**Index**

Introduction 2

Problem formulation 3

Methodology 4

Historical Frame 6

Introduction to chapter 6

Civil War 1861-1865 6

The 1870-1915 7

Segregation 8

Lynching 9

The World Wars and the Great Depression 9

WWI 9

The Great Depression, New Deal and WWII 11

Civil Rights Revolution 12

Beginning 12

The Islamic Expansion 13

The 1960-1965 13

1965- 1980 14

The Post Civil Rights and Post Black Power Era – the election of President Obama in 2012 15

Theory 17

Race 17

The creation of the concept race 18

The interpretation and use of the concept race 20

Race in America 21

Racism 22

Internalised racism 24

African American Stereotypes 26

Meritocracy and the American Dream– Theory and Myth 28

Rhetoric 31

The Neo- Aristotelian Scheme 31

Rhetoric in popular culture 33

The seven critical rhetoric groups 34

Taboo 37

Analysis 39

Introduction to chapter 39

Characterization of Aibileen 41

Characterization of Minny 42

Aibileen’s and Minny’s views of the white women in Jackson 44

Aibileen’s and Minny’s description of themselves 45

The language and its rhetoric influence 48

Standpoint theory and its importance in *The Help* 53

The pursuit of happiness 54

The book “Help” and its importance for the narrative and the pursuit of happiness 56

Conclusion to chapter 59

Discussion 60

Introduction to chapter 60

Stockett’s background 60

Stockett’s perspective 61

The consequences of Stockett’s perspective 63

The reception of *the Help* 64

*The Help’s* resemblance to other popular fictional novels about race in USA 66

Conclusion to chapter 68

Conclusion 70

Literature List 72

Books 72

Articles (Including WebArticles) 72

WebPages and Search Engines 73

# Introduction

When *The Help* was published in 2009, the reviews were ambiguous. Sybil Steinberg from the Washington Post described it as a “page-turner that brings new resonance to the moral issues involved” (Steinberg, 2009), while Duchess Harris at Feminist Wire believed ”that The Help isn’t for Black women at all, and quickly devolves into just another novel by and for white women” (Harris, 2011).

Kathryn Stockett’s portraits of the three protagonists, where Skeeter is white and Aibileen and Minny are black, spurred this ambiguity on.

This thesis analyses Kathryn Stockett’s depictions of the three protagonists Skeeter, Aibileen and Minny to examine how they are portrayed and how they portray their lives and cultures. On the surface, *The Help* embodies the lives and struggles of black maids in America in the 1960’s. The unjust treatment of the black maids, as well as the many racial crimes happening in the town Jackson underline Aibileen’s and Minny’s motivation and desire for change and thereby their pursuit of the American Dream. This aspect will be analysed to establish an understanding of the black maids actions and decisions in *The Help*. Moreover, Miss Hilly Holbrook, an important antagonistic white female employer, who ends up sealing her own reputational destruction, brings on the need for change in *The Help*, while the heroine, who is also white and female, Skeeter, saves the black maids. These specific aspects will be analysed with rhetorical tools such as dramatistic/narrative criticism and standpoint theory to examine the language used in *The Help* and how the choice of language helps divide the white women and black women into two separate groups of good and evil. The rhetorical tool standpoint theory will be applied to analyse the impressions, perceptions and perspectives that the protagonists give individually.

Kathryn Stockett’s decision to describe Aibileen and Minny through their own voices and thoughts give way to a discussion about Stockett’s cultural perspective. This thesis discusses Stockett’s cultural perspective, examining whether Stockett’s perspective is ethnocentric or cultural centred. The meanings attributed to the characters change when describing them from a culture-centred or ethnocentric perspective. This thesis discusses different situations occurring in the novel to determine whether there is an emphasis on a culture-centred or ethnocentric perspective, giving way to a further discussion about the designated audience for *The Help.*

By using rhetorical tools, this thesis examines whether Stockett uses African American stereotypes to portray Aibileen and Minny, as well as how Stockett chooses to portray Aibileen’s and Minny’s thoughts of selves and their African American culture. Furthermore, the reception of *The Help* by both the white and the African American society in America will be discussed to further look into Stockett’s cultural perspective.

*The Help* has become a widely discussed bestseller similar to *to Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. An examination of the themes and critique of *to Kill a Mockingbird* will be included to compare *The Help* and *to Kill a Mockingbird* with focus on their similarities in themes and the critique of the novels, to show what traits of the novels make these novels such popular reads. In addition, a short comparison to *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison is included due to its mentioning and importance in the Help, where *Invisible Man* is inspiration for the book “Help”[[1]](#footnote-1). The comparison of *The Help* and *Invisible Man* focuses on the similarities in the specific theme internalised racism as well as the critique received on the use of stereotypes. Subsequently, the comparison looks into the differences in the novels, resulting in a short discussion about the intended audience for the novels.

# Problem formulation

How does Kathryn Stockett portray the characters in *The Help*, and what does the portrait of the characters reveal about Stockett’s cultural perspective?

# Methodology

This thesis analyses and discusses the way Kathryn Stockett portrays her characters in *The Help*, namely the three protagonists, Skeeter, Minny and Aibileen. The analysis uses rhetorical analytical tools, which will be explained and elaborated in the theory chapter. The theories on rhetoric are based on Barry Brummett’s theories in his book *Rhetoric in Popular Culture* from 2006. His explanations of the rhetorical tools vary from the ancient Greek neo Aristotelian scheme to the modern day interpretations and uses of rhetoric. Barry Brummett’s theories on rhetoric are contemporary, and effectively explain and exemplify how to use rhetorical analytical tools when analysing.

The historical frame is built upon the book *Creating Black Americans* by Nell Painter in 2006. The book shows American History from an African American point of view, effectively focusing on the historical focal points for African Americans. Nell Painter is an American Historian, now retired from Princeton, president of [Organization of American Historians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organization_of_American_Historians) and as president of the [Southern Historical Association](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_Historical_Association). The historical frame provides a necessary historical context for the analysis and discussion of *The Help*, since *The Help* implicitly uses real historic data to support the authenticity of the narrative. The reader needs to be aware of the historical context to decipher both the racial discourse and the progress and change for the protagonists in the narrative. Subsequently, the discussion about Stockett’s cultural perspective implicitly uses the historical context as a cultural context and perspective. As will be elaborated later, the historical frame is a timeline beginning with the Civil War in 1861, because it was at this point that racial discourse surfaced in America and that the first progress and initiative for equality between Americans and African Americans were made. The timeline ends in 2012 with the election of President Obama, because this was a historical milestone, and the novel *The Help* was written in 2009, ensuring that any important historical context happening from when the narrative takes place to the book being written is accounted for. The historical frame focuses on historical factors that influenced the lives of the African Americans. This historical frame does not focus on the many important, but also complicated and extensive, political events and factors within African American history, because the factors and events that influenced African Americans’ every day lives is more relevant for this thesis.

Despite the narrative taking place in the 1960’s, *The Help* has become widely popular today. The reason for this is the actuality of the themes, because the want for equality and the question of whether the American Dream is for everyone and meritocratic is still popularly discussed within all medias from politics to sitcoms. Race is an on-going debate, and racism is ever present in America. The generations of African Americans who served as domestic help, and their white “babies” who are now grown up, desire the voicing of their past, which is a dangerous taboo-like area to undertake in popular fiction, making the popular fictional titles about racial discourse and the voice of African Americans few. Kathryn Stockett is white, and in her interview she states that she believed the female voices were missing from that period, and that this was one of the motives for *The Help*. The theories of Feminism and the feministic analytic approaches, which could be applied to *The Help*, are not undertaken in this thesis despite their actuality and the large amount of feministic material in *The Help*. This thesis acknowledges that there is a feministic aspect and perspective in the novel, but chooses to focus on the rhetorical analysis of the characterizations of the protagonists in relation to race and the results hereof.

The reception of *The Help* uses articles from popular online magazines and newspapers to establish the reception among members of the black community and the former maid of Stockett’s brother, who filed a lawsuit against Stockett because of her resemblance to the protagonist Aibileen in *The Help*. The reception among the general public of America will also be looked at through online articles.

# Historical Frame

## Introduction to chapter

This chapter provides the historical context for this thesis. The outlining of the chapter is a timeline, where the most important historical events in America, which affected the American and the African American relationship, are described. The timeline begins with the Civil War 1861- 1865, because the white American view upon the African Americans changed during that war, leading to the abolishment of slavery in 1865, which will be explained thoroughly in the beginning of the chapter. The timeline ends with the election of President Obama in 2012. This historical frame is relevant for the understanding of the historical period which the narrative takes place in, the historical background of Kathryn Stockett, who had *The Help* published in 2009, and the American racial historical background, because *The Help* requires prior knowledge of African American racial history to be fully comprehended.

## Civil War 1861-1865

It is a common mistake to believe that the American Civil War initiated because of slavery and the very different opinions held by the north and the south on this topic. The Civil War began because of a want to restore the Union. However, this goal was soon replaced by the question of slavery, because it was (at that time) impossible to restore the Union. The United States did not prevail in their quest until they fought to end slavery (Painter, 2006: 105).

The Civil War was important in relation to the view upon African Americans, because firstly the freed slaves were considered human beings, in stark contrast to their previous label, which was property, and secondly the black man became the heroic figure of the black soldier (Painter, 2006: 105), meaning that the military service symbolized citizenship. More than 200000 African American men fought in the civil war to eradicate slavery, thereby bringing down the most powerful slaveholding class in the world (Painter, 2006: 106).

With the eradication of slavery, came freedom. Yet, as will be described in this chapter, real freedom would be quite challenging for the African Americans to obtain, resulting in yet another century of struggles.

The following 5 years seemed promising for the African Americans, and the many “freedmen” from the south began to educate themselves, constitute own religions, own land and interest themselves with politics. Many challenges occurred along the way: President Johnson readmitting the states of the former confederacy, giving many of the important plantation owners their land back, which greatly lessened the African American chance for obtaining their own land. Violent and hateful atrocities were committed against the many freedmen who travelled on foot to reunite their families. There were horrible conditions for the many people, who travelled from the north to the south to teach and educate the freedmen. Nonetheless, the African Americans educated themselves, sought to grow their own land, and reunited countless families during these first promising 5 years after the 13th amendment, which abolished slavery (Painter, 2006: 130-139).

## The 1870-1915

In the late 1860’s, an uprising by various white supremacist militias (e.g. the Ku Klux Klan, started in 1866 by former confederate general Nathan Forrest) attacked black voters as well as political organizers. This violence in the South was suppressed by the federal antiterrorist legislation until the early 1870’s. The economic crisis of 1873 put and end to the suppression of the violence, leading to more than half a century of segregation, suppression of civil rights and the realistic fear of being lynched. After the 1870’s, a large number of black men lost their right to vote, and violence completely destroyed the promise of democracy in the south in the 19th century (Painter, 2006: 139). After many attempts to regain control over the situation, many black people fled to e.g. Kansas.

The “Jim Crow ” laws in the south were based on discriminatory custom, state and local laws, as well as the decisions made by the United States Supreme Court. (Painter, 2006: 141). After 1873, The Supreme Court interpreted the 14th amendment, which was made to establish the fact of black men’s citizenship, as to protect corporations from regulations, not to secure the civil rights of human beings (Painter, 2006: 142). This interpretation of the 14th amendment, as well as the Supreme Court ruling the civil rights act of 1875 unconstitutional, permitted discrimination in public accommodations by individuals, states and localities (Painter, 2006: 142). Through the ruling of several cases by The Supreme Court, the legal basis for segregation disfranchisement and racial degradation was made.

The African Americans living in the north lived a very different life. Education was on the top of their list, and the number of Black College graduates exploded from a mere 44 the 1860’s to 1613 in the 1900’s (Painter, 2006: Table 8,2, 156). Moreover, black business became a cornerstone for race progress. Booker T. Washington, a famous conservative African American, founding father of Tuskegee Institute of Tuskegee in Alabama, believed that through making friends with white people, as well as dedicating themselves to agriculture, domestic service and other manual trades, black men would accumulate wealth and become respected by white men. To Washington, the poor African American had no need to study a higher education, or to demand civil rights or the vote, because it would serve the African American better to gain respect and wealth through hard labour. Washington was considered one of the most influential African Americans of his time, yet especially two of his fellow African American educators heavily disagreed with him, namely W.E.B Dubois and John Hope. Hope and Dubois believed, that African Americans deserved the right to educate them, and that dedicating one’s life to “mere moneymaking” (Painter, 2006: 155) would deprive black men of their manhood. Dubois’ writings later spurred on the formation of the Niagara Movement of Political Protest, the predecessor for the well known NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) which still exists today. However, both Dubois and Washington agreed, that black business was the way to secure race progress. Banks, insurance companies, real estate firms, press houses shot up throughout America, profiting on the rules of segregation. Even African American women joined the in with e.g. The Poro Company, and the Walker Company, two large successful companies within the hair and beauty industry (Painter, 2006: 158).

## Segregation

Segregation started with the Plessy vs. Ferguson case in 1892, where the Supreme Court ruled against Plessy, an African American who took Louisiana railroads to court for denying him access to the first class coach, stating that black people had to ride their own cars in the trains (Painter, 2006: 142). This spread like wildfire into all facets of public life in the South. Libraries, parks, swimming pools and public colleges were closed off for the blacks. Schools were in particular segregated, and the funding of the schools were intentionally controlled, so the white children would benefit, due to the common belief that blacks did not need good or lengthy education (Painter, 2006: 142).

## Lynching

Lynching is a phenomenon, which was especially practised and popular among mostly white southerners between roughly 1866-1900, after which the reports of people being lynched decreased drastically. The heavy majority of victims were black. The lynching shifted it’s character in the 1890’s and early 20th century, going from a means of killing troublesome people to an event, where white people would gather to see the show, and picture postcards were made. The victims were tortured and killed slowly to: “ensure maximum pain and humiliation” (Painter, 2006: 167). Lynching was defended by white supremacists as a punishment for black rapists, even though investigations proved that only a fraction of the lynched victims were accused of this crime. These investigations led to the organization of antilynching-campaigns, and by the 1930’s, antilynching legislation passed, yet no federal antilynching bills has ever been enacted into law (Painter, 2006: 167).

## The World Wars and the Great Depression

### WWI

World War I set off an unforeseen African American migration. More than 500.000 African American southerners chose to migrate to north and west America during WWI (Painter, 2006: 174). In the North and West, they were able to educate themselves better, voted and were able to make a wage to support themselves. In the midst of the Jim Crow era, where the African Americans had to fight off demeaning stereotypes and where many Americans still viewed black people as an inferior race, the black people defended themselves and were proud to be “negro”. African Americans started to publicise their own ideas about the race (Painter, 2006: 174). Their allies began the influence American politics and culture like never before. Yet WWI had a negative outcome for the race progress in America. As the African American men joined the war, were faced with segregation, the inability to become an officer and hostility from their fellow white combatants (Painter, 2006:180). This resulted in many African American soldiers joining the civil rights movement when returning from the war. Furthermore, as the African American soldiers were fighting in France, they learned the freedom of the many Africans in France, as well as the insurmountable American racism, which they were to return to (Painter, 2006: 182). As the African American soldiers returned post-war, further complications from WWI arose. Anti-black riots became increasingly more common after 1919, because seeing a black man in a military uniform provoked many white people. Moreover, the dilemma of white soldiers returning to their jobs, which had been filled by African Americans, caused for violent anti-black riots. 1919 is therefore also known as “Red Summer” due to all the African American blood spilled during that summer.

