

## Racism in the Film *The Help*: Analysis of Narrative and Cinematographic Elements

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### ABSTRACT

Cinema or film had the power to depict societal realities, particularly those pertaining to social issues. *The Help* was one movie that uses narrative and cinematographic devices to depict social reality. In the movie *The Help*, a group of African-American domestic workers were the subject of unfair treatment and prejudice on the part of their white employers. This was due to the persistent perception that African Americans occupy an inferior status. In particular, Pettrie & Boggs' (2018) narrative and cinematographic theories were used in this study, which employed qualitative methodologies and a structuralist approach. The goal of this study was to examine how narrative and cinematographic components in the movie *The Help* explore the topic of racial discrimination faced by African Americans in America. According to this study, the movie *The Help* contained narrative and cinematographic structural elements that illustrate racial inequality, most of which occurred in the domestic setting. In addition, it was discovered that racial discrimination was not shown in movies in a compelling way. This appeared to be an attempt to simplify for the viewer the concept of racial prejudice as it was shown in the movie.

**Keywords:** Racial Discrimination, Naratif Elements, Cinematographic Elements, *The Help*

### INTRODUCTION (Times New Roman 12 bold)

Cinema is a kind of art that consists of a sequence of pictures that move constantly together and have a distinct rhythm to their movements (Stenberg in Pettrie & Boggs, 2018). According to Villarejo (2007), movies are vibrant, give life to the environment we live in, and use images to take us to other worlds.

Cinema and films are inextricably linked to reality. According to Andrew (2010), film serves as a method for audience mediation with reality. Cinema serves as a frame that connects reality and a portal into the outside world (Elsaesser and Hagener 2015). Films are a representation that can occasionally resemble reality itself, but they are also untrustworthy because they never succeed in showing the audience reality (Andrew 2010).

It is clear from the foregoing that watching and evaluating movies is a fascinating activity. For this reason, Tate Taylor's film *The Help* will be examined in this essay. The narrative of Aibee, a black maid, is told in this movie. Minny is the name of his buddy. Because they are black African Americans, Aibee, Minny, and their pals frequently endure harsh treatment as servants. Skeeter had a dream of writing a book about the fate

of Jackson, Mississippi's maids one day. He begged Aibee to assist him. Despite Aibee's initial reluctance, he and his companions eventually told Skeeter the entire tale. And at the conclusion of the tale, this causes them to alter.

It appears from the synopsis above that there is a racial problem in the movie *The Help*. The movie *The Help* has been the subject of numerous studies in the past. Ariesta & Muliastuti<sup>1</sup> (2017) used the womanist theory to analyze the movie *The Help*. They came to the conclusion that black women were fighting against oppression based on their race, class, and gender. Moreover, Syamela (2015) used Pierce's semiotic theory to analyze the movie *The Help*. He came to the conclusion that the movie *The Help* featured racial prejudice, violence, and discrimination. Based on these two studies, it appears that no one has used Boggs' narrative and cinematographic theory to analyze *The Help*, which would have shown the existence of racist elements—particularly those observed in the film's cinematography—and produced more thorough study findings. Because of this, this article will make an effort to examine the problem of racism through a structural perspective in movies, specifically by examining narrative components and cinematography from Pettrie & Boggs (2018).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Character and Characterization

According to Abrams & Harpham (2015), characters are the embodiment of a narrative performance, exhibiting moral, intellectual, and emotional attributes through their distinct delivery of the dialogue or their actions. Characterization is another aspect of character. Characters were developed according to what they did and said, what other characters thought of them, and how they looked and behaved, as demonstrated by Pettrie & Boggs (2018)

### Plot

A movie's exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution make up its story structure. Flashbacks, which are scenes or interpolated narratives that depict events that happened prior to the work's introduction, are occasionally used to manage the exposition. The rising action starts and culminates at the end following the explanation and opening scene. The crisis, the reversal of events, or the tipping point in the protagonist's journey, then occurs. From this point on, the antagonist, the action or intrigue culminates in the protagonist's success or failure, the conflicts are resolved, the mystery is solved, or the misunderstanding is cleared up. This is the beginning of the falling action. An alternate term that is frequently used to describe a plot's conclusion is the resolution (Pettrie and Boggs 2018).

