The Representation of Three Characters in *The Help*
- A Patronising Highlighting of Black People

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Abstract

This essay argues that *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett highlights black people in a patronising way. In order to analyse the novel a postcolonial perspective has been applied. The novel is an example of narratives of difference and the representation of the characters Miss Skeeter, Minny and Aibileen increases and enhances the differences between people. The coloured people are described as the other, whereas the whites are seen as the norm. Moreover, the essay includes a didactic part, which discusses how to teach a novel like *The Help* in a multicultural classroom.
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1. Introduction

“Ever morning, until you dead in the ground, you gone have to make this decision . . . You gone have to ask yourself, *Am I gone believe what them fools say about me today?*” (Stockett 63).

The novel *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett was released in 2009 and became a bestseller. In 2011 the book also became a successful and popular movie. *The Help*, both the book and the movie, bring up the race issue in Southern US, although this paper will focus on the novel. The main characters are the white journalist Miss Skeeter and the two black maids Aibileen and Minny. Miss Skeeter wants to write a book about the relationship between the black maids and their employers from the point of view of the help, something no one has ever done before. For her assistance Aibileen and Minny tell her their stories. Throughout the novel we get to know the women, both in their own words and from the point of view of the others, since each chapter is narrated by one of the three.

*The Help* is a captivating novel. It is a work of fiction, however it is closely and realistically linked to a number of social and political issues. The book deals with racism, which has, for a long time, been a complex subject. It is still as important to discuss as it always has been. For a white writer from Southern US, it can be a real challenge to write about a topic like racism, especially for Stockett, who tries to highlight the black people’s situation. On the one hand, the story is really moving and beautifully written, but on the other hand, the stereotypes and the patronising attitude towards the black characters, makes the book reinforce the feeling of “us and them”. This makes the book problematic. Stockett indicates that she is aware of the challenging task she has in front of her and she says “what I *am* sure about is this: I don’t
presume to think that I know what it really felt like to be a black woman in Mississippi, especially in the 1960s” (Stockett 451).

The aim is to investigate to what extent the representation of the three characters, Miss Skeeter, Aibileen and Minny, reproduce the white people as superior in trying to help the passive and objectified coloured people. Kathryn Stockett claims in her homepage that her intention with the book is to highlight the relationship between white and black people in Southern US in the 1960s, writing in the voices of two African-American maids. In an afterword to the novel she states that “I was scared, a lot of the time, that I was crossing a terrible line, writing in the voice of a black person. I was afraid I would fail to describe a relationship that was so intensely influential in my life, so loving, so grossly stereotyped in American history and literature” (Stockett 450). She names her afterword “too little, too late” and perhaps that is a well-suited title, because the contradictions that occur in The Help make her purpose significantly ambiguous. The way she represents the black maids is sometimes really downgrading. To write a few lines about how scared she was to fail describing the relationship does not make this more acceptable. Therefore, I will argue that this is yet another novel where a white author tries to write about racism, and where the outcome results in the representation of white people trying to help the coloured people in a patronising way. It should be mentioned that in this context “patronizing” means to speak down to others or to treat others with condescension. I am well aware that it is not only the coloured people who are objectified in the book, but also the white people. Nevertheless, this paper will mostly focus on the black maids, although Miss Skeeter will be a part of the analysis.

Moreover, the essay will contain a didactic part dealing with how The Help could be used in upper secondary schools in Sweden. The syllabus for English says, “students should be given
the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket 2011). Furthermore, in the Curriculum for the upper secondary school, norms and values are listed, and according to the Education Act,

The education should be carried out in accordance with fundamental democratic values and human rights, covering the inviolability of people, the freedom and integrity of the individual, the equal value of all people, gender equality and solidarity between people.

The school should actively and consciously influence and stimulate students into embracing the shared values of our society, and encourage their expression in practical daily action. (Curriculum for the upper secondary school 10)

These areas are important to take into account in teaching, and the novel stresses many of the issues. For instance, as mentioned earlier, racism is one of the main themes in the book. In addition, persons such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King are discussed. Moreover, The Civil Rights Movement and Ku Klux Klan are not to be forgotten. Therefore, ideas how to deal with and teach these topics will be presented.