The worst anti-black riot during “Red Summer” was in July Chicago, where a group of white people roamed the streets and shot upon blacks indiscriminately (Painter, 2006: 184). Many African Americans, with their new pride and self-realisation, fought back. It resulted in a week of anarchy, where 537 people were injured and 38 people died, the majority of the deceased being African Americans (Painter, 2006: 184). Most importantly, everyone noticed that the African Americans had fought back, which was new. Out of this new-experienced pride grew among other things the Harlem Renaissance, making music into black musical landmarks, and people all across the world revelled in the talented African American musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. Major publishers started publishing black writers, whose theme was “Black Pride.” With the publications of many “black” books, a transition within the field of writing about the African American also appeared. Formerly, it was mostly white men who were experts on African Americans within literature, but with this new literature by African Americans, shifting the view upon the African American from an “African” with a drum and as uncivilised, to “American”. By publicizing African American notions about themselves, the stereotypes were permanently weakened (Painter, 2006: 193-195).

### The Great Depression, New Deal and WWII

The great depression hit the African Americans all over America hard. Unemployment went through the roof, and many white shop owners refused to hire African Americans. The African American business suffered greatly during the depression years. With Roosevelt’s New Deal, things changed slowly, even though the “New Deal” did nothing to change anything on the matters of segregation, meaning that the African Americans received less economic aid than white people. However, the right to unionise, as well as the financial aid, did help the Africans Americans slightly, but more importantly, made the African Americans fight back on the political front (Painter, 2006: 197-217).

WWII brought on both great change and great dilemma for the African Americans. Despite they were faced with nearly the same segregation policies and unfair wages as in WWI, WWII changed both the political and the everyday life for many African Americans. Protest had become more commonly used, and thereby president Roosevelt caved into the Executive Order 8802, establishing the FEPC (Fair Employment Practices Commission), a commission that was to investigate discrimination in war industries. This important first step proved the U.S. Government taking position against employment discrimination. In the war, the African Americans played a significant role, which came to be much more “seen” by the public. The first Navy Cross received by a black man went to war hero Dorie Miller, who shot down at least 6 Japanese military planes, despite his position as a servant, and his lack of gunnery training. Moreover, the black flyers known as the Tuskegee Airmen proved, despite many attempts to halt them getting to fly and fight, that they were accomplished soldiers and flyers, shooting down more than 300 enemy planes in their time, thereby countering the many stereotypes about the African Americans as less intelligent and lazy (Painter, 2006: 221-225)

Riots marked America during WWII, increasingly in 1943, where riots broke out all over the United States. The rumours of white supremacists attacking African Americans and excessive forced used by white police spurred on the riots, which were fuelled by the many parallels existing between the German Reich which they were fighting because of their treatment of the Jews, and then their own condition. Many of the suppressive methods used by the Germans in WWII were similar to the African American experiences in the Jim Crow south as well as segregation and suppression of civil rights. (Painter, 2006: 222)

## Civil Rights Revolution

### Beginning

Despite the common assumption that the civil rights revolution began in the 1960’s, there is much evidence that the civil rights revolution began with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 in Alabama, because it represented a victory within local organization on a mass scale, and even though it was at that time seen as a local affair, historians have later depicted it as the beginning of the revolutionary civil rights movement (Painter, 2006: 239-240). Racial issues had been de-emphasized after 1948 by the Truman administration, who after having desegregated the United States army in 1948 turned their complete attention to the cold war. Within the cold war discourse in the United States, the black civil rights were often aligned with communist ideas, because the USSR continually criticised USA for its treatment of the African Americans (Painter, 2006: 239). However, the protesting did not cease. After inspiration from the Montgomery Bus Boycott, several prominent African Americans, namely Martin Luther King, sought to further these nonviolent political demonstrations, and therefore led massive, non-violent political action in Protestant Churches. The Montgomery Bus Boycott ended in 1956 with the Browder decision, stating specifically that segregation was considered unconstitutional within transportation (Painter, 2006: 250).

Desegregation came to be hard to implement in the southern states. The Brown decision, stating that segregation in education was unconstitutional, was enforced from the 1960’s to 1970’s. However, desegregation was not welcome everywhere and caused great problems. In 1957, Governor Faubus called on the Arkansas National Guard to prevent nine African American students from entering Little Rock Central High School, thereby creating a huge scandal, which was only fuelled by President Eisenhower indifference and inaction to the matter. The scandal was televised, showing the Americans the hatred that the African Americans had long endured in the south (Painter, 2006: 251).

### The Islamic Expansion

An effect of the unpunished violence and the racial injustice towards African Americans in the 1950’s and 1960’s was the growth of the Islamic black community. The Nation of Islam believed their leader, Elijah Muhammad, when he said that the white people would fall in the mid.1960’s, and that black people would finally become great again (Painter, 2006: 254). The Nation of Islam (NOI) sought to create a black community, where segregation was no longer a negative thing, but where segregation was wanted, to create a black society. Malcolm Little, who after having been imprisoned, visited the leader to get his new name, Malcolm X, believed that he had cast of his white slave given name “Little”. Malcolm X became the most prominent of all Black Muslims. He believed in self-education, self-defence, black pride as well as black power and segregation. By the late 1950’s, the NOI had attracted more than 50.000 members, and when CBS chose to broadcast the program about the NOI *The Hate That Hate Produced*, it not only made Malcolm X famous, but also more importantly warned the white American of the African American militant response to anti-Black violence (Painter, 2006: 256).

### The 1960-1965

The 1960’s were a decade in USA marked by civil rights movements and protests. The beginning of the 1960’s were defined by non violent protests such as “sit in’s”, a popular non-violent form of protesting where both black and white (young mostly) people sat at e.g. Woolworth’s counter preserved for white people. Freedom riders, who were black people using public non-segregated transportation, were beaten and in 1961 a bus was set on fire, while the police did nothing to protect the freedom riders (Painter, 2006: 266-268). The protesters suffered much physical and verbal abuse, but the protests were fruitful. One of the main reasons for the protests being victorious was the media coverage. Images of bloodied freedom riders and abused protestors became a popular part of the news, enlightening all Americans of the racial situation in America. Furthermore, the Kennedy administration sought to support black vote registration; to register black voters would be far worse television but better international press (Painter, 2006: 268). The backup from the Kennedy administration also led to a massive military backup, when James Meredith entered the University Ole Miss, bringing on a huge crisis, where defiant white people including students and the governor of Mississippi denied Meredith’s enrolment. The Kennedy administration sent 31.000 U.S. Troops to restore order, signalling the Kennedy administrations desegregation policies (Painter, 2006: 268).

The Birmingham attack of 1963, where police dogs and fire hoses attacked school children marching, shocked people all around the world. This attack, along with the congress complete lack of action, inspired more than 800 direct actions in the summer of 1963 in the south, resulting in a massive number of arrests and killings (Painter, 2006: 270-271). In New York, The 1963 march on Washington made Martin Luther King Jr. the most prominent symbol of the civil rights movement (Painter, 2006: 271). He was assassinated in 1968, causing riots and making non-blacks recognize that racial exclusion was in the past and opened their institutions to black people. On the other side of the civil rights movement was Malcolm X, who spoke of self-defence as well as violence being “American”. After having left the NOI, Malcolm X drew closer to the civil rights movement, shifting his view from America to Africa, believing that many African Americans were a colonized people struggling against imperialism. NOI gunmen assassinated Malcolm X in 1965 in Harlem (Painter, 2006: 277).

### 1965- 1980

From the mid sixties to the beginning of the seventies, the concept “Black Power” arose in USA and came to dominate a century along with the creation of the Black Panther Party. The concept fundamentally meant that African Americans would no longer pay heed to white people and instead tend to themselves (Painter, 2006: 292-293). Black Power gained much attention and was prominent especially in the South due to anti-Black violence. Stokely Carmichael, a member of the SNCC (Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) stressed Black Power as self-defence and self-definition in his book *Black Power: The politics of Liberation in America* (1967), where the need for Black Power was traced to the weakness of the nonviolent civil rights movement; despite the nonviolent approach gave way to many federal legislations, the laws were not enforced on the local level and therefore made no real difference. Black empowered people would redefine themselves with their own words. For Carmichael, Black Power was needed “to address the fundamental need of African Americans for decent housing, decent jobs, and adequate education” (Painter, 2006: 294). Institutional racism was to Carmichael the biggest barrier to black equality, and under Carmichael’s leadership with the SNCC, they organized nearly 4000 black voters in Alabama in 1965, forming a freedom organization with the symbol of the black panther, which defended itself against attacks from white people. Black Panther parties were created all around USA.

The concept of Black Power and the creation of the Black Panther parties gave way to misinterpretation and potential for anti-white violence and many big black organizations denounced Black Power in 1966 (Painter, 2006: 194). The Black Panther Party (BPP) became a contrasted party, which did a lot for communities by building schools, free dental and medical clinics, and created the “Breakfast programme”, which in 1969 served more than twenty thousand poor children. Meanwhile, they were at war with the police, and many party members spent a lot of time incarcerated. By the mid seventies, the BPP had dissolved due to forces outside such as police attacks and criminal justice convictions, and internal ideological conflicts on the inside. However, the positive effects of the Black Panther Party were already rooted in politics and culture, giving way for blacks to enter new previously all-white positions. The entering of black people into federally funded institutions initiated the change of these institutions, and black professionals created an array of organizations to advance black interests. After the era of Black Power, Racial politics and economics were given increased diversity. Artistically, Black Power gave way to artistic creativity expressing the black pride, in which black people were prized and beautiful (Painter, 2006: 319).

## The Post Civil Rights and Post Black Power Era – the election of President Obama in 2012

The period from about 1980 until today represents itself as a peaceful and frugal period for the African Americans. African Americans were more visible within politics, especially with the Black Conservatives. “Affirmative action”, a term born within the Kennedy administration in 1961 with their Executive Order 10025, which called for federal government to hire African Americans, became the term of a series of quotas for African Americans and other minorities at colleges, as well as quotas within hiring and job promotions, securing places for the African Americans (Painter, 2006: 322). The Black Conservatives opposed “affirmative action”, meaning that the Black Conservatives believed in a laissez faire philosophy, rather than the “affirmative action”. “Affirmative Action” was accused for being “reverse discrimination” against white people, and brought on discussions about whether black colleagues were respected equally as individuals. Black Conservatives believed that the black people’s many years of protesting had worn out, and that a faulty black culture and the lack of black people’s initiative were to blame for African Americans’ poverty (Painter, 2006: 324).

Afrocentrism, a study on the African American’s African-ness and relations to Africa, grew strong after the 1980’s and was seen as controversial. The fight was mostly a battle over African Americans studies departments and programs, but subsided by the end of the twentieth century, ending with African American studies and faculties becoming permanent features of American academic life (Painter, 2006: 333). African Americans became highly visible in American Culture through sports (naming Michael Jordan and the Venus sisters among many), television, namely Oprah Winfrey, film (e.g. Halle Berry won the first Oscar for best actress in 2002) and literature with both Toni Morrison and Rita Dove winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. The Hip Hop culture spread the claim of authentic blackness with its controversial rap, clothing and graffiti. On the 6th of November 2012, the first black president, Barack Hussein Obama, was elected, giving the African Americans a symbol of equality and progression.

# Theory

**Introduction to chapter**

The theories used in this thesis are explained thoroughly below. The reasons for choosing the specific theories on the different subjects are explained in the methodology. The theory regarding the notions of race and its subcategories, Racism and Internalised Racism, are explained to gain an understanding for the implied connotations embedded in the terms race, racism and internalised racism used in the thesis. Race and racism are key concepts in *The Help*, because the rhetorical division of white people and black people is underlined in many different perspectives, as will be further elaborated in the analysis. The theory regarding rhetoric is used not only to look at the structure of the texts chosen for this thesis, but also to achieve an analytical approach, where it is possible to analyse the way in which e.g. Kathryn Stockett uses rhetorical tools to portray the differences between her black and white characters. Rhetoric is the core tool of the analysis, and the rhetoric influence affects both the narrative and the portrayal of the characters, e.g. the difference in language spoken by the characters. The theory on meritocracy, which has been assembled with the historical and theoretical notion of the American Dream, serves both a historical and theoretical foundation, for which the analysis of the black characters’ pursuit of the American Dream will be based, as well as a theoretical understanding of the struggles and impediments that the black characters were faced with. Lastly, the theory regarding taboo will be used in this discussion as a foundation for the understanding of the notion taboo used in this thesis.

## Race

This chapter looks at race, a concept that many scholars deem not to “exist”, meaning that race derived from subjective, poorly proved theories that surfaced and evolved during the Enlightenment. The construction of the concept race is therefore important for the understanding of the cultural common-sense concept race that does very much exist in the world today. After the establishment of the concept race, it was used to create a hierarchy, where the white supremacy oppressed all other races. The connotations aligned with the theories of race concerning intelligence, personality, criminality and physicality provided both white Europeans as well as white Americans with the foundation for the oppression and exploitation of other races as well as the justification for it. The common-sense term race, and the American understanding of race is used as a foundation for both *The Help*, and therefore it is necessary to understand how the common-sense term race originated and how the understanding of race evolved and became the common-sense term used today as well as the implied common-sense connotations aligned with race. Theories of Racism will be looked at thoroughly to establish the different cultural aspects of racism, which are implied and described in *The Help*. In order to understand the choices made by the different characters, as well as their personal motivations for their actions, theories of race, racism and internalised racism are fundamental, whilst these concepts are embedded in the texts as an implied and prior knowledge.

### The creation of the concept race

The term race and the first scientific theories about race emerged during the Enlightenment as a combination of scientific classification, religion, and order. There has been much discussion whether the term race emerged in ancient Greece, but Professor Brian Niro of the DePaul University argues, that ancient Greece merely provided the discursive tools for the term to later emerge (Niro, 2003: 58). The concept of race was the result of an attempt to denigrate the alternative to the biblical narrative, where the concept of monogenesis was dominant and influenced many scholars. The concept of polygenesis, a more scientific approach to race, was introduced by French theologist Peyrere in 1655, which challenged the concept of monogenesis;

*The problem for the monogenesis position lies in the need to account for the disparity found in the varied forms of humanity, while maintaining the rigid structural, historical limitations imposed by the bible. In terms of the construction of race, monogenesis cannot explain how all humanity descended from one couple over the course of only several thousand years (Niro, 2003: 56).*

Travel writing has been very significant for the Western civilization’s perception of the world and for the creation of the definitions of race. Francois Bernier is the first to group the people he meets during his travels into distinct races based on their physical appearance and differences. Bernier’s travel writing has been a large contributor to the foundation of the term Natural History, which will be explained later. Bernier’s categorization of races was fragile and contradictory, but the very idea of the categorization of races on the basis of physical appearance survived, endured and developed. Bernier’s attempt to include all the people he met in his racial system meant that he often contradicted himself, and thereby underlines the idea, that the very concept of racial distinctions are subjective (Niro, 2003: 62).