### Setting

In certain specialist films, setting plays a significant role in establishing an underlying tone or emotional environment. Setting may generate a sense of tension and suspense that is consistent with the general tone of the movie, in addition to lending credence to story and character components (Pettrie and Boggs 2018).

### Theme

The term "theme" in film analysis refers to the specific focus that unifies the work and serves as the film's unifying central issue. In addition to emphasizing one of the four

other main elements—plot, character, emotional effect or mood, and style, texture, or structure—a filmmaker may decide to concentrate on ideas (Pettrie and Boggs 2018).

### **Racial Discrimination**

Discrimination is an activity carried out by a group of people with significant sway over the community, where it can impact social conditions. Moreover, Fulthoni et al. (in Bimantara, 2020) illustrates a range of discriminatory practices: 1) Discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, and ethnicity, 2) Discrimination according to gender and sex 3) Discrimination against HIV/AIDS patients 4) Prejudice based on social caste

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study use structuralism in conjunction with qualitative approaches. According to Myers (2019), social and cultural phenomena can be effectively analyzed in study using qualitative methodologies. The narrative and cinematographic film theory published by Pettrie & Boggs (2018) is the theory applied in this movie. The actions made for this study were: 1) seeing the movie 2) examining the problems in the movie *The Assistance* 3) selecting the appropriate theory to clarify the concepts or problems in the movie 4) Observing and evaluating information about the movie's racism issue through speech and picture analysis 5) Make inferences based on the analysis that was done.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **a. Plot Analysis**

The plot of the movie *The Help* employs a nonlinear structure Boogs method. This movie employs the *In Medias Res* technique early on in the narrative, specifically in the exchange between Aibileen and Skeeter. This moment is from the middle of the story, when Aibileen ultimately makes the decision to assist Skeeter in writing her book, which addresses racism in the United States, particularly in Jackson, Mississippi. This *In Medias Res* approach highlights Aibileen's role as the major character of the plot and makes it clear that the story in the film is about her life as a maid and nanny. Additionally, by using this *in medias res* technique, it is highlighted that the viewer will be presented with a film that will likely raise the issue of the fate of a black person who works as a servant in a white house which is full of drama.



Figure 1. Aibileen  
Source: *The Help* (Taylor, 2011)

Additionally, it is seen in Aibileen's happy reaction when Skeeter asks her if she wants to be anything other than a maid (figure 1) that there will be enjoyable moments throughout the movie. Aibileen's kitchen appears to have a complete pantry, which further illustrates that the drama surrounding the fate of black maids is not centered on welfare concerns.

The narrative then moves on to explain the other characters in the movie, including Mae Mobby (Emma Leefolt's toddler child, whom Aibileen looks after), Elizabeth (Aibileen's employer, who is still very young), Skeeter (a recent graduate who has been hired by the Jackson Journal), Hilly (Minnie's employer), Minny (Aibileen's best friend), and a group of friends Hilly and Celia Foot (her role has not been revealed at this introduction). After being in medias res, the characters' exposition seems to be intended to highlight the fact that, in addition to Aibileen, other characters will play significant roles in the plot. Apart from that, this section also seems to show the character of Hilly Holbrook as the antagonist in the story.

The conflict in the story arises when Hilly needs to use the restroom in Elizabeth's home but is hesitant to do so since she believes Aibileen has already used it all. The events and language in the exposition section guide the plot of the story to the rising action section. restroom inside Elizabeth's home. Hilli believed that African American servants such as Aibileen were infected. Hilly has even put forth a plan that would require all white citizens to have a separate bathroom from his African American staff who are black. The plot gets complicated when Skeeter invites Aibileen to serve as her source for her book she plans to write about Jackson's racist treatment of its maids. Nevertheless, due to a rule that states that "if there is a leaflet asking for equal rights between blacks and whites then the party concerned will be put in prison", this makes Aibileen unwilling to help Skeeter. From here the storyline continues to show tension. Minny, Hilly's maid, wants to relieve herself. Because there was a storm at the time, he couldn't urinate outside where there was a special toilet made for him. Minny ends up secretly using the bathroom in the house, and Hilly finds out about this. Minny was finally fired, and Hilly spread slander against Minny as the reason for her dismissal. This was discovered by Leroy, Minny's husband, and Minny was treated harshly. Aibi, who knew about this incident, felt sorry for Minny. Receiving a lecture while worshipping at church, Aibee finally has the courage to help Skeeter write a book about the fate of the maid in Jackson. Aibee also invited Skeeter to her house and told her what happened to her as a maid.