The essay will contain seven further sections. Initially, postcolonial theory and narratives of difference will be discussed. Next, the representation of key characters in The Help will be examined, which will be followed by the representation of Miss Skeeter, Minny and Aibileen. Thereafter, a didactic part will be included in the paper, where ideas how to teach a novel like The Help in upper secondary schools will be presented. Finally, there will be brief conclusion.
2. Postcolonial Theory and Narratives of Difference

In *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, the term postcolonial is used “to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). They argue that postcolonial theory emerged because of the need to address different practices since there are no “universal features of language, epistemologies or value systems” (11). They claim that literature from the U.S. should be included in this category (2). Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt agree about this conclusion, stated in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States. Race, Ethnicity and Literature* that the U.S. may actually be seen as the first postcolonial country. Furthermore, Justin D. Edwards states in *Postcolonial Literature. A Readers’ guide to essential criticism* that “in the United States and former European colonies, slavery and racism produced a hegemonic white culture that enforced its system and values on the non-white population, and the non-white populations both obeyed and resisted those system and values” (24). These ideas are parts of the thematic of the novel and will be valid in the analysis.

In this context it should be mentioned that Singh and Schmidt discuss borders, and in U.S. ethnic and cultural history “‘borders’ mean both examples of internal stratification within an ethnicity or a nation and the ways in which cultural differences may be used to define transnational connections and tensions” (7). Singh and Schmidt examine how these borders mark, for instance, colour, class and social status as they examine narratives of ethnic difference. They state that, “these narratives of difference are narratives of the American nightmare rather than the American dream – ways of marking individuals and people with cultural and/or genetic traits make them threatening aliens” (8). These constructions of ethnic
and cultural difference are clear expressions of how the binary opposition Self and Other works. As Ashcroft et al argue,

In order to maintain authority over the Other in a colonial situation, imperial discourse strives to delineate the Other as radically different from the self, yet at the same time it must maintain sufficient identity with the Other to valorise control over it. The Other can, of course, only be constructed out of the archive of ‘the Self’, yet the self must also articulate the Other as inescapably different.

(103)

These notions will be further discussed, since The Help is an example of narratives of difference and exaggerates the mechanism of the self and the other. As Singh and Schmidt say, it could be a narrative of the American nightmare (8).

Kinga Varga-Dobai mentions in “Gender Issues in Multicultural Children’s Literature – Black and Third-World Feminist Critiques of Appropriation, Essentialism and Us/Other Binary Oppositions” that when an outsider speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves emphasizes imperialism, and often when white Western authors write about non-Western cultures or minority groups, they describe those cultures as binary contrasts to the west (144). She continues with, “binary oppositions … are based on an essentialist view that there is a unified, unique, coherent and unchanging essence and the core of an individual” (144). Moreover, Chandra Talpade Mohanty says in “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” that this essentialist view assumes that women are “an already constituted coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial locations and contradictions” (336-337). However, coloured or third-world women are described as “ignorant, poor, uneducated, traditions-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized”, who are “in contrast to the implicit self-representation of Western women as
educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions“ (337). These assumptions about white and coloured women will be crucial in the analysis.

Furthermore, this division between people and “othering” of black people are stressed in the article “Dirty South: The Help and the Problem of Black Bodies”, which is a critical review written by Tikenya Foster-Singletary. She discusses many of the issues that the novel brings up. For instance, she argues that the representation of a number of events make the segregation between white and black people even bigger. One example is how Minny is described in the book. She represents wild blackness, her body is abnormal and she cannot control her mouth. “She is too much – too much woman to be a lady, too much mouth for a maid, too black for her own good” (100). Foster-Singletary mentions that Stockett might have fallen into a trap, where the black women actually do not speak for themselves, but rather remain as icons (106) and that their blackness deny their individual humanity (101). In addition, Wallace-Sanders mentions in “Every Child Left Behind. The Many Invincible Children in The Help”, that “the chapters written from Aibileen’s or Minny’s points of view reflect little of their own inner lives as black women or as working mothers” (69). By contrast, whiteness is seldom “recognized as an explicit identity, except in relation to those it excludes”, says Chris Weedon in Identity and Culture. Narratives of Difference and Belonging. He mentions that whiteness, is assumed to be natural and the norm. This practice of assuming the universality of whiteness as a marker of quintessentially human has deep roots in the development of Western culture since the Renaissance. One of its outcomes has been white supremacy: the belief in the natural superiority of white people. (15)
Pearl McHaney examines *The Help* in her article “Kathryn Stockett’s Postmodern First Novel”, and she mentions, “one critique of *The Help* is that it takes the racial terror out of the 1960s by ignoring the bombings, shootings, and beatings and replacing the Ku Klux Klan with snotty Junior Leaguers who were mean to their maids” (80). However, according to McHaney, the criticism is inappropriate, since Stockett’s intention was not to write a historically factual text, but a work of fiction (81). Nevertheless, McHaney argues that the novel received critique in a number of other categories, such as the language and the characters. She mentions, for instance, that an editor once tried to change the dialogues in the novel. However, Stockett claimed that she wanted the African American characters distinct from the white characters, because that is how they sounded in her memory. Stockett explained, “of course she couldn’t have Minny speaking like a white socialite”. However, in the book, she never gives an explanation why the novel contains different dialects (McHaney 82). To separate characters by their speech is a well-known problem and in *The Language of Postcolonial Literatures. An Introduction*, Ismail S. Talib mentions that to use pidgin in a novel could indicate a character’s lack of education, as Mohanty says coloured people are portrayed to be (337), although it can also be a way to create a feeling of realism (Talib 140). This constructs difference among people, and Edwards says that structures of difference are sustained by the “myths of the racial and cultural purity” (140). By dividing people into such groups, is once again a construction of narratives of difference. In addition, the people’s personal values might be forgotten. This could be linked to how stereotypes emerge.