The botanist and physician Linneaus provided the foundation of the term race with the Natural Philosophy approach. Linneaus believed, that by using the theory of ”The Great Chain of Being” which had traditionally been reserved for plants and animals, he could divide human kind into subspecies, and thereby create a hierarchy for human kind.

Buffon was the author of *Natural History* in 1749, which contains a massive system of racial organization and classification, thereby solidifying the term race in its scientific grounding. With the argument of environmental differentiation, Buffon categorises people according to climate and thus their skin colour (which is an effect of the climate and thereby sun exposure). Buffon states, that as long as two people can procreate and have offspring, they are the same race. (Niro, 2003:68) This rule has been used and interpreted largely in arguments for miscegenation, referring to the fact that when a donkey and horse procreate, they have a sterile offspring. This rule explains the (at the time) common misconception that a mulattoo was born sterile.

Blumenbach contributed with many theories, but the most important for the development of race was his preference to the “white”,

*The Caucasian as “white in colour, which we may fairly assume to have been the primitive colour of mankind, since . . . it is very easy for that to degenerate into brown, but very much more difficult for dark to become white” (Blumenbach 2000: 31). Here, Blumenbach builds upon Buffon and earlier theorists who also speculate that white constitutes the most basic color from which the others descend (Bernasconi 2001: 24) (Niro, 2003: 70).*

Interestingly, Immanuel Kant was inspired by Blumenbach’s theories, and their research affected one another’s. Kant wanted to reach a more general understanding of human difference. Furthermore, his goal was to be able to conjure laws to control and govern the natural world. The reason why Kant became one of the most prominent founding fathers of the concept race was due to his ability to “nick and pick” things from other collegial scholars, hence creating his own theories where parts of theories (the parts he agreed with) were used. Subsequently, he verbalised the concept of the white man’s supremacy.

*The inhabitant of the temperate parts of the world, above the central part, has a more beautiful body, works harder, is more jocular, more controlled in his passions, more intelligent than any other race of people in the world. That is why at all points in time these peoples have educated others and controlled them with weapons. The Romans, Greeks, the ancient Nordic peoples, Genghis Khan, the Turks, Tamurlaine, the Europeans after Columbus’s discoveries, they have all amazed the southern lands with their arts and weapons (Kant 1997: 64) (Niro, 2003: 75).*

Niro states that Kant, with his theory of the white man’s supremacy due to skills in weaponry, articulates the concept of race as a scientific account of difference, and the argument which ties everything together for Kant is that the white man (mainly Europeans) has conquered large parts of the world, and therefore must be the supreme race. This argument became the basis for the scientific and popular notion of race.

### The interpretation and use of the concept race

Despite much scientific arguing about the validity of the concept of race, race became a word and concept, which dominated the scientific and public discourse in Europe during the 18th and 19th century. The discourse which argued against race as a valid concept was both misinterpreted and altered, leaving the progress of the scientific discourse on race to gain momentum and expand into theories about white supremacy, the outcome being miscegenation and the fear of possible degeneration of the western civilization. Race had become common sense, and the controlling and determining of races were of the utmost importance. Lombroso, an Italian doctor and scientist, believed that criminal behaviour could be measured in physical appearance, and that being a criminal was predetermined and inheritable. Lombroso measured convicted criminals’ multiple features, especially the size and shape of the skull, and compared it to prehistoric humans as well as apes, concluding that: “the modern criminal has quite literally regressed, or degenerated, into a more primeval form” (Niro, 2003: 108).

Nordau, a German writer greatly inspired by Lombroso’s research, insisted “that all forms of political thought exterior to his aesthetics are proof of degeneracy and madness” (Niro, 2003: 112). These theories led to a public paranoia (and ironically, since both Lombroso and Nordau were raised as Jews, the theories also led to the theoretical basis of the Nazi empire race hygiene initiative) (Niro, 2003: 117). The conclusions by Lombroso were, that the Africans were more like the apes, thereby sub humanising the Africans, and leading the way for the scientific foundation for the idea, that black people were less intelligent.

As late as 1994, Herrnstein and Murray published *The Bell Curve*, where they concluded on basis of crude research on genetics, IQ and social problems such as crime, poverty and race, that “intelligence was the primary motivating factor for modern social accomplishment and class” (Niro, 2003: 123).

### Race in America

As explained/outlined in the historical frame, race and racial history have come to define USA and has left USA with a population and a political world that is deeply affected by its history. Niro points out, that America is ambivalent and controversial in its own view of America, because of the “Melting Pot Myth”. The “Melting Pot Myth”, a piece of true Americana, and today a common-sense term, define the ideologies and mythical creation of America and its greatness. The “Melting Pot Myth” describes, how people of all nations and races, came together and forged/formed America, providing America with the cultural diversity and pioneering spirit that America is known for in the world. As Niro describes it “the melting-pot mythology may not be mythology in practice the same way that it is in theory. Again, this has to do with the statistical probability created not only by the census, but also by popular imagining.”(Niro, 2003: 161) In practice, when counting the people living in USA up until 1850, they were counted as “Free White Men” or “Slaves”. Furthermore, the Melting Pot Myth can create negative and shameful connotations for both white Americans as well as African Americans, because the name “The Melting Pot” tends to led one’s thoughts to miscegenation, which on the white American’s side generates shame due to the countless raping’s of black women serving as e.g. house maids, and as a reminder of the unspeakable oppression of the African Americans.

Race has played, and still plays, an overwhelming role in the creation of the society American citizens live in today. The “one drop rule”, as explained in the historical frame, existed until 1930, and if a person was a mulatto, the negative associations and connotations from both the white and the black community hindered mulattoes and their work from being truly accepted. The ideas of degeneration and the taboo of miscegenation were reflected in the treatment of the mulatto. Race became a barrier wherein America, one was either “black” or “white”. Race became a common-sense concept, which was so apparent in the physical differences of human beings that the valid discourse on whether the concept race even should exist was neglected. As will be discussed later in this chapter, racism and Internalised racism have been determiners throughout the making of “American Citizens”, two concepts originating from the theories of Kant, Lombroso, Blumenbach, Bernier and many more, who based their research on subjective opinions and partial findings. Interestingly, new political actions are stirring in USA. Critical Race Theory is a network of diverse scholarship, which deals with the way in which theory and practice combine in discourses of social power (Niro, 2003: 183). Critical Race Theory recognizes the failure of American Race discourse, and works to “not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to change it” (Crenshaw et al 1995: xiii) (Niro, 2003: 183).

## Racism

When contemplating over the severity of the effects of racism, the peculiar way which racism found its way into American society is striking, because of the element of coincidence and. Numerous scholars question whether it was the beginning of enslaving black people which spurred on the negative, racist connotations towards black people as inferior and “dirty”, or whether it was the racist ideologies already implemented in the pioneers, which brought about slavery. Professor Bulmer and Professor Solomos, the authors behind *Racism*, believe that racism in America was not necessarily an intended result of the progress of American History in the 15th century. However, racism and enslavement of black people were a result of a different range of things; the ideas and notions of black people that the British and Dutch immigrants had brought with them from Europe, where colonisation meant countless accountings of “the black savage” (Bulmer and Solomos, 1999: 71), the rules concerning the enslavement of people attained during war, especially heathens. Therefore, Solomos and Bulmer believe that there are no grounds for assuming that white people in America were driven by racial prejudice in order to enslave black people. It simply began as a need for labour and the pre-existing rule set. The evolution into the ideologically racist society, which America became for a century, is therefore central in this explanation of racism, because even though it started “innocently”, the ideas, which made one race oppress another race for a century, caught fire in people’s minds and enabled the white Americans to subjugate African Americans with a sense of justification.

With an act from 1723, the free blacks remaining, who had not experienced problems with attaining land or acquiring a job, were formally deprived of many of their rights, transforming a state such as Virginia into a slave-based plantation economy. Prior, white indentured servants were a majority amongst labourers. The reason for this decision to relegate all free-blacks to a lower status was stimulated by the fear of the plantation owners and the slaveholding society, who were afraid that the free blacks could become a “dangerous” example to their own slaves, and thereby spur on a riot. As the slave population grew, the slaveholding societies’ fears only grew steadily along, leading to more severe legislation to maintain control over the slaves (Bulmer and Solomos, 1999: 77).

The racist ideologies did not appear until the 19th century, as an aftermath of the scientific discourse on race in Europe during the Enlightenment. Apparently, there was no need for a racist ideology, as long as slavery was taken for granted (Bulmer and Solomos, 1999: 80).

However, as the northern abolitionists started to impose their ideas of freeing slaves and abolishing slavery, the slaveholding society needed to create racist ideologies in order to justify and maintain their slaveholding.

*The Negro is constitutionally indolent and prone to vice; that his mind is heavy, dull, and unambitious; and that the doom that has made the African in all ages and countried, a slave – is the natural consequence of the inferiority of his character (Bulmer and Solomos, 1999: 81)*

Explicit racism, a public ideology based on the idea that black people were naturally inferior, developed directly out of the need to defend upholding slavery. To not have to deal with the aspects of egalitarianism embedded in the law, proslavery apologists claimed, that since black people were a subhuman species, the law did not abide for them, and the egalitarian philosophies could therefore not be applied to any other people than the master race, white people. As thoroughly described in the historical frame, the consequences for the African Americans were slavery, oppression and inferiority through many centuries, before these racist ideas were put to sleep. Rhetoric, an analytical tool that will be elaborated later in this chapter, was a key player in sustaining and developing racism. By defining the black people as subhuman, thus providing them with a different racial category and place in the hierarchy, slavery was sustained.

## Internalised racism

The topic of internalised racism is in some ways related to the field of taboo, because it is a field that invokes many feelings, and often aggravation, amongst its readers and listeners. Internalised racism is often juxtaposed with self-hatred, and is commonly viewed upon as a problem that oppresses people; people who have been victims of racism, have inflicted upon them, and need to solve them. However, as will be explained in this chapter, internalised racism is a product of racism, which unavoidably emerges because of the duality in which a person is looked at, and that the impression of the person changes depending on who is looking at the person. Even though his work is from “a different time”, and not the most contemporary and recent work on internalised racism, W.E.B Dubois captures the essence and duality in internalised racism beautifully in *The Souls of Black Folk*. The version chosen for this project is from 1997, where David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams, who provide Dubois’ theories with a context and more contemporary explanations, have explained his theories in a preface and introduction.

*The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world (Dubois, 1997: 38).*

*One ever feels his two-ness,- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Dubois, 1997: 38).*

Dubois is of the opinion that the strife and duality described in the quotation above are the epitome of the African American’s history, because the longing to gain self-consciousness and to better himself as a man are of the utmost importance to the African American. The African American wishes not to erase any part of his “self”, neither the African nor the American, but to be an accepted African American, without having the doors of opportunity closed on him (Dubois, 1997: 39). If obtained, the African American’s strivings would end. In Dubois opinion, this is all the African American people want.

Internalised racism deeply affected and affects the American society, because the prejudice about races comes to exist in people’s minds, not only about the “other” race, but also about one’s own race. Professor Karen Pyke deals with internalised racism and especially white internalised racism in her article *What is internalized racial oppression and why don’t we study it? Acknowledging racism’s hidden injuries*. In her article she explains that internalised racism and internalised oppression initiates the moment when the oppressed ”accept the identities imposed on them by oppressors” (Pyke, 2010: 557). She explains that one example, which underlines the longing to distance oneself from the negative stereotypes of oppressed races and thereby shows the oppressed group of people’s acceptance of their identity imposed by their oppressor, is the ”defensive othering”. ”The defensive othering” exemplifies itself when one subordinated group of people choose to further subordinate a part of their group. This phenomenon has been seen among e.g. Mexican Americans, who create derogatory identities for new immigrants in order to distance themselves from them. They are creating an ”other” within their own racial group. This example also shows the oppressed acting like the oppressors, which is an aspect that relates to internalised racism, where the oppressed individuals seek to look and act more like their oppressors.

Interestingly, the concept of race was created through certain rhetoric. By selecting and redefining incomplete and lacking research, race and the presumed hierarchy of the races became common knowledge among westerners. The powerful tools of rhetoric are thus key for the creation of the concept race, and also key for the analysis of *the Help*, which will be elaborated later in the thesis.

## African American Stereotypes

One of the results of the oppression and enslavement of African Americans, and the ideologies and theories, which lay the foundation for this, is the creation of African American stereotypes. Stereotypes are unavoidable in any society, since it is a part of the human nature to create stereotypes to mentally categorize. However, the stereotypes about African Americans were created by the white supremacists in order to legalize and justify their actions as slaveholders. In this chapter, the most common stereotypes of African American women will be explained. Melissa V. Harris-Perry, professor at Wake Forest University, describes these stereotypes in her book *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America.*

The “Promiscuous Black Woman” is one of the most common stereotypes about African American women. The promiscuity myth has its roots in the Southern Slaveholding society, where the slaveholder society needed to create this image of the black female slave as promiscuous because of their treatment of these black female slaves. When auctioned, they were often nude, and when working, they needed to hitch up their skirts. The black female slave and the treatment of her were in stark contrast to the Victorian ideal of the white woman, and therefore the need for this stereotype arose. Furthermore and importantly, this stereotype justified the brutality of white man against black female slaves (Harris Perry, 2011: 55).

The myth of the African American woman as “Mammy” was created after 1877, where the Reconstruction ended with the Compromise of 1877, as described in the historical frame. The image of the promiscuous black female woman was now ill-seen, and in order to redefine African American women, to justify their domestic work with white families, the myth and stereotype of “Mammy” came to life.

Mammy is the nurturing, maternal and trustworthy African American woman, who is completely devoid of sexual desire. The Mammy figure was presented as happy and contend with her life, despite the fact that she had to leave her own children to suffer to take care of white families (Harris Perry, 2011:71-73) The stereotype of Mammy became enshrined by putting the “face” of Mammy on syrup bottles, pancake boxes and in films such as *Gone With the Wind*. Monuments to Mammy are still visible both large and small in the American landscape. The Mammy stereotype served to justify the continuing oppression of the African Americans after the civil war and the end of slavery.

The Angry Black woman is a powerful stereotype, which portrays African American women as irrationally angry, verbally abusive and argumentative. According to Harris-Perry, academic literature on stereotyping traces this stereotype to the popular American radio show Amos ‘n’ Andy, where the character Sapphire spurred on several other popular portraits of African American women as brash, independent, hostile and lacking empathy (Harris Perry, 2011: 87-89).

The stereotypes explained above will be used in the analysis as well as the discussion, to see whether Stockett uses these stereotypes in her characterizations of the African American women in *the Help*, and the effects/consequences of her use or lack of use of these stereotypes.