Aibee advised Minny, who had been dismissed by Hilly, to apply at Celia Foot's house, and she was eventually accepted. When Minny went to Aibee's residence once, she discovered Aibee with Skeeter. Minny was first furious and irritated, but she ultimately made the decision to assist Aibee.

The scenario gets even more complicated when it is revealed that Yule Mae, Hilly's new maid, sold the jewels she had uncovered. She was harshly arrested by the police when Hilly accused her of stealing. After this encounter, Aibee's friends—who are also black—decided to speak up and tell Skeeter the real truth. Skeeter also included Constantine, her former servant,'s narrative in her book. In this narrative, there is a flashback plot that tells why Skeeter's maid left the house.

The peak of tension occurs when the book written by Skeeter is published and read by everyone, including Hilly herself. Feeling humiliated, Hilly goes to Skeeter's house and threatens to sue her but Skeeter's mother defends her daughter.

The popularity of the book written by Skeeter made Aibee famous in the church environment where he worshiped, Aibee also received awards from them. The climax of the story occurs when Hilly incites Elizabeth to fire Aibee, by slandering him for stealing a spoon from Elizabeth's house. In this section it is explained that Aibee finally fought Hilly and took out all his frustration on Hilly. The fall of the story (Falling action) occurs when Aibee says goodbye to Mae Mobbly and he finally leaves Elizabeth's house and it is said that Mae Mobbly is the last child he cares for. The story ends with Aibee leaving Elizabeth's house feeling free from all the problems he previously experienced, and believing in his dream in the future, namely becoming a writer. This section is the conclusion of the story or "Denouement".

Through the plot depiction above, it can be seen that the storyline in the film *The Help* has a non-linear structure, which begins with in medias res and is also interspersed with flashbacks. From the plot description above, the film *The Help* seems to be a film that has a comedy-drama genre. This can be seen from the interludes of comedy and romantic love stories in the storyline in the complication section. The comedy element in this film seems to be seen in Minny's character, while the romantic love can be seen in Skeeter's character. Although, at the end of the story the drama element seems to be emphasized more through the depiction of Aibee's dismissal from Elizabeth's house. Based on this plot, it can also be seen that the idea of racial discrimination is depicted as not being too gripping within.

#### **b. Character Analysis**

##### **Aibileen Clark atau Aibee**

Aibileen or Aibee was an African American born in 1911 on a farm in Chicksaw. He is a descendant of slaves from Africa. What proves that Aibi is an African American descendant of slaves, apart from his black skin, is the way he speaks English; "It feels... ..you are kind, you are smart, you are important, from this quote it can be seen that Aibi's way of speaking does not comply with the rules of good and correct American English like most African Americans. Every day Aibi works as a maid and also a babysitter at home for the Leefolt family, a white family. She has been doing this job for quite a long time, and Aibi has previously worked as a maid and child care provider (a total of 17 white children who Aibi has looked after). Aibi herself had a son who had died, and what kept her alive was God and her best friend, Minny.

Through his interactions with Minny, it can be seen that Aibee is a person who upholds the value of friendship. It can be seen that one of the reasons why Aibee dared to take the risk to help Skeeter and tell her life story was Minny, namely when Aibee found out that Minny had been fired and slandered by her employer Hilly. And from the changes in Aibee's character, as the story line progresses, Aibee's character in this story can be categorized as a dynamic or developing character. And at the end of the story, Aibee's most significant change is seen, namely his courage to express his frustration and scold (advise) Hilly and Elizabeth, whereas at the beginning of the story Aibee could only obey and accept whatever Hilly and Elizabeth ordered and did to him.

