- films have been made from novels throughout the history of movies
- novels have consistently provided filmmakers with ready-made narratives that have often resulted in prestigious, popular motion pictures
- films have been made from both literary classics and contemporary novels since their beginnings, and still are today
- viewers bring many assumptions to novel-inspired films,

- particularly that the film should be a photo album of the book
- films based on novels ultimately transform a story based in a linguistic medium into a story told in a visual medium that has its own distinctive characteristics
 - explaining why the choices are made when transforming a literary work into a visual medium can help students understand the strengths and unique qualities of both.

Students learn from film: 4

Films and video productions increase students' experiences, much as written texts do, and they offer similar opportunities for discussion. Films also provide rich opportunities to explore the similarities and differences between visual and written language. Students may examine the effects of visual language cues: composition, colour and light, shadow and contrast, camera angles and distance, pace and rhythm, and the association of images and sounds. They learn to identify point of view by following the eye of the camera.

What Do Students Know About The Film?

More than likely, your students have read the novel, or are about to read it. You may be considering using the film in your classroom. To begin with, you might explore with your students what they already know, if anything, about the film. This guide is designed to help your students explore the answers to these questions and more:

- What year was *To Kill A Mockingbird* made?
- What was happening in US history at the time the film was made?
- What was happening in US history during the time depicted in the film?
- Who wrote the novel? What do you know about the novelist?
- What does it mean when a novel wins the Pulitzer

Prize for literature?

- Who wrote the screenplay? What is the difference in the novel and the screenplay?
- How many Academy Awards did the film earn? For what did it win?
- Who was the producer of the film? What does a producer do?
- Who was the director of the film? What does a director do?
- Who wrote the score or soundtrack? What is the role of the composer?
- What role does music play in the film?
- What is a cinematographer? Who was the cinematographer on TKAM?
- Who was the art director; what is his/her role?
- Is there a message, or more than one message, in this film? If so, what is it?
- Does the movie stand the “test of time?”

Recommended Links

How Filmmaking Develops Higher Order Thinking Skills

<http://www.thedirectorintheclassroom.com/pdf/TDICChapter3.pdf>

Recommended Articles

[*The World In A Fresh Light: To Kill A Mockingbird*](#) (Film as Text)

Australian Screen Education, Issue #35, Winter 2004

Film Literacy, Clearing House, Sep/Oct98, Vol. 72, Issue 1

Critical Viewing Data Sheet

<http://www.myschoolonline.com/page/0,1871,47839-108765-51-31075,00.html>

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