The theories concerning meritocracy will be used in this thesis as a contextual historical and theoretical foundation in the analysis. As will be elaborated below, meritocracy is in theory the idealistic foundation for American democracy and equality, yet in reality is only available for a few American social groups, initiating the discussion of whether the American Dream is for everyone or only white American protestant heterosexual males.

## Meritocracy and the American Dream– Theory and Myth[[2]](#footnote-2)

Meritocracy refers to a social system where all individuals get ahead and earn ”rewards” according to their efforts and skills. America proudly boasts to be a nation inspired by meritocracy, with the idea of The American Dream, which, in its ideological essence, as explained previously, is a meritocratic dream.

*That dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement (McNamee and Miller Jr., 2014: 2).*

The American Dream was in many ways the fulfilment of freedom and the opportunity to succeed in a world, where the aristocratic hierarchy of Europe was not valid, and where the population was a “Melting Pot” of nationalities. Instead of the aristocratic hierarchy, a new more natural hierarchy would be born out of the endeavours to achieve the American Dream, which would be based on virtue and talent. Amongst Americans, the notion of meritocracy is broadly accepted, and many Americans believe that they live in a meritocratic and just society. The thoughts invoking the concepts of The American Dream were both political and religious as well as economic and cultural, which will be explained below.

The religious aspects of the theoretical foundation for the American Dream were mostly protestant. The aftermath of the protestant Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth century created numerous protestant sects in the European colonies in America, and subsequent immigrant groups were expected to adopt the “rule set” of the protestant sects. The Puritans was a group of religious dissidents, who had fled religious persecution in Britain, practiced an extreme form of religious piety. The puritans became the founding fathers for American cultural values as well as the initiators of the American upper class. The Protestant ethic; a constellation of cultural values, expressed itself in hard work and self-denial, where the meaning of self-denial are today associated with the development of capitalism. The principle of hard work derived from the Puritan’s view on the individual’s relationship to God and sin, where the idea of work was seen as a sacred calling, a “mission from God to subdue nature and gain control over it”(McNamee and Miller Jr., 2014: 5). Among the puritan sect, the Calvinists, an expression known as “the salvation anxiety” meant, that individuals worked very hard to achieve success, because in Calvinism, success was taken as a sign of God’s grace. By achieving success, the individuals could prove to themselves as well as others that they were among the “selected” by God, which ultimately resulted in their salvation. Sociologist Max Weber made extensive work on the Calvinistic work ethic and explains that the Calvinistic opposition to the deification of wants and desires goes hand in hand with the American tradition of deprecation. (Weber, 2005: 278). To Weber, the Calvinists believed that God wanted, “impersonal and purposive activity to constitute a means for the glorification of His reputation” (Weber, 2005: 278). The Calvinist needed to act on behalf of God’s aims, which were purely impersonal and rational, devoid of personal feelings and desires.

The puritan values of industry, prudence and frugality became core parts in an emerging national culture, mainly through literature such as American Prime school readers (McNamee and Miller Jr., 2014: 6). One of the major philosophers and writers of this period was Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote the well-known essay *Self-reliance* and the speech *The American Scholar*, and whose thoughts became foundation for the philosophical branch Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism mixed the romantic ideas of Europe with the earth-bound ideas of American Puritanism.

The political ideologies contributed to the notion that the American Dream was democratic. With The Declaration of Independence in 1776, the individual rights life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were implemented in American culture.

The economic aspect contributing to the notion of the American Dream, were theoretically those of Scottish economist Adam Smith. Coincidentally, he published *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* in 1776 (a book which became later known as the bible on free market capitalism), and his theories on self-interest, individual competition, private ownership and laissez-faire principles were appealing to the democratic America, which had a lot of land and no feudal past as well as periodic regional and local labour shortages. The development of America’s national value system was grounded upon these theories, allowing individuals to own their own land, and move up in society on the basis of own efforts, thereby becoming successful. (McNamee and Miller Jr., 2014: 8-9).

The cultural aspects contributing to the founding of the American Dream were the spirit of the pioneers, who staked a claim on a piece of land to call their own. The pioneer mentality that hated aristocracy, special privilege and monopoly attributed to the early ideas of democracy and free market economy.

As explained in the chapter concerning race, meritocracy is far from an ideology that has been put into practice, and the general reason for that is the rhetorical discourse of the white supremacists, excluding racial groups from the meritocratic society. Black people have been referred to as “spoils of victory” and “property”, thereby omitting their egalitarian place in society by dehumanising them.

While discrimination is the very antithesis of merit and invalidates the American Dream, many Americans consider this to be of the past, and that that in itself is a testimony to the American Dream. Most Americans acknowledge the historical forms of discrimination such as the Jim Crow laws or the near-genocide of the Native Americans, but see the election of Barack Obama as evidence of the nations moving forward. McNamee and Miller Jr. argue, that despite the many preventative legislations, discrimination is still a problem, and more importantly, that the effects of many years of previous discrimination reach into the present also known as past-in-present discrimination (McNamee and Miller Jr., 2014: 181). Because of the poorer schools during the Jim Crow era, not only the people from that era, but also many generations after, are affected by the poor education that black people received, and income inequality, both due to past discrimination and present discrimination is a reality in todays America.

McNamee and Miller Jr. point out, that a very important factor in the discussion about meritocracy and discrimination is the political factor. Despite many politicians taking an antidiscriminating position, the unwillingness to correct the discriminatory effects of past political decisions leads to minority disadvantages, thereby resulting in discrimination (McNamee and Miller Jr., 2014: 184).

## Rhetoric

Since Aristotle proposed his theories in ancient Greece about rhetoric and the composition of ”the great speech”, rhetoric has been discussed and evolved in the world throughout the centuries. The ideas of ethos, pathos and logos have been implemented in all texts varying from war speeches to popular music in the 21th century. Barry Brummett discusses the theories of rhetoric and it’s relationship with culture (mainly popular culture) in his book *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*.

Brummett believes that Neo-Aristotelian Criticism is still applicable to popular texts today, The Neo-Aristotelian scheme, which has been developed by scholars during the last couple of centuries, will be explained, in order to understand the foundation of rhetoric, which Brummett further develops his theories about popular culture and rhetorical use.

### The Neo- Aristotelian Scheme

The Situation context-exigency- audience

The Speaker Background – Intentions

The Speech Invention: Logos, Ethos, Pathos- Arrangement-style-Delivery-Memory (Technology)

Evaluation Effects and effectiveness – Ethical Assessment

Explanation of the Neo-Aristotelian scheme

*Neo-Aristotelian criticism thinks of texts as tools that persuaders use to address specific problems (Brummett, 2006: 79)*

”The Situation” is the first thing to be considered when constructing or analysing a text from a Neo-Aristotelian critical perspective. It deals with the event or problem, which has brought on the idea by the author of the text to create the text, as well as its context. In *The Help*, the situation is the racially unjust relationship occurring in Jackson in the beginning of the 1960’s and the desire/need for change. The exigency is the message, which the author wants to deliver in his/her text. The exigency will in *The Help* will be explained in the analysis and discussion. The audience questions who the author intents the text to and the relationship between the audience and the author. “The Speaker” is looked upon because there often is a reason why a particular author chooses to address certain problems to a certain audience. The speaker’s background, including education and reputation, is relevant because it affects and or/explains the reason why the author wishes to deliver or discuss a certain message. This relates to the intentions of the author. The intentions are a key part of the Neo-Aristotelian scheme because it analyses the purpose of the text and the message in the text. In this thesis, Kathryn Stockett, her background and intentions as well as the intended audience will be thoroughly examined in the discussion chapter.

When the Neo-Aristotelian scheme refers to the next category, “the Speech”, the word speech refers to all traditional texts (Brummett, 2006: 80). The Invention is the most complicated part of the speech, because it is the construction of what will be said/written, and the concepts of Logos, Ethos and Pathos help to construct the foundation of the text. Logos represents the logical parts of a text, where statistics and seemingly indisputable facts are given. The Ethos represents the establishing of trust from the audience, which can be done by appealing to the audience by the authors/speakers or characters values and goodwill. Lastly, Pathos represents the emotional appeal to the audience (Brummett, 2006: 83).

“The Arrangement” category deals with stylistics and systematics of the text, considering which messages where delivered firstly and lastly, as well as the progression of the text, concerning itself with e.g. whether some issues were addressed firstly as an opening to addressing other issues. Style, including language choice is a key part of the arrangement, because the author chooses how to communicate, which is important in relation to the author’s audience and when regarding texts, to the impression the author wants to deliver about the characters. The choice of language is thoroughly analysed in the analysis of the novel *The Help*, because Stockett’s choice of language for the black characters differs from the language chosen for the white characters. The choice of Metaphors as well as the use of irony is also included in Style. Delivery deals with the nonverbal and nontextual parts of the texts and is especially important in relation to performed speeches.

The “Evaluation” category deals with the texts’ effects and effectiveness, a field which can often be quite difficult to fulfil, but has become increasingly easier with modern technology such as polls and feedback from social media such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs etc. In relation to this thesis the evaluation category will not be used in the analysis, but rather reflected upon with reviews of the novel in the discussion chapter.

### Rhetoric in popular culture

Brummett establishes early in his book that people grow in and are sustained by popular culture through everyday experiences, artefacts and objects (Brummett, 2006: 82). Public business can no longer be controlled by great speeches or essential texts due to the growth in population, technology, the constantly expanding knowledge and pluralism.

*Because of the growth in these four areas, more of the important business of our society is now done from moment to moment in people’s experiences of popular culture. (Brummett, 2006: 83)*

Brummett examines the field of racism from a developing rhetorical perspective, and he explains, that a century ago, the rhetorical discourse was mainly led by professors such as W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington (two African American professors, whose influence on the American racial discourse will be elaborated in the historical frame chapter). However, today:

*The problem of racism is being managed in the plots of television sitcoms and dramas that take racism as an occasional theme and urge certain audience responses to it. Racism is managed in fashion, as shirts and caps with the name or photograph of a popular hip-hop group, or slogans of racial pride… There, in the everyday texts of popular culture, is where racism is increasingly managed today (Brummett, 2006: 83).*

Brummett explains that the texts of popular culture do not restrain themselves to the confinements of the neo-Aristotelian scheme, but that the rhetoric popular texts can be both non-verbal, films and music, which holds and features many of the terms explained in the neo-Aristotelian scheme, meaning that even though the systematics of the scheme are not necessarily uphold, the delivery of a message, the context and background as well as the audience and evaluation are embedded in popular culture texts.

### The seven critical rhetoric groups

To further examine popular culture texts, Brummett argues that there are 7 different critical rhetoric groups, which are most important: Marxist, visual, psychoanalytic, feminist, dramatistic/narrative, media-centred and culture-centred. The different groups will be explained below, but only the groups important for the analysis (feminist (however only a selected part of the theory), dramatistic/narrative and culture-centred) in this thesis are thoroughly explained, since the field of rhetorical criticism is very broad.

Marxist criticism deals with materialism, superstructure, everything belonging to the world of ideas, laws and government with a focus on the ideas being “overdetermined”, meaning that they are determined by economic forces or several material forces working simultaneously (Brummett, 2006: 152).

Visual rhetorical criticism is a field of three critical methods (visual rhetoric, psychoanalytic criticism and feminist criticism). Brummett explains that

*For images, like language, have a structure- they appear in contexts- and they must be interpreted so as to extract meaning from them. Images, like verbal utterances, are focal points for the attribution of meaning (Brummett, 2006: 162).*

By examining the way that the images are organized, one creates a rhetorical organization that attributes meanings to the images. Critical question such as “what goes with what?” and the choices of e.g. arrangement in the images are important for attributing meaning to the images. Brummett notes that when using visual rhetorical criticism, the critic needs to look at the logic or rationale behind the structures, to locate what sort of visual world is created and how the “rules” of that world can affect the audience. Furthermore, and importantly, images can become basis for the community, meaning that people can share collective memories through certain images. This is important because of the ambiguity, which comes with that collective memory invoked by the images. Brummett exemplifies this by referring to a billboard commercial, where people of different races are “hanging out” happily and peacefully together, in America, representing the feeling of social connection, despite the continuous/on-going racial tension in America.

Psychoanalysis is a broadly used term, originating from Freud, but is today often used as reference for theory concerning the construction of the mind, personality and psyche. (Brummett, 2006: 165). Psychoanalysis is very useful to apply to rhetoric criticism, especially in the field of visual rhetoric criticism, because people form human personalities through the relationship to others using signs and representations, which can be interpreted and shaped by rhetoric (Brummett, 2006: 166).

Psychoanalytic criticism assumes that there is something “behind” all artefacts of popular culture.

Feminist criticism deals with how inequality is created through popular texts as well as the empowerment of women. Feminism is strongly tied together with rhetoric, because the basis of feminist criticism is to interpret texts to discover the way in which a male dominant system, patriarchy, perpetuates inequality through popular texts. (Brummett, 2006: 171) Feminists assume that there is a male dominant system of power, a patriarchy. Even through there are many varieties of feminist criticism; only one theory will be explained in this section, which is the standpoint theory. Standpoint theory argues

*The world may be known only in partial perspectives given to us by where we are situated in the world in terms of class, race, gender, geography, sexual identity (Brummett, 2006: 173).*

The theory shows how different texts are produced from different standpoints and exposes those different points of views. Standpoint theory questions who is privileged in the text, and inquires to how the object would be different if made from a different point of view. This theory is useful for the analysis of *The Help*, where Stockett writes as Skeeter, the white rich young woman, and the two middle-aged African American women, working as maids.

Dramatistic/narrative criticism focuses on language and other sign systems. Critics believe that language and other sign systems are the grounding for human reality and motivation (Brummett, 2006: 179). Because of, and through the symbols people use, people see the world and react to it with certain motivations. People create and use texts to help understand and formulate responses to problems in life. Dramatistic/narrative criticism believes that symbols are the source of perceptions and motivations, and therefore anyone who understands the symbols will have access to the perceptions and motivations generated by the symbols. The effect of choosing one word instead of another can create a completely different set of meanings, e.g. by referring to those who violently oppose their governments as either “revolutionists” or “criminals” or “political activists” (Brummett, 2006: 180).

Within the theory of dramatistic/narrative criticism is the concept teleology, which refers to the perfection of a thing, and the teleology of symbols intersect with real life problems and solutions (Brummett, 2006: 182). The dramatistic/narrative criticism looks for individual symbols in a text and track their development, to show how that development happened as it did because of teleology. Teleology is an important theory for this thesis, due to the creation and development of the book Help in *The Help*, which will be elaborated thoroughly in the analysis.

Media-centred criticism focuses on the importance of the explicit media used to convey/show a text.

Culture centred criticism examines cultural artefacts and symbols with a perspective from the culture the artefact originates. In opposition to ethnocentricity, which has been the basis for oppression and inferiority/supremacy of the races, culture centred criticism looks at a culture from that very own culture’s methods of critical analysis, thereby providing an understanding of the artefacts/symbols meaning to that specific culture. An example of a culture centred criticism is Afrocentricity, a word created by author Molefi Asante, a culture centred criticism used to look at the African heritage of the African Americans, arguing that e.g. jazz and rap cannot be adequately understood when analysed from a Eurocentric perspective.