##### **Eugenia Phelan or Skeeter**

Apart from Aibee, the main character in the story is Skeeter. Skeeter is a 21 year old woman who has just graduated from college. His single status made his mother worried because all of his classmates were married. At the beginning of the film *The Help* Skeeter is depicted as an ambitious woman in pursuing her career. His dream is to become a writer. Skeeter is described as having a very close relationship with her friends, especially Hilly. However, Hilly's attitude of always acting unfairly with her servants and her over-the-top racist attitude made Skeeter feel annoyed and changed the contents of the report that Hilly asked to be published. This incident embarrassed Hilly, because suddenly her yard was filled with toilets, and this caused Skeeter and Hilly's relationship to drift apart. Even if you look at the beginning of the story, Skeeter can only surrender and apologize to Aibee for Hilly's words about the toilet which offended Aibee.

So based on Skeeter's changes, she can be categorized as a dynamic or developed character in this film. At the beginning of the story, Skeeter seems to be only pursuing her ambition to become a journalist and writer when she asks Aibee for help making a book about the fate of the maids. In fact, it is depicted that Skeeter almost gave up because of the lack of sources in her writing, regardless of the efforts of Aibee and Minny. However, at the end of the story, Skeeter is depicted as being wiser and caring about the fate of Aibee and Minny, and she decides to stay in Jackson rather than accept a job offer in New York. However, Aibee and Minny advised Skeeter to keep going for various reasons given by them. Skeeter's change in attitude towards the fate of the black maid in Jackson is likely due to the stories of unfair and racist treatment she heard and saw herself. And he also felt sadness from the servant who had looked after him since childhood, named Constantine, who had to be thrown out by his mother

### **Hilly Holbrook**

Hilly is a 21 year old young woman, who is married and has one child. At the beginning of the story, Hilly is described as Skeeter's good friend, in fact she is always trying to find Skeeter a mate or husband. However, Hilly's attitude of showing unfair behavior towards black maids makes Skeeter feel annoyed and ultimately breaks the friendship between the two.

In the film *The Help*, Hilly is depicted as an antagonist who has a conflict with the main characters, Aibee and Skeeter (in the middle to the end of the story). Hilly is a figure who seems to have a big influence in his community. This can be seen from the following quote taken from Aibee's narrative: "cause once Miss Hilly had a baby, every girl at the bridge table had to have one, too." Whatever orders Hilly said were always followed by his friends; having a baby, antagonizing Celia Foot, including having separate sanitation for their maids. Hilly's racist attitude seems to be the influence of her father, this can be seen from the following dialogue from Hilly's mother: "Daddy ruined you". Things like this are the main issue in this film, namely that white children who are raised by black people at first act sweetly, but when they grow up they actually turn against and discriminate against them. This also seems to be what happened to Hilly.

### **Minny Jackson**

Based on the characterization in the film *The Help*, Minny can be categorized as a static character because she does not show significant changes in this film.

Even though at the end of the story it is narrated that Minny finally makes the decision to leave Leroy, who has always been rude to her, this will be easy for the audience to predict because from the start of the film Minny is depicted as a brave woman (including in making decisions); Minny dared to enter the bathroom in Hilly's house even though she forbade it. After being fired, Minny brought a pie made from her own feces, which Hilly ate and she also dared to say in front of Hilly that the pie was made from her feces. Finally, thanks to Minny who finally telling Skeeter about the incident, they were saved from a lawsuit that Hilly might have filed regarding Skeeter's writing.

Even though she is only a supporting character, it seems like Minny has a fairly essential role in helping to shape the impression of the story in this film. His humorous character makes this film not seem too drama because there are elements of comedy, this is as stated by Towne (in Boggs, 2009) that "static characters are most essential to comedy and dynamic characters are essential to serious drama". Because the two characters in dynamic and static, namely Aibileen and Minny, in this film seem to be equally important in giving the impression of the film, it can be argued that through this, this film can be categorized into the comedy drama genre.

### c. Setting Analysis

Jackson, Mississippi serves as the backdrop for the movie *The Help*. A news publishing organization named the "Jackson Journal" that flies the state flag of Mississippi serves as visual evidence of the location of this place. The first geographical location suggests that this movie will deal with issues that are directly related to writing or journalism. In addition, Skeeter's initial involvement with this organization supports his portrayal as someone who aspires to be a writer and journalist.