Stereotypes are regularly based on “incorrect notions” and “ignore individual variation” say Karen A. Kit, Holly A. Tuokko and Catherine A. Mateer in “A Review of the Stereotype Threat Literature and Its Application in a Neurological Population” (132). However, often
people see themselves in another way compared to how others define them (Weedon 14). Depending on for example, social status and traits, people are divided into different groups. Susan V. Donaldson mentions in “‘A Stake in the Story’ Kathryn Stockett’s The Help, Ellen Douglas’s Can’t Quit You, Baby, and the Politics of Southern Storytelling”, that stereotypes of mammyes in stories were common after the American Civil War (46). In addition, Wallace-Sanders says that “one of the most consistent traits assigned to the stereotypic mammy character is that, over her own children, she demonstrates a strong preference for the white children of the families who own or employ her” (66). She also mentions that “The Help affirms the stereotype of black mothers as harsh and punishing with their own children” (68).

Since one of the aims with the thesis is to present ideas how The Help could be used in upper secondary schools, it is important to stress the different interpretations a book may give rise to, depending on several different factors. In the reader response study, “The Divided Reception of The Help” Suzanne W. Jones quotes the reader response theorist Norman Holland:

> As readers, each of us will bring different kinds of external information to bear. Each will seek out the particular themes that concern him. Each will have different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies. (Holland qtd in Jones 23)

Moreover, Jones points out that readers criticise it for “‘disappointing resurrection’ of the Mammy stereotype … the misrepresentation of African American speech and culture … and the ‘misleading’ depiction of black men as abusive and absent” (12). In addition, some readers have the impression of Miss Skeeter being portrayed as naïve, ignorant and weak. They argue that she did not have the courage to take a stand towards her friends’ awful
behaviour against the coloured people. Some have even said that Miss Skeeter was the one who was being saved, not the one who saved others. A reader called Megan claims “I feel like the women who were cleaning the houses gave her the courage to find her own voice and in return she gave them a voice” (Jones 18-19). Valerie Smith mentions in “Black Women’s Memories and The Help” that the novel also could be seen from a perspective where the black people “are used to humanize the liberal white people” (31). In addition, she says that one critique is that the bad white people are seen as racists, where the good white people are not (34).

Nevertheless, some readers of The Help say that the book gives the reader a hopeful and optimistic view of the relationship between white and black people (Jones 18), and Donaldson mentions that many readers identify “with the novel’s message of racial reconciliation and white redemption”, and with Miss Skeeter (45). She states that “Stockett’s novel is ultimately seen by many readers as primarily a story of well-meaning whites, like the novel’s white narrator Miss Skeeter, awakened and transformed by black stories arguing for their common humanity” (45). Edwards, however, argues that “there is always a sense that an opposition is not an innocent structural relation. Rather, it is a power relation, in which one of the oppositions dominate the other” (19).