*Through such a method, Asante hopes that African culture, including its manifestations among African Americans in the United States, will become “subject and not object”, the perspective from which a thing is seen rather than the thing that is seen from some other perspective (Brummett, 2006: 205).*

These critics are discussing the ways in which the African Culture helps inform African American culture today, and that it is a cultural argument, not a racial argument. To engage in culture centred criticism, the critic must therefore ask the values, ways of understanding, as well as characteristics and aesthetics of a given culture in order to analyse it and its artefacts. This theory is interesting to consider in the discussion, because this thesis has to question whether the cultural artefacts and symbols described and portrayed in the novel are portrayed from an ethnocentric point of view or a culture centred point of view.

## Taboo

This thesis deals with racism, which many believe to be a taboo-like subject. Since the discovering of the term in Polynesia by captain James Cook in 1771, the word taboo has changed through societies into a term commonly used for things and subjects which are hard to address. The treatment of the African Americans through American history is today considered a taboo by many, and is therefore in this thesis also considered a taboo like subject, which must be treated when writing about it with respect and caution. This thesis deals with Stockett’s handling of the racism taboo, making a definition of the term taboo and it’s development important.

Freud describes in his book in 1913, *Totem and Taboo*, which is actually a collection of essays, that by studying Australian Aborigines, he found two universal taboos. The first taboo was incest, and the second the killing of the totem animal (Freud, 1918:139).

In contemporary modern society, taboo is commonly known as a term used for many different topics, which are hard to address. Genocide, race, menstruation, erectile dysfunction are a few examples of these topics, which are hard to address. As described in the historical frame, slavery and the laws of the Jim Crow era meant large African American casualties, and many African Americans related their situation to the Jews in Nazi-Germany during WWII. The genocidal nature of the history of African Americans is especially difficult to discuss, given that the current generations of Americans were born in or after the post black power and civil rights movement era. Racism is an on-going problem in USA, further problematizing the racial discourse and the historical discourse on race in USA.

# 

# Analysis

## Introduction to chapter

Kathryn Stockett chose three protagonists to narrate *The Help*. Skeeter, the white young, educated single with ambition. Aibileen, the maternal, soon to be elderly black maid, who has served white families her entire life and Minny, the younger black maid with a temper and a smart mouth. Together, these three women narrate *The Help* through their own personal thoughts and conversations. On the surface, the reader perceives this novel to be an empowerment of black maids in the segregation era and the civil rights movement era. However, the way in which the women are portrayed and depicted, the words and language chosen to describe them, and the way Stockett uses her protagonists to create coherence throughout the novel paint a different picture, where the white woman ends up saving the black women. The characterizations of the protagonists will therefore be the focus of this analysis, examining how Stockett describes the characters in the novel and what meaning the words she uses to describe them attributes. Rhetoric analytical tools such as the dramatistic/narrative criticism and the rhetoric standpoint theory will be applied to thoroughly examine this.

**Characterization of Skeeter**

Miss Eugenia Phelan, also known as Skeeter, is a controversial protagonist in the novel. She is a white, single woman in her mid twenties, who has educated herself, and works at the Jackson Journal answering “Miss Myrna” letters, a task which she cannot fulfil on her own, since she knows nothing of house keeping, and therefore uses Aibileen’s knowledge for her job. Skeeter is faced with stereotypical “white” problems, which differ from the problems the black protagonists face. Her mother is constantly obsessing over her appearance, grieving that Skeeter is not yet married, and she is facing the tough sexist discrimination in the world of business, unable to assert herself as a writer due to her being female. She takes on writing the book “Help”, partly due to the injustice she feels on behalf of her friends’ black maids, and partly because she has been searching for a ground-breaking idea for a book that will catch the attention of the idolised Missus Stein from New York, who ends up publishing “Help”.

As Skeeter initiates the long journey of writing “Help”, she progressively becomes more disconnected with her friends, miss Leefolt and miss Holbrook. Firstly, she forgets a bag containing material about the “Jim Crow” laws, which is discovered by miss Holbrook, and gives way to miss Holbrook suspecting Skeeter for being too friendly with black people. As miss Holbrook decides to force Skeeter into printing an add about the Home-Help- Sanitation-Initiative (an initiative claiming that black and white people can infect each other with different diseases through bathroom hygiene), Skeeter chooses to retaliate by making a typo, that results in miss Holbrook’s front lawn being crowded with used toilets. This act of retaliation and defiance means the social death of Skeeter, providing Skeeter with many of the same feelings about being shunned and differentiated as Aibileen and Minny.

The controversial aspect of the portrait of Skeeter is her role in the narrative. She comes off as this heroic figure, who ends up “saving” the black maids in Jackson, and as the only white sympathiser towards the black community. Because she is the one, who ends up persuading Aibileen into sharing her stories, she ends up as this white protective figure, sheltering the black maids from their white employers. This aspect denigrates the black protagonists’ roles, leaving the impression that Skeeter is the person to credit for change, more than Aibileen and Minny, who are actually the characters risking the most in order to change their lives.

The controversy is discussed shortly in the novel, where a young maid named Gretchen has agreed to share her stories, but turns up only to inform Skeeter, that she knows nothing about black people and that the black people helping Skeeter all hate her. Aibileen actually ends up throwing Gretchen out, while Skeeter sits innocently and dumbfounded, not understanding Gretchen’s reactions. This innocence on Skeeter’s part only underlines her heroic status in the novel. Stockett’s portrait of Skeeter as a heroine will be discussed thoroughly in the discussion about Stockett’s cultural perspective.

After “Help” has been published, and Skeeter becomes an anonymous, yet accomplished writer, she chooses to leave for NY to fulfil her dream of becoming a writer. This can be seen both as a symbol of female empowerment as well as the pursuit of the American Dream, but can also be interpreted as a symbol of white supremacy. Skeeter chooses to leave the black maids who helped her to pursue her own dream without reassuring the black maids security and future, and thereby aligns herself with the other women of Jackson as selfish and ignorant.

## Characterization of Aibileen

Aibileen is the first black maid the reader encounters. Aibileen is in her mid fifties, and has taken care of white people’s babies for about 30 years. She cares deeply for the children she is taking care of, which at the time the story initiates is Mae Mobley Leefolt. Aibileen’s own son, Treelore, died 5 months before Aibileen started working at the Leefolt house, and Aibileen’s grief follows her through the whole novel. Treelore died working at a mill, where he slipped off the loading dock, and was run over by a tractor. Treelore’s white boss simply left him in front of the coloured people’s hospital. The loss of her son plays an important role in the novel, because it becomes Aibileen’s main motive for change and protest. After having lost her son, she explains that she has changed.

*I put down the iron real slow, feel that bitter seed grow in my chest, the one planted after Treelore died. My face goes hot, my tongue twitchy. I don’t know what to say to her. All I know is, I ain’t saying it (Stockett, 2009: 29)*

This quote is chosen from a situation, where miss Leefolt has had a bathroom build in their garage for Aibileen and the other coloured people coming to the Leefolt house. Miss Hilly Holbrook, the antagonistic white female character, who is president of the Jackson Junior League, planted the idea of the coloured bathroom and is both feared and looked up to by the white upper class women in Jackson. Hilly Holbrook and her role in the novel will be looked upon later in the analysis. It is one of the first times that the reader comes to know of Aibileen’s want for change and more for the African Americans in Jackson. This want for change and Aibileen’s motives will be further analysed in the analysis chapter concerning the black characters’ pursuit of the American Dream.

Aibileen is portrayed as more true and virtuous than the other characters in the novel. She is known in the black community as a woman whose prayers God listens to, and is therefore heightened to an almost saint-like status, to whom the other black church members turn to for help.

Aibileen in many ways represents the Mammy stereotype explained in the theory chapter. She is portrayed as maternal, caring and loving the white babies she nurses. Aibileen is not as uncritical and accepting as the stereotypic image of Mammy described in the theory chapter, because the reader is allowed into Aibileen’s personal thoughts. The way she chooses to act when with her white employers is definitely that of the content, trustworthy, caregiving Mammy, who has no personal desires. Aibileen is portrayed as fairly content with her situation, and is not described in any sexual way, giving way to the devoid of sexuality.

## Characterization of Minny

Minny is the younger, hot-headed black protagonist, who is much more blunt and candid than Aibileen in her opinions about and towards white people.

Minny differs from Aibileen in her provocative nature, and comes off as more self-confident and proud than Aibileen. She explains that these ill-sought features like the temper and the sassing are traits that have been a problem for her all her life (Stockett, 2009: 338)

Minny’s relationship with her female white bosses differs quite drastically from the other maids’ relationships to their employers. Her experience with miss Walters, the mother of Hilly Holbrook, and then miss Foote, are depicted quite differently. When Hilly Holbrook wanted to ship of her mother to a nursing home, she offered Minny a job at her house. However, as Minny turned it down, partly because of the rumours concerning working at the Holbrook house and partly because of loyalty towards another black maid and friend Yule May, Holbrook accused Minny of stealing, spreading the rumour throughout town, ensuring that Minny was completely doomed. This act of revenge against Minny relates to the quote by Aibileen above concerning the white woman’s revenge. Minny’s reaction to Hilly Holbrook’s unjust and revengeful act is what comes to define Minny throughout the novel. “The Terrible Awful” was when Minny chooses to bake one of her famous caramel cakes, a Hilly Holbrook favourite, with her own shit as an ingredient (Stockett, 2009: 339). This act of defiance, which comes to “save” the protagonists in the end because of Hilly Holbrook’s desperate attempt to redeem her own reputation, provides Minny with cockiness and a devil-may-care attitude, which concurs with the stereotype of the Angry Black Woman, which will be elaborated later in this chapter.

Minny’s relationship to Miss Celia Foote is of a completely different nature, and shows the more empathic, complex and loving features of Minny. As Minny comes to work for miss Celia, she is unaware that miss Celia was raised in a very poor “trailer-trash” like part of the county. Therefore, Minny fails understand why miss Celia does not treat Minny like her previous employers, but instead wants to eat lunch together with her, and talks to Minny in an almost apologetic manner. Minny comes to understand that miss Celia is dealing with many of the same social problems as Minny, because she is not socially accepted because she married Hilly Holbrook’s high school boyfriend and is therefore shunned by Hilly Holbrook. Minny pities miss Celia because miss Celia does not belong among the white or the black. Furthermore, miss Celia is unfortunate and has had several miscarriages, which Minny discovers when finding miss Celia almost dead from loosing blood after another miscarriage. Minny’s relationship with miss Celia develops through their understanding of one another, and they achieve an almost friend-like relationship.

Importantly, the reason why they do not develop a real friendship is due to Minny and her own opinions and fears about the relationships between black and white women. Miss Celia is the ignorant outsider, and interestingly, Minny chooses to draw up the “lines” between white and black, enforcing the “rules” from her previous employments.

*See, I think if God had intended for white people and coloured people to be this close together for so much of the day, he would’ve made us colorblind… I’m wondering, how did she get this far in life without knowing where the lines are drawn (Stockett, 2009: 215).*

This behaviour can be caused by two different things; internalised racism, as if Minny is so affected by the many years of being oppressed and suffering from effects of racism that she enforces the rules because of her own inferior view of herself, or; as a protection for Minny and miss Celia, well knowing that their abnormal behaviour and relationship with one another would be ill looked upon and dangerous if found out. This aspect will be further discussed in the discussion about Stockett’s cultural perspective.

Minny represents the Angry Black Women. As described in the theory chapter, the stereotype the Angry Black Woman is constantly angry and brash, even hostile. Minny is irrationally angry throughout the entire novel, blaming it on her nature. Interestingly, Minny mentions Mammy in the novel;

*I sure didn’t like that movie, the way they made slavery look like a big happy tea party. If I’d played Mammy, I’d told of Scarlett to stick those green draperies up her white little pooper. Make her own damn man-catching dress (Stockett, 2009: 50).*

The mentioning and denunciation of one stereotype, while being portrayed as another common stereotype, underlines Stockett’s knowledge of African American stereotypes. She is playing on these stereotypes to generate relatable features within the audience intended. This will be elaborated in the discussion.

## Aibileen’s and Minny’s views of the white women in Jackson

An important aspect of the way Aibileen is portrayed is her view upon the white families and especially women she encounters in the narrative. The opinions she expresses to miss Leefolt and miss Holbrook are very different from those she expresses internally. Externally, when working as a maid, she comes on as this inferior “child”, who is to be taught about the rules of society, and who does not know better. She is seen as less intelligent than white women by the white women, and she does nothing to express her true feelings about this. Aibileen’s acceptance of being treated as inferior is not an example of internalised racism or a display of her self-worth, but a proof of the real dangers that coloured people were faced with. Despite the fact that many of the racist discriminatory events are not vividly depicted the reader senses and detects the black peoples fear of the white people and the consequences of protest.

*White womens like to keep they hands clean. They got a shiny little set a tools they use, sharp as witches’ fingernails, tide and laid out and neat, like the picks on a dentist tray. They gone take they time with em (Stockett, 2009: 188).*

This description of the white women in the town Jackson does not only depict the injustice and rules between white and black people in Jackson, but depicts the very nature of the white women. The white women are often described as helpless beings, who are not able to raise and nurture their own children, and who lack true values like being a good parent, being able to cook and clean for your family. Meanwhile, they are devious and manipulating as described in the quote above. The contrast between Aibileen and miss Leefolt is sharp, where Aibileen is portrayed as the maternal nurturing, teaching and understanding “parent” for Mae Mobley, while miss Leefolt is portrayed as this clueless, unforgiving, disappointed and ever annoyed parent.

*Miss Leefolt look down at her, start shaking her finger. “Mae Mobley, you know you’re not supposed to climb out of your crib!”… I rush past Miss Leefolt, pick Baby Girl up. I whisper, “Let’s go on in the living room and play with the talking toy. What that donkey say?” ”She keeps getting up. I put her back in bed three times this morning.” “Cause somebody needs changing. Whooooweeee.” Miss Leefolt tisk, say, “Well I didn’t realize…” but she already staring out the window at the lumber truck (Stockett, 2009: 15).*

As Mae Mobley throughout the novel chooses Aibileen over miss Leefolt for comfort and chooses to believe Aibileen over her white schoolteacher, Aibileen comes off as a saint-like like Mammy character, who is superior to her white bosses, and who is truer and whose values are more important than that of the white women, which will be elaborated on later in the analysis.

## Aibileen’s and Minny’s description of themselves

The most important thing to examine when analysing how Stockett portrays Aibileen and Minny in *The Help* is how she describes Aibileen and Minny with their own words, to look at how the protagonists see themselves and ultimately, what meaning Stockett wants the reader to derive from the symbols attached to the words Aibileen and Minny describe themselves with.

The most striking incident in the novel, which says a lot about how Aibileen sees herself, is the evening at her house, where she encounters a big cockroach.