In addition, the spatial setting that is frequently employed in the movie *The Help* is Interior space, according to space theory, which separates space into two categories: Interior and Exterior. The dining room, kitchen, family room, and living room of the homes of Hilly, Elizabeth, Skeeter, Aibee, Celia, and Minny make up the interior setting. A movie's environment can accentuate its central subject (Giannetti 2018; Pettrie and Boggs 2018). The exchanges and disputes that take place here seem to indicate that the racial themes or difficulties this movie portrays are limited to domestic affairs. Despite a number of occurrences demonstrating racial concerns in public places, such as shootings in the street, it appears that this is just a distraction and not the main issue in this film.

The year 1960 is thought to be the setting for the movie *The Help*. This is evident from a news report that mentioned American President John F. Kennedy's passing (Taylor, 2011, 1.35. 39-1.36.13). President Kennedy was an activist in the 1960s American movement that raised the subject of equal rights between Blacks and Whites, therefore it appears that the goal of depicting the event of his death is to underline the theme of racism in this film. In addition, it appears like the majority of the events in this movie take place during the day based on the time setting, which separates time into day and night. It appears that this is meant to portray the idea that the problems in this movie are not too frightening, in the

sense that there is still warmth in the happenings and hope for equal rights for Blacks and Whites. This is demonstrated by Minny's contacts with Celia, which are always daytime events.

**d. Theme Analysis: Racism in *The Help* Movie**

It is evident from the preceding film narrative analysis that *The Help* has racism as a central topic. The film's narrative structure and cinematography both highlight the racism theme. As in Figure 2 it is shown Aibee pouring beverages to Hilly and her friends, Minny fanning Hilly's mother, Missus Walters, and Yule Mae wiping the dining table at Hilly's house. The mise en scene pattern depicted in Figure 2 features a white boss and a black servant in a household setting.



Figure 2. Domestic Section  
Source: *The Help* (Taylor, 2011)

It can be observed how black people and white people arrange their bodies differently in this photograph. In this image, every white employer is seen sitting down. This displays an unburdened, carefree, and relaxed position. In the meantime, all of the black servants in this image are depicted as standing. This posture may suggest that one feels overburdened. African Americans' situation is usually challenging and uncomfortable due to racial prejudice in the United States (Banaji, Fiske, and Massey 2021; Hidayat, Juliandina, and Yusuf 2022). The disparity between the status of white people and black people may be observed in these pictures. In this scenario, Black people are the servants and White people are the masters. The black and white people will then be contrasted from this point on.

Image 2 was captured with a medium shot method in order to make the background more readable. The focal point of this picture is one of the inside rooms, like the family room, dining room, and living room. This demonstrates how racial disparities between Blacks and Whites manifest themselves in the home, particularly in the form of disputes between employers and servants.

Figure 3 and 4 below illustrates the issue of Black people being viewed as second-class citizens in the movie *The Help*.



Figure 3. Segregation  
Source: *The Help* (Taylor, 2011)

Figure 4. Segregation  
Source: *The Help* (Taylor, 2011)

Aibee and Henry are shown on a bus in figure 3. The circumstances in the bus that Aibee and Henry were traveling in figure 3 are depicted in figure 4. On the other hand, figure 4 depicts white people seated in the front seats, while Aibee and Henry were occupying the back seats. It also appears that the photographs were divided on purpose. Based on the film's time period, it appears that this was done on purpose to demonstrate that black and white people in America were still segregated in 1960. Even in the sequel narrative, when a black person is murdered and the bus stops, "Colored people off, the rest of you let me know where you're going," the bus driver said as Aibee and Henry were forced to exit. I'll do my best to bring you close, says *The Help*. It is evident from this comment that white people and Black people have different rights.

Though there are a few characters in this movie that exhibit attitudes that equate black and white skin, the problem of racism is not really demonstrated through heated or tense circumstances. This is seen in picture 5.



