

Exemplar student paper

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### A Battle Between Mediums:

#### Differences Between the Book and Movie of *To Kill A Mockingbird*

After spoken word and art, books are one of the oldest forms of storytelling in history. Capturing and preserving the history, culture, morals and research of countless humans before us, books have been the main vessel of non-verbal human storytelling for a long time. Only in the last century have other forms of storytelling become more prevalent, with movies being one of the main additions. Florida International University offers in *What is Film Adaptation?*, “When compared with the approximately five hundred year history of printing-press culture, and the thousand year histories of manuscript cultures, the hundred year history of film seems remarkably brief. And yet ... moving images have quickly become the central conveyors of narrative in our culture.” With this new medium available, many have adapted classic novels into movies for the big screen. Inevitably, due to the differences in the mediums, changes are made to how things are presented, and sometimes—to the detriment or betterment—larger things about the books are changed. *To Kill A Mockingbird* was written by Harper Lee in 1960 and adapted into a movie, directed by Robert Mulligan, two years later. Both versions of the story are critically acclaimed and widely praised, but analysis of the focus, interpretations, characters and plot of each work reveals the book to be a richer and more complex story for its audience.

There are many standard changes that are made when adapting a book to the big screen, mainly due to the limitations of the medium. Over time, this concept of film adaptation has become more advanced, as more book scholars have debated the best ways to present and preserve a book's main message and plot when made into a movie. Chapman University explains, in a critical history of film adaptation, that there are three most common changes that are made while adapting, due to the limitations of film. First, books are almost always longer than their movie adaptations. This is because the typical length of a movie screenplay is around 80-110 pages, while the length of most books is well over 200 pages. Due to this length, many directors will cut events, characters and sometimes large elements to allow the movie to fit the main plot and overall theme in the time allotted. Second, when someone reads a book, they do not imagine anything similar to anyone else; each person's interpretation of a book can be slightly varying. With a movie, the things you see are fixed, and they do not vary from viewer to viewer. Because of this, multiple adaptations of the same book can often be very different. Lastly, it is also common for a director's own ideology to come through in the adaptation they organize. In this way, things that a writer puts in a novel, that they might deem unimportant, might seem important to the director. These three common changes are usually made to the book's original story when it is adapted into a movie.

Usually, when a book is adapted into a movie, its fans can judge whether the movie adaptation can stay true to its source material or changes it too much. Tasha Robertson details in an article titled *What Makes a Good Book-to Film Adaptation?* her thoughts on the movie adaptation of *The Hunger Games*: "Few things get me as testy as a film adaptation of an excellent book that doesn't trust the material...All too often, it seems like even the biggest

bestsellers are deemed not commercial enough in content, and the process of bringing them to the screen is a process of forcing them into familiar pigeonholes in hopes of reaching a broader and less discerning audience. That said, I wound up mildly disappointed with the film version of *The Hunger Games* too. NPR's Linda Holmes made a point ... about the adaptation being so close to the source material that fans 'might, for all their constant desire to see a faithful adaptation, leave the film feeling like they've seen the book almost exactly, as if they didn't need to see it at all.' That largely describes my reaction: 'Huh. Well, that was certainly familiar.'" This details the fine line that movie adaptations have when recreating very popular works: Too much change and the story feels different, too little change, and it feels as if you are just reading the book again. In the NPR interview Tasha references, Linda supports Chapman University's claim that one limitation of film adaptation is having to be "as faithful to the book as it can possibly be while condensing the proceedings into a little under two and a half hours."

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, many scenes were omitted or altered, some were necessary for shortening the tale to screen time, but other deleted or altered scenes detracted from the overall theme and message of the original text. Some abbreviations that had a smaller impact on the movie was the omission of the classroom episodes. These occurred with Scout's first grade teacher, Miss Carolina Stephanie. During Jem and Scout's escape from the Radley's backyard, Jem loses his pants. In the movie version Jem does back immediately to retrieve them, while in the book he goes the next day. These scenes—and other minor scenes that gave little to the main theme of the story—were not imperative to include in the movie—especially if they wanted to shorten the time—however some of these interactions in the book give life to Maycomb county in a way that movie did not include.

With less time overall, many characters in the film version are removed or combined. In the book, a character named Cecil Jacobs caused Scout to fight in school, not Francis Handcock. Miss Stephanie Crawford was Dill's aunt in the movie, but Miss Rachel Haverford was his aunt in the book. One of the biggest changes of the book, which offered insight into the director's interpretation of the story, was the omission of Aunt Alexandria. Some other characters, like Tom Robinson's family, were also added to the movie, providing further insight into the director's different interpretation of the book.

It is clear that although the book and the film shared many similar plot points, they were different in their interpretation of the story. This different interpretation can be shown through the aforementioned omission and addition of characters in the film. In the book, the story is about Scout and her coming-of-age. This story is mixed with societal pressures of being ladylike, embodied through her Aunt Alexandria. It also includes the confusion of racism, embodied through the town ordeal of the trial. These experiences affect her perception of the world as she grows up, and requires her to make her own sense of the madness. Omission of Alexandria also removes her counter-judgement on the family, which is not present in the film. She explains to the children, "If Uncle Atticus lets you run around with stray dogs, that's his own business... I guess it ain't your fault if Uncle Atticus is a nigger-lover besides, but I'm here to tell you it certainly does mortify the rest of the family... but now he's turned out a nigger-lover we'll never be able to walk the streets of Maycomb agin." This more racist attitude in the Finch family was not present in the film, which made the family much more homogenous and less complex. Aunt Alexandria also stresses the Finch family's position compared to the other families of Maycomb, an opinion less present in the film.

Although not gone, this story from Scout's perspective in the book is changed to focus more on the trial in the film, with Scout's coming-of-age as a footnote. This is shown through the director's choice of omitting Aunt Alexandria, focusing more on Tom's Family, focusing less on narration by Scout throughout the movie and not highlighting the difficult discussions that Atticus had to make to his young children about the complex issues they were exposed to during the trial. In the book, Atticus makes a concerted effort to shield his children from the trouble in the trial and makes it clear that they would get in huge trouble if they went, which results in a big focus on the children sneaking into the trial. This emphasis is not present in the movie, where the children walk into the trial easily and then walk home with Atticus afterwards. These distinctions show a clear difference in what part of the story each medium is focused.

Although differences are present between the two mediums, the movie still highlights many key issues that the book makes a statement on, just not in the same way. The emphasis on the trial, with the divisions of race highlighted prominently, is clearly present. However, the book also includes subtler examples of divisions, such as other characters' attitudes towards Calpurnia and the omission of Scout and Jem's trip to her church. The movie still makes clear that Bob Ewell is a nasty human being, through his stalking of Atticus' children and his daughter's obvious fear of him, without even mentioning the implied incest that was present at the trial in the book.

Although these complexities and details were missing in the movie, that certainly limited its portrayal of the book; books are limited in that they are an imaginative medium, not a visual one. The movie's use of imagery, good acting, musical score, and pacing are all attributes that can only be achieved by film. MK Earnest notes in a comparison of the two mediums that,

“Harper Lee herself gave her stamp of approval ... after seeing the movie she declared, ‘I can only say that I am a happy author. They have made my story into a beautiful and moving motion picture. I am very proud and grateful.’” Lee’s own comments demonstrate that the movie is definitely worth praise and lives up to a good telling of the story. In essence, if the movie stood alone it would be substantial, but with the book’s addition of detail, subtlety, and complex themes its version of the story is a bit outclassed in comparison.

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