*That night after supper, me and that cockroach stare each other down across the kitchen floor. He big, inch an a half. He black. Blacker than me. He making a crackling sound with his wings. I got my shoe in my hand.(Stockett, 2009: 189).*

This incident is incredibly eloquent and stands out when reading it. When Aibileen almost compares herself to a cockroach, describing her own colour and blackness as comparative to a detested bug, it derives several meanings.

Firstly, one can see it as an example of internalised racism with the feelings of low self-esteem and self-hatred. If this is what Stockett wishes to portray, Aibileen is comparing herself to a cockroach because of the racially unjust society she grew up in and lives in, where she is worth nothing and is seen as a bug is which is to be confined and eradicated by many white people. However, this is a very radical conclusion to derive from this quotation, which has been included only to show the different meanings, which can be attributed to the quotation.

Secondly, the quotation can be seen as an example of how she is treated and her living standards. By showing that Aibileen has to deal with cockroaches in her little home, it gives the impression of a poor home, as a contrast to her employer’s fancy and clean house (Stockett, 2009: 3-4). Furthermore, her many hours at the Leefolt residence leaves little time for her to keep her own house sanitised and orderly. As she utters “blacker than me” she is not necessarily thinking it as a negative comment, or a comparative comment, but merely as explanatory, maybe even humorous. However, the connotations come out as negative, giving the reader a feeling of despondency.

Thirdly, Aibileen could be commenting on her life, not exactly her person and not as an example of internalised racism, but as a social critique and as an outlet of emotions of being treated as a bug. If Aibileen is complaining to herself about her situation as a coloured woman, the cockroach could symbolise the unjust treatment of black people by the white supremacists. There are several incidents in the novel where black people are killed and treated unjustly without real consequence, such as Aibileen’s cousin getting her car burned up for going down to the voting station (Stockett, 2009: 103), Robert, a grandson of another black maid, being beaten violently resulting in blindness by white men for using a “white” bathroom (Stockett, 2009: 101), and the killing of Medgar Evers, the black field secretary of NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) (Stockett, 2009: 194-195). Just like everyone hates the cockroach simply because of it being a detested bug, white people have treated Aibileen unjustly her whole life due to the skin colour, she was born with e.g. the necessity for a separate coloured bathroom (Stockett, 2009: 8), Hilly Holbrook getting Aibileen fired by accusing her of steeling (Stockett, 2009: 440) and the treatment of her son Treelore when injured which lead to his death (Stockett, 2009: 153).

Minny sees herself as too hot-headed, and that her flaws lie in her nature, that she was born with her temper. As mentioned earlier, this feature is not only typical of Minny, but of the African American stereotype The Angry Black Woman.

*My eyes grow sharper in the dark. After a minute, I see myself in the mirror over the sink. Crouched like a fool on top of a white lady’s toilet. Look at me. Look what it’s come to for Minny Jackson to make a damn living (Stockett, 2009: 53).*

This is one of the strongest quotations about Minny and her thoughts of self, because it shows that even though she is a proud woman, which the reader learns early in the novel, she is forced to humiliate herself by hiding in the bathroom, afraid of Mister Johnny. The fact that she is more humiliated than she is scared proves that she is usually proud of herself. In the chapter, which includes this quotation, Minny thinks about her family, which she is proud of, and that she holds her head up despite of challenges like a drunken husband. Despite her talking negatively about herself with words such as “short” and “fat”, the way she talks negatively about herself is with a hint of humour, giving the impression that she is self-aware and confident. The humiliating situation makes Minny degrade herself temporarily to a fool, ashamed of her situation. She is ambivalent in her feelings about herself, shifting from proud to foolish. However, this attributes a relatable feeling, because she is portrayed as a woman who is tough in the outside, yet fragile on the inside.

## The language and its rhetoric influence

The language chosen for Aibileen and Minny by Stockett is both linguistically and stylistically interesting and very important for the understanding and impression of Minny and Aibileen. As described in the theory chapter concerning rhetoric, language represents a set of symbols, and we as readers interpret those set of symbols. The language chosen is important in different ways, which will be looked upon individually below.

As explained in the neo-Aristotelian scheme, the style and language of the text has an importance for the text and those who receive the text. In this case, Stockett has chosen to write in a stereotypical African American “slang-like” style filled with spelling mistakes and contractions, leaving the impression on the reader, that both Aibileen and Minny think and speak in a less educated and highly accentuated manner which provides an impression of realism.

*“Course I’s happy. You happy too. Big house, big yard, husband looking after you.” I frown at Miss Celia and I make sure she can see it. Because ain’t that white people for you, wondering if they are happy enough (Stockett, 2009: 49).*

However, to mention a contrast, Skeeter’s language is much more refined, yet with the southern accent as an undertone. The choice of the language being either “black” or “white” helps the reader gain insight into the depictions of the characters and furthers Stockett’s way of differentiating between the black and white characters. Stylistically, it eases the transition of the three protagonists, ensuring that their stories are not one big blur. Visually and linguistically, the reader knows from reading the language whether it is a white or black character thinking or voicing an opinion, which is a good tool when analysing the protagonists. However, there is undoubtedly also a prejudicial undertone, which will be looked into in the discussion about Stockett’s cultural perspective.

The other side of the linguistic choices has to do with the dramatistic/narrative rhetorical criticism, which is described in the theory chapter concerning rhetoric. As explained, when choosing certain words to describe e.g. a person, there is a meaning attributed to these words. These words become symbols. When looking at the words Stockett uses to describe either the black maids or the white women, it gives the reader insight into the picture Stockett wishes to paint of both black and white women in Jackson. Below, an analysis of selected words used to describe different white and black characters will show how Stockett uses rhetorical tools to depict the black and white women differently.

As mentioned earlier, Stockett depicts the female white employers with negative connotations. She describes through Aibileen’s narrative voice miss Leefolt as skinny, spindly legs, boyish and thin haired (Stockett, 2009: 1). She has a scary smile, slaps her own child and is unable to take care of Mae Mobley, leaving her in her crib without changing her diaper (Stockett, 2009: 18, 15). The specific words skinny, spindly, scary are negatively sounding adjectives (especially in their context) and therefore the perception of miss Leefolt becomes negatively connoted. When describing Aibileen as plumb, while mentioning that babies like fat, and furthermore underlining that Aibileen’s plumpness is “a friendly softness” (Stockett, 2009: 78), miss Leefolt and Aibileen become contrasts. While Aibileen is maternal and loving, plump and soft, miss Leefolt is cold, skinny, scary and an unfit mother.

Miss Celia is described as crazy, lazy, a fool who cannot cook or look after her own house, mainly through the narrative voice of Minny (Stockett, 2009: 212, 31). Miss Celia is described as an outsider from the “white” society of Jackson, unhappy, unable to see the many privileges she has in her life (Stockett, 2009: 49), due to her inability to procreate. Minny is in many ways a contrast to Celia, having many children, being a good cook and cleaner, understanding the rules of the black and white society. Miss Celia is portrayed as a fool not only because of her lack of domestic skills, but more because of her lack of knowledge about the supposed rules between black and white people. Minny sees miss Celia as ignorant, a piece of trailer-trash from Sugar Ditch who is in fault of her own social death because of her inability to fit in in Jackson. However, miss Celia is also portrayed as friendly, giving Minny a hug despite its impropriety, wanting to share her day and life with Minny and thinks of Minny as her friend (Stockett, 2009: 224). Yet because of Minny’s reactions to her friendliness, which is far from forthcoming and obliging, the perception of miss Celia becomes that of the friendly but lost outsider in society, unable to fit in anywhere.

Miss Holbrook is the most important white female employer in *The Help*. She is the antagonist in the novel, and is important both for the narrative and the narratives progress as well as for the dividing of the black maids and white employers. Hilly Holbrook is the wife of a upcoming local politician, and whole heartedly supports segregation, believing that black and white people are two different species or races, and that they carry different diseases, making black people “dangerous”. She is admired and feared by her fellow white league ladies of Jackson, and rules most of Jackson with a firm hand, persuading and controlling her friends into doing her biddings. As *The Help* progresses, miss Holbrook becomes the detonator of the creation and success of the book, leading to her own destruction within the Jackson Society. In the narrative, she is a key character, because she is the evil woman, who drives the “innocent black women” to a need for change, and she is consequently the character, who fuels the book and who embodies practically all the negative qualities of the white women, except her being a good mother. When speaking of miss Holbrook, Minny refers to Hilly as a Ku Klux Klan member, giving the reader the idea of Hilly being racist and anti-black with violent or hurtful tendencies.

*“Who you think you talking to, Aibileen? A monkey? I might as well go work for the KKK (Stockett, 2009: 17)*

The failure and breakdown of Hilly Holbrook becomes almost as important in *The Help* as the publishing of the book itself, because Hilly Holbrook comes to symbolise the white supremacist and thereby also the enemy. The fact that she is to blame for her own “destruction” furthers the notion of good and evil, because it leaves the impression of the protagonists as innocent. As Hilly Holbrook and Aibileen have their final confrontation, Hilly Holbrook’s failure is fixed.

*I say, “I know something about you and don’t you forget that.”…”Nobody would believe something you wrote, Nigra.””I don’t know. I been told I’m a pretty good writer.” She fish her tongue out and touch that sore with it. Then she drop her eyes from mine (Stockett, 2009: 441-442).*

The progression and ending of the narrative becomes natural/pleasing, because the destruction of Hilly Holbrook as white supremacist in the end provides a “new beginning” for Jackson and a chance for change.

Stockett depicts the female white employers overall negatively and Minny and Aibileen overall positively. The black maids and their female employers become opposites in many aspects, reflecting how divided the white and black people’s lives where. Initially, there is the “obvious” skin colour as a visual contrast. As mentioned in the theory chapter on race, the visual differences of human beings have been cause for great speculation and brought on a need for categorization, explanation and hierarchy. The values of the black and white characters are also oppositional, where the black characters values which are personal, strong, loving, sacrificing, maternal and selfless are in sharp contrast to the materialistic, helpless, ungrateful, self-centred values of the white characters. The interests of the characters are also somewhat oppositional, where the black characters are very involved with the church and God, the white female characters are interested in the work with the League, and the white men are interested in their work and in football, resulting in the impression that the white characters are mostly interested in platonic and trivial things.

To further underline the positive connotations of the black maids, Stockett uses different rhetoric tools. The establishment of ethos, logos and pathos is useful in all texts when trying to retrieve a message from the text. In the rhetoric chapter in the theory section these three concepts are explained as the statistic, emphatic and trustworthy elements of a text. In relation to the ethos, logos and pathos of the text, standpoint theory is also very relevant, seeing that in *The Help*, the story is narrated by three protagonists, where two of them are black maids, and the third is a white female who has never herself employed a black maid, but has loved her own maid growing up. Therefore, the ethos, logos and pathos are forged out of three voices that are opposed to segregation and the racial injustice in Jackson.

The ethos in *The Help* consists of two parts; the trust from the audience towards the author and the trust from the audience towards the narrators. The trust from the audience to the author is established in the last chapter in the novel, where Stockett explains her relationship to her own maid. This last “autobiographical” chapter invokes trust, making the reader feel that Stockett knows what she is writing about and has realistic insight to the racial situation in Jackson. The trust from the audience to the protagonists is partially the language used as described above, where the use of African American “slang” vs. the southern “white” dialect provides a trustworthy effect, where the reader can sense the way in which the women speak and feel. Furthermore, the first person narrator invokes trust, because the reader is allowed inside the thoughts of the protagonists.

Logos is the logical part of the text, which in a speech could be statistics. These statistics are not present in the same way in *The Help* but the use of real historical events such as the march in Washington with Martin Luther King, and the use of other historically correct names such as Rosa Parks, helps to give an authenticated feel. The historically correct facts and names are used on a prior knowledge basis, assuming the reader knows of these historical events and important persons.

Pathos is established throughout the novel, asserting the black maids struggles and motives for writing “Help” and for wanting change. The death of Treelore, Aibileen’s son, gives the reader a sense of empathy and injustice. Minny’s pride in her work, reassures the reader of the black maids’ integrity and drive. The black maids’ love for their employers depicted in many of the “stories” in their book “Help” gives the reader the idea, that these black maids are human and forgiving. Aibileen’s love for Mae Mobley and vice versa, despite Mae Mobley being the child of her cold, young, ignorant employer, provides an innocent, loving aspect. The feelings range from revenge and hate to love and forgiveness, giving the black maids a feminine, human and relatable character.

## Standpoint theory and its importance in *The Help*

As described in the theory chapter, standpoint theory deals with the view of the protagonists, analysing what picture is portrayed to the reader by which protagonists and contemplating whether the picture would look different from other perspectives. In *The Help*, the protagonists all provide a picture of Jackson, where the white women are spoiled, selfish and unaware of anything but themselves. Stockett does include Skeeter, giving the reader the impression that the voice of the white women is represented. Skeeter’s perception of the white women in Jackson is muddled, depicting her fellow white girlfriends as good friends during high school, but empty and somewhat lost as adults. Skeeter’s perspective centres on her career and ambitions versus her devotion to her family and the expectations of a white, rich young woman in Jackson. As will be explained thoroughly in the discussion, this perspective is criticised by professor Duchess Harris.

*As a Black female reader, I ended up feeling like one of “the help,” forced to tend to Miss Skeeter’s emotional sadness over the loss of her maid (whom she loved more than her own white momma) and her social trials regarding a clearly racist “Jim Crow” bill. (Harris, 2011)*

Harris describes in her article how Skeeter is used as the white protagonist, who guides both the reader and the black protagonists through the narrative and ends up saving all the black maids while securing her own future career. She even gives up her chance of getting married to the senator’s son, Stuart Whitworth, by telling him the truth about her writings, giving the impression that she is truly committed to helping herself and the black maids contributing with their stories. As Harris mentions in the article, Skeeter is hardly a true civil rights activist, and her sacrifices seem big in the novel, but she pales compared to real white civil rights activists. There are some similarities between the narrative voices of Skeeter, Aibileen and Minny, because she too feels alienated and uncomprehending to her white friends’ lives.

Aibileen’s and Minny’s perspectives attribute the black opinions and attitudes, giving the reader the feeling of knowing the black maid’s lives and cultures, struggles and joys. Both their perspectives give way to the reader’s understanding of the want for change and the reality for black maids in Jackson in the 1960’s. However, these black perspectives are created by Stockett, who portrays both Aibileen and Minny as African American stereotypes and with a partly ethnocentric perspective, which gives way to confusion about whether the black protagonists provide a real African American perspective or a perceived African American perspective.

It could have been interesting to look at the course of events in *The Help* from Hilly Holbrook’s perspective. The uniformity of the depictions of the white and black women in Jackson creates a one-sided, biased and somewhat monotonous feeling.