Source: *The Help* (Taylor 2011)

It can be seen a pattern in this image where the positions of the black and white characters are the same. This demonstrates how similar they are. Nevertheless, the camera position (angle) in images 5 and 6 is not parallel but rather employs an oblique angle technique (the image appears lopsided). This indicates that there is tension in this scene, specifically when Minny and Aibee are discussing their fate as black servants who were treated unfairly. In contrast, the camera is positioned parallel in pictures 7 and 8, where the background is clearly visible in broad daylight. This can depict the private moment between Celia and Minny (figure 6) as well as the interaction between Skeeter, Aibee, and

Minnie (figure 8). The scene in figure 8 also shows the wiser attitude of Skeeter, who seems to be able to sense the fate of the black maid. This can be seen from the picture showing Skeeter and Ailee holding hands.

But in addition to showing prejudice, *The Help* also shows the fight against racism. The interactions between the characters Skeeter and Ailee serve to show this. In this movie, Skeeter first approached Ailee to write a book about racial problems that happened in Jackson, Mississippi. But in the end, this conversation genuinely altered their lives for the better. Ailee, who had previously been reluctant to voice his opinions regarding white people, at last found the confidence to do so. This is a result of her habit of telling Skeeter depressing tales about her time spent working as a maid. Skeeter, meantime, was eventually able to gain wisdom despite having initially simply followed her dream of being a writer because she frequently paid attention to the servants' grievances. Meanwhile, Skeeter, who initially only pursued her ambition as a writer, however, because she often listened to the servants' complaints, was finally able to be wiser in dealing with their fate. And the book they both wrote ultimately became a means of demanding equal rights between blacks and whites. This is seen in the following image:

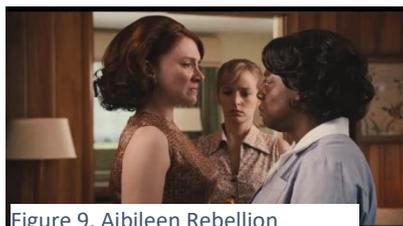


Figure 9. Aibileen Rebellion

Source: *The Help* (Taylor 2011)

This image shows that Ailee has finally found the strength to confront Hilly about his unfair treatment by telling Elizabeth to terminate him and spreading false information about him. The fact that Ailee, Hilly, and Elizabeth are all positioned in the same way in this photo—that is, standing—indicates that racism as a whole is still a battle. Since Hilly cannot sue Ailee for creating the book because it contains Hilly's shame for ingesting Minnie's feces, her current situation can actually serve as an example of how it feels to be treated unfairly. In other words, as the picture from the movie's final scene shows, the fight against racism itself is far from over.

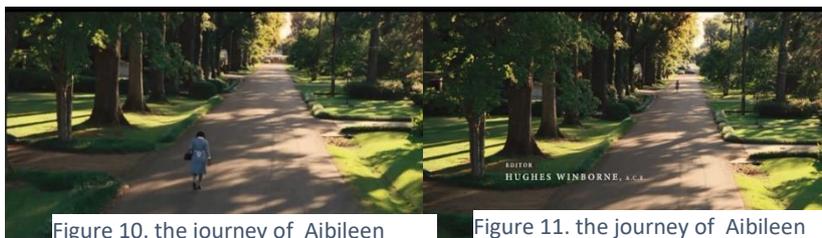


Figure 10. the journey of Aibileen

Figure 11. the journey of Aibileen

Source: *The Help* (Taylor 2011)

The figure 10 and 11 shows Ailee is moving away from the camera, yet the camera itself is stationary. This demonstrates that there is still work to be done in

order to end racial difficulties in America. The phrases "It's gonna be along a long journey...it's gonna be a tough fight" are found in non-diegetic music that supports this. It appears that the song selection with these lyrics aims to underline to the listener how challenging it will be to end racism in the United States.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident from an examination of the film's narrative structure and cinematography that *The Help* explores racism as a subject. But because some white people in the movie are still able to treat black people nicely, racism isn't portrayed as being overly terrifying. In addition, this movie conveys through a number of characters a sense of humor laced throughout the drama aspects centered around racism. Additionally, the movie seems to highlight the fact that the racism depicted here is mainly domestic in nature, specifically between black servants and white employers.

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