In the classroom it is vital to problematize constructions of “us and them” says Bo Lundahl in Engelsk Språkdidaktik. Texter, kommunikation, språkutveckling (95), and discussing literary texts may provide a space for this problematizing. In this context, he mentions two problems that could emerge when dealing with racism. The first problem is when teachers begin a lesson with the assumption that some students have racist thoughts. The second problem is when teachers overdo cultural sensitivity. In both cases, Lundahl says, as a result it may
reinforce the feeling of “us and them” (99). Sweden is a multicultural society with individuals that have different needs and experiences, hence every classroom is multicultural since every class has students with, for example, different interests, taste in music, opinions and group constellations. This opens up for the argument that different group constellations do not mean groups only based on ethnicity or culture (Lundahl 95). Lundahl uses the term multiple identities to express that one person belongs to several cultural groups and that ethnicity is just one of them (95). The importance to have knowledge that people have multiple identities is also discussed by Ann-Marie Dunbar in “Between Universalizing and Othering: Develop an Ethics of Reading in the Multicultural American Literature Classroom”. She examines how one could confront two ways of universalizing. The first problem of universalizing is that students conclude that we are all human and therefore we are not different from each other. The second problem is that students come to the conclusion that people that are not the same as he or she are totally different (Dunbar 29). Dunbar continues by pointing out that teachers often put too much effort in discussing constructions of gender, minority groups and stereotypes. She says that it is necessary to get students to realise that whiteness is a construction too, although it could create “discomfort and tension” in the classroom, because “it confronts white students with the uncomfortable reality that even if they are not themselves racist, they continue to benefit from white privilege in countless ways” (Dunbar 42). This kind of awareness may help white students to understand their own position in relation to texts where race is an issue (Dunbar 30). It is here literature becomes important. As Lundahl says, literature makes it possible for people to understand historical, economical and social condition in different parts of the world (404).

Finally, Anna Thyberg states in *Ambiguity and Estrangement: Peer-Led Deliberative Dialogues on Literature in the EFL Classroom* that to choose literature suitable for teaching
purposes is a difficult task and she says that from a postcolonial perspective representation and positioning are the focus (304). Thyberg mentions that provocative texts, such as trauma narratives might result in “intense students reactions even to the point of rejection” (304). However, she argues that “one way to work with such resistance in the EFL-classroom could be to discuss the ethical responsibility of the reader to witness and confirm the experience of the characters in the story and relate it to democracy and human rights issues” (304). These notions will be crucial in the didactic part, since The Help both is a narrative of difference and a trauma narrative. Also, representation and positioning are two of the main themes in the novel.

3. The Representation of Key Characters in The Help

To write in the voices of both a white and two coloured women like Stockett attempts, is a challenging task in itself. Who can you speak for without sounding patronising? Is it even possible? As Kinga Varga-Dobai says, it often emphasizes imperialism when someone speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves (144). In The Help Miss Skeeter is the person who gives Aibileen and Minny voices, although as the reader Megan states, she felt that Aibileen and Minny gave Miss Skeeter a voice (Jones 18-19).

Regardless, Miss Skeeter represents the white and well-educated good person and is, to some extent, described as the hero of black people’s struggle. As Mohanty argues, there are certain characteristics of the self-representation of Western women, which Miss Skeeter lives up to. She is educated, she has the control over her own body and she has the freedom to make her own decisions (Mohanty 337). She is able to write the book. Besides, she gets a job as a writer in New York at the end of the novel, something neither Aibileen nor Minny could ever dream of. By contrast, they represent two versions of the Southern white construction of coloured
women. Mohanty states that coloured people are imagined to be “ignorant, poor, uneducated, traditions-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized” (337). In the novel Aibileen is the one who has the traits to be traditions-bound, domestic and family-oriented, whereas Minny is described as ignorant, poor and victimized. Both of them are described as uneducated and this is supported in the novel by their language, since grammar mistakes are frequently made. Talib mentions that, to use pidgin could indicate a character’s lack of education (140). None of the white people have a dialect. This indicates that to be white is the norm, as Weedon says whiteness often is assumed to be (15). Additionally, this enhances the hegemonic white culture, as Edwards says “the United Stated and former European colonies, slavery and racism produced” (24). Furthermore, in the novel Aibileen and Minny are addressed as just “Aibileen” and “Minny”, whereas Miss Skeeter always is addressed as “Miss”. This implies that the maids are from a lower social class. In fact, every coloured woman in the book is called just by her first name, while most of the white women are called “Miss”. Moreover, the white women do all appear to have different personalities and lives, whereas the maids only seem to be mainly maids. The reader gets to follow Miss Skeeter’s personal life and her life as a writer but the reader never gets to know much about the maids’ lives that does not involve their work. As Wallace-Sanders mentions “the chapters written from Aibileen’s or Minny’s points of view reflect little of their own inner lives as black women or as working mothers” (69).