## The pursuit of happiness

Repeatedly throughout the novel, Minny, Aibileen and Skeeter want to change things. For Aibileen, her motives for change has to do mainly with children, both her own dead Treelore, as well as the white babies she has been raising through the years. She tells Mae Mobley every day that Mae Mobley is kind and smart, dreading for when Mae Mobley grows up and begins to listen to her mother’s prejudicial and racist ideas, eventually becoming a white grown up who thinks that white people are better than black people. Aibileen is ashamed when miss Leefolt calls Aibileen’s bathroom dirty and infected with disease, not so much because of the negative and racist utterances, but more because she knows that Mae Mobley hears it. As mentioned in the characterization of Aibileen, she refers to her change after Treelore’s death as a bitter seed being planted in her chest. As she joins Skeeter in writing the book, she actively participates in the pursuit of happiness and the American Dream, wishing to better conditions for future generations, and wishing for her to be more successful and doing something better with her life. In the end of the novel, when she leaves the Leefolt house and takes to writing instead, one can interpret that as Aibileen’s American Dream being fulfilled, because she has bettered life for herself, and has contributed to the start of changing things in Jackson.

Minny’s motivations are her own family, mainly her girls, who she wants a better life for. An interesting part in the novel is Minny’s secret want for the truth to be told and her reaction to finally telling her stories.

*Truth. It feels cool, like water washing over my sticky-hot body. Cooling a heat that’s been burning me up all my life (Stockett, 2009: 129).*

*Every time we meet, I complain, I moan. I get mad and throw a hot potato fit. But here’s the thing: I like telling my stories. It feels like I’m doing something about it. When I leave, the concrete in my chest has loosened, melted down so I can breathe for a few days (Stockett, 2009: 218).*

These quotes show a theme in the novel, which is written between the lines. Racial discrimination and racism are central themes in *The Help*, but neither Minny nor Aibileen come out to themselves or each other and state that they are treated unjust according to their race, or that their situation is unfair. They do not verbalise the anger and frustration, yet the reader senses it throughout the novel. The mentioning of the different violent racist attacks, which invokes fear in all three protagonists, provide not only the logical and realistic background for the story, but also reminds the reader of the real fears and dangers the three protagonists face. Stockett uses short sentences here and there, thoughts of the protagonists to a given situation, to mark the anger, helplessness and disempowerment that Minny and Aibileen feel in their lives, but she does not dedicate entire chapters or paragraphs for Minny’s and Aibileen’s thoughts about the racial situation in Jackson. The subtle, and therefore also powerful, hints to their suppressed anger are fuelled into a drive and passion for the book “Help” to be published, and as Minny describes it in the quotation above, their participation by telling their stories allows Minny to breathe.

Minny and Aibileen do not regret having told or published their stories despite the rumours in Jackson. This suggests that Minny and Aibileen have decided that their pursuit of happiness is more important than their safety, and the lives they are living before the book are no longer able to satisfy them. Their want for change has changed them, and they cannot look back but have to move forward to become successful. As described in the theory chapter on meritocracy and the American Dream, this pursuit of success and to better one’s life are the key elements of the American Dream. Furthermore, when looking at the ideas of meritocracy, which as mentioned earlier are ideally key concepts of the American Dream, Minny and Aibileen want to change the lives of their loved ones into a more meritocratic society.

As mentioned in the historical frame, most black people sought only the ideas of meritocracy for themselves, believing that when becoming an equal American citizen, their pursuit could come to an end. This idea goes hand in hand with Minny’s and Aibileen’s wishes for their futures, wanting only to better their lives and not to be discriminated and treated as inferior. They don’t express grandiose dreams of becoming president or wealthy, but focus on their pride and a better future for their children.

## The book “Help” and its importance for the narrative and the pursuit of happiness

The book written by Skeeter with the help of Aibileen and Minny has two different angles of importance, which both help guide the reader and help the three protagonists. Aibileen enlightens both Skeeter and the reader with her son Treelore’s ideas of a book as well as the dangers connoted to writing it.

*He read this book call Invisible Man. When he done, he say he gone write down what it is like to be colored working for a white man in Mississippi (Stockett, 2009: 85).*

*Don’t she know how dangerous this could be, talking about this while the whole world can see us? “Exactly what kind a stories you think you gone hear?” “ What you get paid, how they treat you”… She looks excited, like this is some kind a game. For a second, I think I might be more mad than I am tired (Stockett, 2009: 102*)

It starts out as Skeeter’s want for an interesting theme for a book, which then evolves into the more ideological want for change. Skeeter seems innocent and unaware of the dangerousness of her idea, while Aibileen is completely aware of the dangerousness and therefore initially rejects the idea. However, a seed has been planted, which becomes more and more compelling for Aibileen, who after a confrontation with Hilly Holbrook agrees and get’s Minny and the other maids aboard.

The book serves as a “red thread” for the reader, given that the book needs to be finished at a certain date, and that there is a beginning, middle and end within the story due to the book, which also begins in the beginning, then evolves with the maids through the narrative and then is finally published towards the end of the book, resulting in the firing of Aibileen and the job offer for Skeeter, thereby creating an ending for the narrative. When looking at the role of the book from a theoretical standpoint, the theory of teleology is applicable and interesting. As described in the theory chapter, teleology deals with objects that develop, and Telos is the concept of a perfect object. In this case, the book is the object developing, and through the narrative, the book becomes perfected when it is published and Hilly Holbrook reads the chapter, which makes her denounce the book being from Jackson, saving the maids of Jackson. Therefore, the “Help” is developed throughout the narrative towards its Telos.

What is subsequently interesting about the book is its importance for the protagonists, because it contributes individual meaning to them. For Skeeter, it is both a nostalgic remembrance and a carrier opportunity, where for Aibileen and Minny, it is a more ideological meaning. Aibileen has the least to loose, given her age and the fact that she has no one to support financially. Her want for change is the most ideological of the three protagonists, writing her stories because she wishes something better for “society” both white and black. She ends up with bettering her life due to the publishing of the book “Help”, but she did not expect or plan for it. Minny however, contributes with her stories for the sake of her children, who she does not want to grow up like her. She is the black figure who symbolizes the pursuit of the American Dream the most, because she actively wants to better her life and become successful despite the consequences.

Skeeter is the perfect example of a white woman pursuing the American Dream, because she is let down because of her sex in the beginning, but chooses a dangerous path in order to become a recognized author, and then chooses to move to New York in order to fulfil her dreams in the end. Thereby, the book “Help” becomes the important “red thread” not only for the plot guiding the reader, but also for the protagonists, being the object that symbolizes their pursuit of the American Dream.

The development and unfolding of the book “Help” gives insight to the important events in the narrative, that help shape both the protagonists’ motivations and the frame around the plot, because the book ties the lives of the protagonists together.

The first important event is in the beginning of the novel, where the white women are playing bridge, and Hilly Holbrook presents the Home-Help- Sanitation-Initiative (an initiative claiming that black and white people can infect each other with different diseases through bathroom hygiene), where Aibileen narrates, that Skeeter chooses to confront miss Holbrook, and that Skeeter does not agree with miss Holbrook, while the other white women silently concur with miss Holbrook. This event shows the reader that Skeeter is different and more likeable than the other white women. Skeeter then asks Aibileen (privately, in the kitchen) whether she wouldn’t want to change things if she could. This fortifies the idea that Skeeter is not racist and is different from the other white characters. When Skeeter then presents the idea of the book, the reader is not surprised, which leads to the second important event; Aibileen’s confrontation with miss Holbrook, which leads to her participation in writing the book.

After these two important events, the foundation for the book and the motivation for the book have been established. The third important event, which fuels the motivation and wrath among the other black maids, is the unjust imprisoning of miss Holbrook’s maid, Yule May, who ends up doing much more time than usual due to miss Holbrook. This fuels the other maids into participating with their stories, thereby completing the book. The fourth and final important event is miss Holbrook’s rejection of the book being from Jackson as an attempt to save her own reputation. This event is what “perfects” the book, because this event spurs on the later occurring changes, which were the motivations for the book. Interestingly, miss Holbrook is to blame for her own discredit and failure, since she is the antagonist in all four important events leading to the perfection of the book.

## Conclusion to chapter

As mentioned in the introduction to the analysis, *The Help* is portrayed as an empowerment of black woman working as maids in the 1960’s and their want/quest for change and achieving/pursuing the American Dream. The analysis of the protagonists and the other characters reveals that Stockett is ambivalent in her portraits of Minny and Aibileen. She portrays them as strong with true values and as sharp contrasts to their white selfish employers, while simultaneously reducing them to helpless victims, who are saved by the white heroine, whose intentions are partly selfish too. Stockett glorifies Aibileen and Minny, which can be seen as the solution to writing about taboo-like subject such as racism and internalised racism. The discussion chapter will examine Stockett’s intentions, background and perspective, and look at her motives and qualifications for writing *The Help*. Interestingly, the intentions in *The Help* are perceived differently if it is written from an ethnocentric or culture centred perspective. The findings in the discussion will help conclude on the ambivalence in Stockett’s portraits of the characters.

# 

# Discussion

## Introduction to chapter

Kathryn Stockett divides her female characters in *The Help* into two categories; Black and White. The discussions in this thesis concerns Stockett’s portrait of the black characters, because even though the black characters are portrayed as truer and more virtuous, they are also described from a certain perspective. The two perspectives important for the discussion are the ethnocentric perspective and the culture centred perspective. There are both depictions that seem described from a culture centred and an ethnocentric perspective. These passages will be thoroughly examined and discussed, in order to establish, whether Stockett is writing majorly from the ethnocentric or the culture centred perspective. Interestingly, the perception of the portrait of the black women changes, when considering that the portrait could be made out of stereotype assumptions as well as white persons perception of black persons’ feelings about themselves. Moreover, the reception of the novel when published will be looked at, to further discuss whether this novel’s audience is black, white or the general population of America.

## Stockett’s background

To establish Kathryn Stockett’s understanding of the characters in Jackson, Stockett’s background is vital. Her background helps determine whether Stockett has knowledge of and personal experience with issues of racial discourse. In an article written by Stockett, she explains that she was born in 1969 in Jackson, Mississippi, and that she adored the housekeeper and nanny, Demetrie, who was with their family for 32 years. In the article, she describes Demetrie as loving and caring, and there are many resemblances to the character Aibileen in *The Help*. Stockett describes their relationship, and explains that;

*It was probably the most intimate relationship I’ve ever had with someone who wasn’t related to me. And yet, as much as we loved Demetrie, she had a separate bathroom located on the outside of the house. I never once sat down to eat with her at the table. I never saw her – except the day she lay in her coffin – dressed in anything but that white uniform. I am ashamed to admit that it took me 20 years to realise the irony of that relationship. I’m sure that’s why I wrote my novel, The Help – to find answers to my questions, to soothe my own mind about Demetrie (Stockett, 2009: Daily Mail).*

Stockett’s background shows, that she has always been on the ”white” side of the racial discourse and that she writes *The Help* due to her own want to voice her childhood and upbringing. She attempts to describe the black characters in *The Help* with respect for the nostalgic memory of her childhood nanny, yet is in conflict with her cultural perspective do to her upbringing and lack of life experience as a minority. The results of Stockett’s attempts to describe the black characters Aibileen and Minny in *The Help* will be discussed below.

## Stockett’s perspective

This discussion examines different situations from the novel *The Help* where the black maids are portrayed. Many of the same situations chosen for the analysis will be used for this discussion, implementing the findings of the analysis. The objective is to discuss, whether the black maids are portrayed from a cultural centred or ethnocentric perspective, which is not a conclusive task, since there are parts of portraits, which include both perspectives. This discussions objective is not to conclude on whether the situations are completely cultural centred or ethnocentric, but to examine how the situations are perceived from the two perspectives, and if Stockett generally portrays the characters from a more ethnocentric or more culturally centred perspective. The results of these portraits will be discussed in the next chapter.

If Stockett were using a culture centred perspective, Brummett would argue that Stockett needed to contemplate over the values, artefacts and symbols from the African American culture, and view them from the African American cultures perspective. When Aibileen describes the cockroach as “blacker than me” (Stockett, 2009: 189), she refers to herself as black, and in some way compares herself to the cockroach. The notion of internalised racism thereby appears, and the situation is a good example of internalised racism, because as explained in the theory chapter, the effects of internalised racism are those of self-hatred and the want to become the oppressor. When Aibileen has the shoe in her hand, wanting to kill the cockroach, and defining the cockroach as “blacker”, she exemplifies internalised racism by oppressing and targeting something that is even blacker than herself, which can be slightly related to the situation mentioned in the theory chapter of the Mexican Americans practicing the “defensive othering”. It is difficult to regard this situation as cultural centred; given that it seems highly unlikely that African American culture views African Americans as relatable to cockroaches. The fact that this situation has given way to criticism by the African American community furthers that this situation is written from an ethnocentric perspective. An ethnocentric perspective would explain, that Stockett is trying to describe the hardship and the unjustness or inequalities in society by comparing Aibileen to a cockroach, which is an ill-seen and detested rodent, as a way of showing how society regards the black people in Jackson in the 1960’s.

The situation where Minny ends up drawing the social lines between white and black people to miss Celia is significant. This situation can both be seen as another example of internalised racism, but can also be seen as a number of different things. As described in the history chapter, many members of the black community acknowledged the theories of Malcolm X. Malcolm X and the NOI believed that segregation was important for the African Americans, that they should seek to be with their “own” instead of white people. *The Help* says nothing of Minny’s and Aibileen’s political persuasions, but mentions that both women are religious and that they speak of dr. King.

If Minny herself believes that the best way to live together in a society is to be divided, then it is not necessarily an example of internalised racism, but an example of her own political beliefs. The quote by Minny used in the analysis (1.quote on page 40) could be indicatory that Minny herself does not want to be in a colour-blind society. This situation can therefore be seen as written from a culture centred perspective, because Minny’s political persuasions are indeed indicative of a large part of the African American culture in the 1960’s. However, if Minny is drawing up the social lines from an inferior perception of self, this situation is an example of internalised racism, which can be deemed both ethnocentric and culture centred, given that internalised racism is a topic verbalised by both perspectives. Therefore this situation shows the duality and variety in Stockett’s portraits of Minny and Aibileen. One might argue that given the large amount of ethnocentric perspectives in other situations in *The Help*, this example is another example of the ethnocentric perspective. However, as mentioned earlier in the discussion, this discussion does not aim to conclude whether all the situations in the novel are either ethnocentric or culture centred. This situation is complicated, showing that these situations can be viewed from both perspectives.

The situation with the Terrible Awful seems both humorous and defiant on the surface. However, when regarding the actual situation, what happened and by whom to whom, the Terrible Awful is a complicated situation. Minny chooses to shit in a cake and serve it to miss Hilly Holbrook as a desperate act of defiance and revenge. The aftermath is not as serious as Minny expects and ends up using the situation as a weapon against miss Holbrook. Yet, when analysing the situation, Stockett portrays Minny as a human being, who would actually shit in a cake. When looking at it from that perspective, disregarding what the Terrible Awful comes to stand for, Stockett is actually saying a lot about Minny as a person by portraying her as a person who would shit in a cake for revenge. In today’s western civilization it would be deemed the act of a disturbed, mentally ill person, who would be incarcerated or hospitalized, not praised or glorified as a patron of change.

One of the findings in the analysis is the stereotypical portrait of Minny and Aibileen. As explained in the theory chapter, these stereotypes were created and kept alive by white people through history in order to explain and justify the oppression of the African Americans. By depicting Aibileen with classic Mammy features and Minny with classic Angry Black Woman features, the perspective comes off as ethnocentric. Stockett underlines this by Minny’s statement, that her anger and temper is part of her, using the white people’s explanations and justifications to characterize Minny.