Consequently, borders are created already from the beginning of the book, and as Singh and Schmidt mention, borders mark for example colour, class and social status (8). This in turn, leads to the construction of Self and Other and narratives of difference, which place the women on different sides of the boarder. These constructions, as Edwards states, are not innocent structural relations, but are in fact rather a power relation (19). Therefore, if the
whites are seen as the dominant group, the coloured people can never be seen as equal. Moreover, to put people into different groups is patronizing and often people become marked for something that does not corresponds with who they are. As Weedon says, often people see themselves in another way compared to who are judging them (14).

3.1 Miss Skeeter

Miss Skeeter is in many ways described as an innocent and well-meaning person. In the beginning of the book she says, “by sixteen I wasn’t just not pretty, I was painfully tall. The kind of tall that puts a girl in the back row of class pictures with the boys. The kind of tall where your mother spends her nights taking down hems, yanking sweater sleeves, flattening your hair for dances you hadn’t been asked to” (Stockett 57). By picturing herself as not pretty and tall could give the reader a harmless view of her, although it could also indicate her as weak, and in need of saving, as Jones says many readers interpreted her to be (18-19). In addition, her behaviour towards her friends exaggerates the feeling of her as weak. For instance, when Miss Skeeter and her friends Hilly and Elizabeth are talking and Aibileen comes to serve them salad, she starts to notice things she had not done before. “Hilly raises her voice about three octaves higher when she talks to colored people. Elizabeth smiles like she’s talking to a child“ (Stockett 157). However, as Jones mentions she never confronts her friends about their bad behaviour and does not stand up for the coloured people, (18-19). Consequently, she is well aware that her friends are othering Aibileen and by not confronting them she lets them continue with their “belief in the natural superiority of white people” (Weedon 15).

Furthermore, Miss Skeeter is described as naïve. When she asks Aibileen if she wants to help her write the book, Aibileen answers “‘Miss Skeeter’, and I say it slow, try to make it count, I
do this with you, I might as well burn my own house down” (Stockett 103). Miss Skeeter does not seem to realise how dangerous it can be for coloured people telling their perspective in the relationship between white and black people. Instead, she thinks about the irony of the relationship between the maids and their employers:

‘I’d like to write about this showing the point of view of the help. The colored women down here’ … ‘They raise a white child and then twenty years later the child becomes the employer. It’s that irony, that we love them and they love us, yet…’. I swallowed, my voice trembling. ‘We don’t even allow them to use the toilet in the house’. (Stockett 106-107)

Here, as McHaney points out, the focus is taken away from the racial terror that existed and replaces it with white women who were mean to their maids (80). In addition, Miss Skeeter simplifies the relationship, which results in neglect not only of the reality of racist violence but also of the individuality of the black women. Thus, she amplifies the mechanism of othering. Another example that shows this is when Miss Skeeter tells the reader about her childhood. “Sometimes two girls from next door would come over to play with me, named Mary Nell and Mary Roan. They were so black I couldn’t tell them apart and called them both just Mary” (Stockett 62). This indicates that Miss Skeeter has fallen into the trap of treating black people as icons and not as individuals, something Foster-Singletary says that Stockett’s text does in places (106). In addition, it is a racist utterance where Miss Skeeter, the one who is supposed to fight for the coloured people, shows her patronising attitude towards people who are not the same as she is.

At the end of the novel Miss Skeeter thinks for herself “wasn’t that the point of the book? For women to realize, We are just two people. Not that much separates us. Not nearly as much as
I’d thought” (Stockett 418). By saying this she confirms that she still has prejudices towards black people. All people are different, but not because of their colour or race. Clearly, it is an improvement to realize that “not that much separates us”, but the borders do still exist. Black people are still narrated as different and remain as the other. As Ashcroft et al argue, the other is different from the self, but the self needs to identify with the other in order to have control over it (103). At the end of the novel the conditions for black people are in some cases even worse than when she started to write the book, while she gets the opportunity of a lifetime. Of course she is the good-hearted white woman “awakened and transformed by black stories arguing for their common humanity” as Donaldson says many readers interpreted her to be (45). However, this is where her heroic efforts end.

3.2 Minny

Minny is in many situations pictured as the other. The beginning of Minny’s first chapter indicates this. She is waiting outside Celia’s house, hoping to get a job. “Standing on that white lady’s back porch, I tell myself, Tuck it in, Minny. Tuck in whatever might fly out my mouth and tuck in my behind too. Look like a maid who does what she’s told” (Stockett 30). Furthermore, the reader gets to know about her “terrible awful” already before Minny’s first chapter. However, the meaning of the “terrible awful” is not revealed until later. Still, what the reader could figure out is that she did something with Miss Hilly’s pie. A few pages in the novel Minny calls Aibileen and tells her “‘I ain’t telling. I ain’t telling nobody about that pie. But I give her what she deserve!’ … Ain’t no game crossing Miss Hilly. ‘I ain’t never gone get no work again, Leroy gone kill me’” (Stockett 21). This is probably also the reason why she tells herself to tuck it in at Celia’s porch, since she is afraid not to get work ever again. These two examples confirm what Foster-Singletary says: “She is too much – too much woman to be a lady, too much mouth for a maid, too black for her own good” (100).
Moreover, the last sentence, “‘I ain’t never gone get no work again, Leroy gone kill me’” (Stockett 21), indicates that Minny is portrayed as victimized, as Mohanty says coloured people are imagined to be (337). In conclusion, through Minny’s actions she both obeys and resists the hegemonic white culture. Her act with the pie shows her resistance against the white system and its values, but she also tries to conform to the white norm by telling herself “to tuck it in”. As Edwards says, these system and values were something the hegemony of white culture forced the coloured people to follow (24).

Nonetheless, Minny succeeds to get the work. She begins to work for Celia, although Celia’s husband, Mister Johnny, is not allowed to know she works there. This is because Celia wants him to believe she is the one who cooks, and cleans the house. However, one day Mister Johnny comes home early and finds Minny in the house. Minny sees Minster Johnny with an axe in his hand and does not know what to do. “I do the only thing I can do. I wrinkle my face as mean as I can and pull my lips across my teeth and yell: ‘You and your axe better get out a

my way” (Stockett 137). Again, Stockett puts Minny in a position where, as Foster-Singletary mentions, she represents wild blackness (100). This is also an example of why The Help is a narrative of difference and as Singh and Schmidt state “these narratives of difference are narratives of the American nightmare rather than the American dream” (8).

The fact that Minny is portrayed as “too black” makes her represent “the other” more and enhances differences. This way of marking her with “cultural and/or genetic traits”, as Singh and Schmidt say, makes her a “threatening alien” (8). This could be the reason why she is treated badly throughout the novel by some of the white people. Consequently, it might not be surprising that she does not trust white people. There is an example, in particular, that show this and it is when Miss Skeeter, Aibileen and Minny are discussing the book. “‘What makes
you think colored people need your help?’ Minny stands up, chair scraping. ‘Why you even care about this? You white’ (Stockett 164).

3.3 Aibileen

Aibileen is portrayed as a stereotypical maid throughout the novel. She is really attached to Mae Mobley, the white child she takes care of. This is, as Wallace-Sanders says, one of the most consistent characteristics of the stereotypical maid (66). It even goes so far that when Mae Mobley and Aibileen discuss how many children Aibileen has, Mae Mobley says “I know, I’m your real baby” (Stockett 285). In addition, she is very concerned with Mae Mobley’s wellbeing. Several times Aibileen tells her how important she is and when she is dismissed from her work, she wants May Mobley to remember what she has taught her. “‘Baby Girl’, I say. ‘I need you to remember everything I told you. Do you remember what I told you?’ … ‘You is kind’, she say, ‘you is smart. You is important’” (Stockett 443).

Aibileen is, however, not only portrayed as the stereotypical maid, the Southern white construction of blackness is shown a number of times in the book. One example is when Mae Mobley goes to Aibileen’s toilet and her mother screams to her “this is dirty out here, Mae Mobley. You’ll catch diseases! No no no!” (Stockett 95). In the novel white and black people were supposed to have separate bathrooms since according to the white people, black people were dirty. This in itself tells about one of the many contradictions that occur in the novel. On the one hand, the coloured people are not allowed to use the whites’ bathrooms because they have diseases and are dirty. On the other hand, the white people want them to clean their houses, cook their food and take care of their children.