## The consequences of Stockett’s perspective

Despite Stockett glorifying the traits of Aibileen and Minny, Stockett’s choice to describe them with their own voices and thoughts creates a problem for Stockett. She writes from a majorly ethnocentric perspective, and uses stereotypes to characterize both Minny and Aibileen. The result is that white readers easily relate and favour all three protagonists, because they behave as expected. By portraying Skeeter as the white, somewhat feministic heroine, who differs from the stay-at-home wives of Jackson, she is seen as strong and independent, yet sensitive and caring. Her passion for her book and helping the black maids gives the “white” reader the impression similar to a civil rights activist, who is willing to sacrifice her own chance at love and friends to change things and pursue the American Dream. Aibileen is portrayed with the Mammy-like features displayed all over American in books, TV-series and films (e.g. *Gone with the Wind* and *to Kill a Mockingbird*), while Minny is the Angry Black woman, often seen in TV shows such as *Amos n Andy* and various films and series portraying black women from “ghettos”. Therefore, *The Help* appeals to “white” readers, following a structure similar to *to Kill a Mockingbird* where a white protagonist guides the reader through the taboo-like subjects and saves the day.

The glorification of Aibileen and Minny provide a solution to writing about a taboo-like subject, yet the heavily ethnocentric and stereotypic characterizations of them leaves the impression of subtly being condescending. Probably unintentionally, Stockett ends up denigrating Aibileen and Minny by using stereotypes and by using their own perspectives, when these perspectives are clouded by Stockett’s ethnocentric perspective. African American readers have been less impressed by *The Help*, which will be looked at below.

## The reception of *the Help*

The ABC News wrote an article in 2011, stating that Abilene Cooper, the longtime nanny of Kathryn Stockett’s brother, sued Kathryn Stockett for 75.000 dollars. The reason was, that Abilene Cooper is certain that the character Aibileen is based on her. This thesis does not contemplate over the truth or falseness of these legal actions, but finds it interesting what Abilene Cooper thinks of the novel and the alleged portrait of her.

*The Help compares Aibileen’s skin colour to a cockroach: ‘He black,’ Abilene says of the insect, ‘blacker than me. How can Kathryn live with herself after writing that? How can a person be that cruel? 'I think she is just a racist. She claims she respects black people but she just ran all over me’ (Churcher, 2011: Mail Online).*

This statement about Stockett being racist from Abilene’s point of view is interestingly sharp. Reading the interview, it seems that Abilene believes that Stockett is being racist, not merely because of the situation with the cockroach, but also because of Stockett’s alleged treatment of her. However, Stockett’s alleged ”running over” Abilene cannot necessarily be regarded as a racist act, because it does not necessarily have anything to do with Abilene being black. Abilene finds the situation with the cockroach humiliating. Abilene’s lawyer, Edward Sander, presents an interesting theory about Abilene’s intentions as well as the intent of the novel.

*‘It’s not about money for Abilene. It’s about hypocrisy. The Help’s big appeal is to white people. It makes them feel good because it’s about a white woman who reaches across the racial divide to help poor black servants (Churcher, 2011: Mail Online).*

# This opinion as shared by others. In the article *Kathryn Stockett Is Not My Sister and I Am Not Her Help* in the Feminist Wire, Professor of American Studies at Macalester College, Duchess Harris, accuses *The Help* of being borderline ridiculous. Harris is of the opinion that Stockett has used her own imagination to depict the black characters, rather than written non-fictional memoirs or interviews with black maids from the 1960’s. Harris accuses Stockett of being ignorant of the real lives of black women in Jackson in the 1960’s, and that *The Help* is truly about the feminist, relatable white woman, Skeeter. Harris points out, that the reader is supposed to empathise with Skeeter (e.g. over the loss of her maid), despite the fact that she has endured no hardship and is no true civil rights activist, but more a typical white woman, leaving her black helpers behind as soon as she has gotten what she needed from them to enhance her own carrier.

# *And the result is that* The Help *isn’t for Black women at all, and quickly devolves into just another novel by and for white women. (Duchess, 2011)*

## *The Help’s* resemblance to other popular fictional novels about race in USA

In *The Help* there are references to other popular fictional novels such as *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison and *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell. As Harris mentions in her article *Kathryn Stockett Is Not My Sister and I Am Not Her Help* there is much resemblance to another very popular American fictional novel, *to Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. This chapter looks into two of the novels; *to Kill a Mockingbird* and *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. The motive is to look at the two novels in relation to *The Help* to establish the similarities and differences in the cultural perspectives used to characterize the African American characters in the novels. Importantly, an African American wrote *Invisible Man*, while *to Kill a Mockingbird* was written by a white American.

In *The Help*, Aibileen refers to *Invisible Man* as the source of her son’s idea for a book about working for a white employer. This idea is then followed through by Skeeter. This gives the reader the idea that *The Help* is somewhat similar to *Invisible Man*, or shares themes or traits.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* for which Harper Lee was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, has been and is still a classic American modern novel. It has been used within the American School system, and is often viewed as; “a paragon of anti-racist literature and, therefore, untouchable and sacrosanct.” (Mancini, 2008: 49). However, the Black Educator’s Association has been working to clear t*o Kill a Mockingbird* from schools, because they believe that *to Kill a Mockingbird* misrepresents both African American culture and the antiracist movement of the twentieth century. In *to Kill a Mockingbird* as well as in *The Help*, the white protagonist guides the reader through the “dangerous” territory of racial issues. Furthermore, in both novels the saviour and protector of the African Americans is white, giving the impression, that it was white people who led the antiracist movement and the civil rights movement, instead of African Americans fighting for their own cause. Both Atticus and Scout are portrayed as independent and strong individuals who are not afraid to be disconnected from their own social society, which is similarly portrayed in Skeeter in *The Help*. Interestingly, the very quote (quoted below), which defines *to Kill a Mockingbird*, has been misinterpreted by white readers and given a false sense of the novel being a literary antiracist statement.

*‘Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don’t eat up people’s gardens, don’t nest in corncribs, they don’t do one thing but sing hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird’ (Lee, 2004: 98).*

The critics of *to Kill a Mockingbird* argue, that the resemblance between the mockingbirds and the African Americans is not an acknowledgement of equal rights and respect for the African Americans. The mockingbirds, which symbolize the entire African American population, are described as beautiful and harmless creatures, which are not to be tormented and treated cruelly. (Mancini, 2008: 50) This statement positions the African Americans not as equals, but as valued “animals”, meaning that the quote does not speak of the racist social order itself, but speaks of the on-going violent and cruel treatments of the African Americans in the 1930’s. In a way, the quote states that African Americans are to be valued and unharmed, yet fails to state anything about the equality of white and black people. *The Help* differs from this perspective, focusing on change and the want for equality.

The society in Jackson is portrayed as unjust and narrow-minded, thereby highlighting and glorifying the qualities of the protagonists. The explanation hereof could be that in *to Kill a Mockingbird*, which takes place in the 1930’s, no true change in society has yet taken place, and the government as well as the public was not yet faced with the many protests and media coverage, which has taken place for at few years in the 1960’s, where *The Help* takes place. As mentioned in the historical frame, the 1960’s became a turning point, where both black and white civil rights activists were demonstrating, which was televised and gave the general public a visual of the way African Americans were treated, which then gave way to desegregation legislation. The different historical frames, which the two novels are written within, must be considered when comparing the novels. It seems more natural that a novel taking place in the 1960’s thematises equality, because of the heavy discourse about equality going on in the 1960’s. Both novels speak of the unjust racist society, and focus on a white protagonist to save the African Americans.

*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison from 1952 addresses the complicated racial issues of the early 20th century such as internalised racism and identity, namely black identity, incorporating and illustrating the results of Washington T. Booker’s racial policies and ideas. When *Invisible Man* is mentioned in *The Help*, it becomes a sort of precursor for “Help” to the reader (who doesn’t have prior knowledge of *Invisible Man*). The similarities between *The Help* and *Invisible Man* are few and are somewhat far-fetched, but due to the role of *Invisible Man* in *The Help*, they will be examined hereunder.

Internalised racism is a dominant theme in *Invisible Man*, where the nameless protagonist is repeatedly finding himself unable to live up to the expectations of his immediate social group, not fitting in anywhere because he is in inner conflict with his ideas of himself as a black man and lacking a true identity. He is faced with the racism of others as well as his own inferior thoughts of self, resulting in the protagonist not fitting in in any of his immediate social groups, leading to his invisibility. Internalised racism is similarly a theme in *The Help*, which is exemplified by Minny drawing up the social lines between miss Celia and herself, yet is not as dominant a theme. The intended reader for the Help is the white female where Invisible Man appeals to the male African American, providing a large difference between the receptions of the novels. *The Help* is a popular bestseller protest novel while *Invisible Man* uses symbolism and imagery in a less restrictive way. The American Dream is an important theme and motivator in both novels, yet where in *The Help* the American Dream is (to a degree) attained by all three protagonists, the protagonist in *Invisible Man* accepts his “invisibility” and after many years of pursuing the American Dream, he comes to realise that he was never a candidate for the American Dream.

## Conclusion to chapter

Kathryn Stockett portrays the white protagonist Skeeter as a heroine, resulting in a denigration of black protagonists Aibileen and Minny, who are portrayed as strong, independent women, yet needs a white woman to save them. The negative reception of *The Help* among African Americans underlines the fact that Stockett uses stereotypes to portray Minny and Aibileen. Additionally, the critique strengthens the conclusion that Stockett is writing majorly from an ethnocentric perspective, which can be seen in her characterizations of Minny and Aibileen as well as her choice of Skeeter as heroine.

# 

# 

# Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* intends to be a novel about the struggles and lives of black maids in the 1960’s, embodying their voices and expressing their want for change and their individual pursuit of the American Dream. The rhetoric analysis of *the Help* shows, that Stockett divides the society of the town Jackson into black and white, good and evil. This enhances her glorification of Aibileen and Minny, who are portrayed as truer and wiser, with the real values such as loving, caring and hard working. The rhetoric analysis shows, that Stockett is consistent in using positive adjectives to describe the black maids, while using negatively connoted words to describe their female employers. The great accentuation of Aibileen’s and Mae Mobley’s relationship as a contrast to Mae Mobley’s relationship to the mother, Elisabeth Leefolt, enhances the division of good and evil further.

Stockett’s portrait of Aibileen is similar to the stereotypic Mammy figure, and Minny is portrayed as the stereotypical “Angry Black Woman”. The use of these stereotypes to describe Aibileen and Minny leaves the impression, that the intended reader is a white female, who recognizes and identifies with the white heroine, Skeeter, while acknowledging and accepting Aibileen and Minny, because they are portrayed exactly the way, that the white female reader imagines and expects.

Skeeter plays a central part in the narrative, because she ends up becoming the heroine. However, when looking at what happens in the novel and not how it is depicted, Skeeter is actually pursuing her own American Dream of success and freedom, and ends up leaving Jackson and the black maids behind to fulfil her dream of becoming a writer. The actual events are contradictory to how it is described in the novel, because the reader initially gets the impression that Skeeter is a sort of white civil rights activist, who is willing to sacrifice herself and her own chances in life in order to help the black maids. Stockett described, that she felt that most civil rights literature was from a male perspective, and that that left a territory, which was not covered much (Harris, 2011: Feminist Wire). This statement about Stockett wanting to voice the female perspectives is somewhat contradictory when regarding her depiction of Aibileen and Minny as African American stereotypes. This leads to speculation about her cultural perspective.

Stockett’s cultural perspective is primarily ethnocentric due to the use of stereotypes and language. The rhetorical analysis shows that Stockett’s use of language provides the reader with a helpful division of white and black characters, but subsequently creates a prejudicial undertone. Aibileen is skilled in writing, and was taught in school, yet is simultaneously portrayed with a stereotypical “black” uneducated accent. The result of Stockett’s ethnocentric perspective is a novel, which, like *to Kill a Mockingbird*, sets out to be anti-racist, but subsequently becomes a partly racist portrait of African Americans due to the heavy use of stereotypes. By portraying African Americans as other people see them, instead of how they see themselves, the portrait becomes lacking and wrongful. Interestingly, Stockett does not depict Aibileen and Minny negatively. She glorifies Aibileen and Minny. It is the way that she portrays them, the way that she describes they feel about themselves and experience different situations, which is stereotypic and ultimately leads to an ethnocentric perspective.

# Literature List

## Books

Brummett, Barry, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*, Sage Publications, 2006

Bulmer and Solomos, *Racism*, Oxford University Press, 1999

Candice Mancini, *Social Issues in Literature: Racism in Harper Lee’s To Kill A Mockingbird*, The Gale Group, 2008

Dubois, W.E.B. *The souls of black folk,* Bedford Books, 1997

Ellison, Ralph, *Invisible Man*, Bikki Books, 2015

Freud, Sigmund, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, Vintage Books, 1918

Harris Perry, Mellissa V., *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, Yale University Press, 2011

Lee, Harper, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Vintage, 2004

McNamee and miller Jr., *The Meritocracy Myth*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014

Niro, Brian, *Race*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003

Painter, Nell Irvin, *Creating Black Americans*, Oxford University Press, 2006,

Stockett, Kathryn, *The Help*, Penguin, 2009

Weber, Max, *Max Weber Readings and Commentary on Modernity*, Blackwell Publishing, 2005

## Articles (Including WebArticles)

Churcher, Sharon, “Her family hired me as a maid for 12 years but then she stole my life and made it a Disney movie”, Mail Online, 2011 (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2033369/Her-family-hired-maid-12-years-stole-life-Disney-movie.html>) last seen 18/5/2015

Harris, Duchess, “Kathryn Stockett Is Not My Sister and I Am Not Her Help”, Feminist Wire, 2011 (<http://thefeministwire.com/2011/08/kathryn-stockett-is-not-my-sister-and-i-am-not-her-help/>) last seen 18/5/2015

Pyke, Karen D, Sociological Perspectives, Vol. 53, Issue 4, pp. 551–572, “WHAT IS INTERNALIZED RACIAL OPPRESSION AND WHY DON’T WE STUDY IT? ACKNOWLEDGING RACISM’S HIDDEN INJURIES”, Pacific Sociological Association, 2010

Steinberg, Sybil, “Book Review: 'The Help' by Kathryn Stockett”, Washington Post, 2009 (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/31/AR2009033103552.html>) last seen 18/5/2015

Stockett, Kathryn, “This Life: Kathryn Stockett on her childhood in the Deep South”, The Daily Mail, 2009 (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-1199603/This-Life-Kathryn-Stockett-childhood-Deep-South.html>) last seen 18/5/2015

## WebPages and Search Engines

Denstoredanske.dk

Oxforddictionaries.com

1. The book ”Help” written in *The Help* is shown with inverted commas to prevent confusion [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This thesis’ definition of myth is a widely held but false idea or belief, as defined in the Oxford Dictionary ( [↑](#footnote-ref-2)