Furthermore, Aibileen compares herself with a cockroach:
That night after supper, me and that cockroach stare at each other down across
the kitchen floor. He big, inch, inch an a half. He black. Blacker than me.

(Stockett 189)

This could indicate that there are not only the white people who have a patronising attitude
towards black people, but Aibileen looks down on herself too. To compare herself with an
insect, a pest, is to acknowledge herself as dirty and potentially harmful.

Nevertheless, Aibileen shows something neither Miss Skeeter nor Minny does. Both Miss
Skeeter and Minny have prejudices against one another, which Aibileen in some aspects, sees
through. In the novel she says to Minny “all I’m saying is, kindness don’t have no
boundaries” (Stockett 312). Here, it implies, as Smith says, that the book actually could be
interpreted as the black people trying to humanize the open-minded white people (31). In
addition, at the end of the novel there is a sequence when Mae Mobley has coloured herself
black in nursery, because she was told to draw what she liked the most about herself.
However, her teacher said to her that black means that she has dirty and bad face. When
Aibileen hears about this she feels devastated, “after all the time I spent teaching Mae Mobley
how to love all people, not judge by color. I feel a hard fist in my chest because what person
out there don’t remember they first-grade teacher? Maybe they don’t remember what they
learn, but I’m telling you, I done enough kids to know, they matter” (Stockett 409). This also
shows that Aibileen is the one who actually shows some reasonable thoughts about how the
relationship between whites and coloured people could be.

4. The Multicultural Classroom

To teach The Help in an Upper Secondary School in Sweden, or in a Western country in
general, can be a problematic task. As teachers it is important not to reinforce the feeling of
“us and them”. As Lundahl says, teachers should not assume that students have racist ideas, and neither should they try to appear as overdo culture sensitivity (99), since this may exaggerate constructions of self and other. However, with that said, people should not be discouraged to teach novels like *The Help*. In fact, in my view, it is a great novel to teach. In addition, as the Curriculum for the upper secondary school says, schools should teach “fundamental democratic values and human rights … the freedom and integrity of the individual, the equal value of all people” (Curriculum for the upper secondary school 10). What is important though, is to not just hand out the book to the students and let them read it. Instead, it is essential to give the students some background information what it was like to live in Southern U.S. in the 1960s, both for white and coloured people. In addition, I think it is necessary to discuss terms as identity, ethnicity and prejudices before the students start to read the book. As Lundahl says, every person has multiple identities. One person belongs to several cultural groups and ethnicity is just one of them (95). Moreover, the problem with universalizing that Dunbar mentions, is necessary to comprehend. Students should leave the classroom with the awareness that the fact that we are all human does not implies that we are not different from each other or conversely, with the assumptions that people who are not similar to themselves are totally different (Dunbar 29).

Therefore, this is a book that needs to be discussed. As Holland mentions, as readers we will find different themes that bother us (Holland qtd in Jones 23) and depending on several factors we will interpret a text differently. By talking about the text the students can develop their understanding. One example that would be essential to discuss is identity politics and the problem of representativity. Questions that could be raised are whom can you speak for and is it patronizing to speak for someone? Is it even possible to represent something that you are not? Moreover, it is essential to ask the students to find examples of the hegemonic white
culture. Some students might not even notice this white system that everyone had to conform to (Edwards 24). Furthermore, it is also important to have in mind that some students could get strong reactions to the text (Thyberg 304). Therefore, as Thyberg says, it is essential “to discuss the ethical responsibility of the reader to witness and confirm the experience of the characters in the story and relate it to democracy and human rights issues” (304).

Since *The Help* is settled in the 1960s’ in Southern U.S., when the civil rights movement began, it opens an opportunity to cooperate with a history class. The book brings up important persons like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. In addition, it mentions KKK. To have the students learn about the civil rights movement while reading the book could help the students understanding. Moreover, in the history class they learn to be critical of sources, which could be an advantage in the English class when reading the book, just as teaching literature could be useful for the history class. As Lundahl says, literature makes it possible for people to understand history, economical and social condition in different parts of the world (404).

Furthermore, the students could write an essay about one of the many themes that the novel discusses. For example, they could write about racism, representation, positioning, prejudices or stereotypes. In addition, as Dunbar mentions, it is important to make the students realise that whiteness too, is a construction (42). It is necessary though, to let the students write about their own thoughts and argue for their opinions as long as they can refer to the text. As Holland says “each will have different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies” (Holland qtd in Jones 23).

According to me, there are no limits how to teach literature, as long as the teaching corresponds with the syllabus. The syllabus should always be the basis when planning the
lessons. Moreover, depending on several different factors the teacher has to invent a teaching plan that suits the given class. No class is ever the same, and consequently a task that works in class A might not work in class B. Therefore, it is rather impossible to have a module that works every year. As a result, it could be quite hard to say in which level of English *The Help* will work in. All three courses have contents that would make the novel suitable for both English 5, 6 and 7.

Nevertheless, since *The Help* is over 400 pages and deals with a heavy subject it could be good to have the students read the book in English 7, when they are older. Additionally, in the core content for English 7 it says that the course has to include “societal issues, cultural, historical, political and social conditions, and also ethical and existential issues in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket 2011). The book brings up all these aspects. In addition, to teach the novel from a postcolonial perspective would be suitable, since it is a narrative of difference. As Ashcroft et al argue, postcolonial theory emerged because of the need to address different practices (11), and as Singh and Schmidt say, in the US, ethnical and cultural history create narratives of difference which mark “individuals and people with cultural and/or genetic traits [that] make them threatening aliens” (8). However, if there would be cooperation with the history class it has to work with the time the students take that course, which changes the preconditions. As mentioned before, there are many different factors that affect the choice of level of English and since the book actually is suitable for all courses it is up to the teacher to decide.

5. Conclusion

The contradictions start to emerge already from the beginning of the novel. On the one hand Stockett says that her intention with the book is to highlight the relationship between white
and coloured people. On the other hand, already from page one she marks coloured people as not as good as whites, both through their language and the way they are addressed. Thereafter the patronizing attitude towards them just continues. Miss Skeeter is naïve and constantly simplifies the relationship, although she is portrayed as the innocent well-meaning woman who wants to help. She does not understand the coloured people’s struggle, and does not have the courage to confront her friends and take a stand against them. Moreover, the description of Minny exaggerates the feeling of “us and them”. She is continuously portrayed as the other. In fact, it is only from Aibileen’s point of view the relationship sometimes is described in a balanced way. However, the sequence when she compares herself with a cockroach is just one example out of many where Stockett stumbles in her narration.

To write a novel about the relationship between whites and coloured people is, as mentioned before, a heavy commitment. Critics have criticised Stockett for how she chose to write her story, however, people will always criticise. Independently of what an author writes about there are always those who have different opinions. It is important not to stop writing about racism, since it is important not to stop raising the race issue. I believe the constructions of difference are one of the most vital parts to deal with, since it is the idea of people being different that threatens “the self”. It is important to see the different individuals that exist all over the world. It is here, according to me, that Stockett fails to highlight the relationship between white and black people in an acceptable way. As a result her narrative becomes patronising. This is because she does not treat the black people as individuals, she treats them only, for example, as maids or as less educated people. Stockett also fails in describing the racial issue, since she takes away the terror and only focuses on the relationship between maids and their employers. Even if Stockett tries to describe the relation from the point of view of the 1960s, the narrative is unrealistic. Admittedly, it is a work of fiction, but the
question can still be asked why she has not made the story more authentic, since it deals with such a heavy subject. Nevertheless, I still think the book is good and I think that Stockett does something that is really important and valuable, since her novel provokes reactions and discussions. I believe that it is necessary to discuss subjects such as racism and oppression, and that it becomes dangerous when people stop doing it. However, as I have argued, it is essential to talk about the different constructions that can emerge, which might in itself raise awareness. If this is included in teaching, I do not see why a novel like *The Help* should not work in upper secondary schools.

This thesis can be developed into further research and can take other directions. One example is to put more focus on the didactic part, how to deal with oppression, racism and prejudices in schools. It could be analysed both from both the students’ and the teachers’ point of views. How teachers teach subjects like these will influence the students to a great extent. Therefore it is important to know how to handle different problems that might emerge. For instance, how should one stop a discussion that begins to develop into a racist argumentation? To teach a book like *The Help* brings responsibilities. I believe that we should not stop discussing the relationship between different people. *The Help* could be compared with novels that thematise present day and historical racial differences in order to see similarities and differences. However, we should not stop being critical towards what we read.

6. Works Cited


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