

The Help



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DIRECTED BY: Tate Taylor

CERTIFICATE: 12

RUNNING TIME: 140 mins

COUNTRY: USA

YEAR: 2012

KEYWORDS: representation of women; racism; civil rights

SUITABLE FOR: 14–19 media/film studies, history, citizenship

SYNOPSIS

In 1960s Mississippi, African American women are employed as servants, maids and nannies to rich white families and referred to as 'The Help'. Their pay is low, they are forced to use separate facilities within family homes and they are segregated from society. Meanwhile Skeeter, a young aspiring writer played by Emma Stone, learns about the hardships of black servants and determines to write an exposé of their mistreatment. The very idea ensures that Skeeter faces opposition from her white friends and family, but will the black community find the courage to speak out as racism and bigotry reaches fever pitch?

BEFORE VIEWING

BLACK HISTORY THROUGH WHITE EYES

A number of mainstream Hollywood dramas and thrillers that focus on the Civil Rights era, slavery, racism or the Deep South have been accused of presenting the themes through the experience of a white central character and relegating African Americans to secondary or supporting characters.

Research the premises of the films below, and write a one line synopsis or logline that briefly outlines the plot in terms of racial dynamics.

The first film is done for you as an example on page 3.

Then discuss the following:

- Do all the films focus on a white main character? Are there any exceptions?
- Who are the top-billed stars and directors of the films?
- How successful were the films in terms of box office and critical reception?
- In terms of narrative conventions, why might these stories use a white character in the central role?
- How would you define the relationship between black characters and the white protagonist[s] in those films from the list you have seen?

Film	Plot outline	Top-billed star	Director
<i>Ghosts of the Mississippi</i>	a white lawyer tries to prosecute the racist killer of Civil Rights activist Medger Evers	Alec Baldwin with Whoopi Goldberg and James Woods	Rob Reiner
<i>A Time To Kill</i>			
<i>The Color Purple</i>			
<i>The Long Walk Home</i>			
<i>Crash</i>			
<i>Mississippi Burning</i>			
<i>Get On The Bus</i>			
<i>Glory</i>			
<i>Remember The Titans</i>			
<i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i>			
<i>The Green Mile</i>			
<i>Do The Right Thing</i>			
<i>Higher Learning</i>			

BINARY OPPOSITES

Many of the films above tend to feature representations of Southern Whites and African Americans that adhere to a stereotypical set of codes and conventions. Look at the set of binary opposites below. Do you agree with any of the comparisons? Are there any films that do not have typical representations? Add more words to the list if you can:

Southern Whites	African Americans
guilty	innocent
racist	peaceful
arrogant	honourable
humbled	noble
determined	patient
naive	world-weary

AFTER VIEWING

CASTING

The cast of *The Help* is predominantly female; only one or two husband and boyfriend figures have much screen time. Three actresses were nominated for their roles (Octavia Spencer won for her performance as Minny). Films aimed at older female audiences or featuring strong female casts (such as *Mamma Mia*) tend to do fantastically at the box office because it is rare that quality films for this demographic are produced.

- How have the producers cast the film in order to appeal to as wide an age range as possible? List the popular films or TV series that the film's top actresses have appeared in before and the audience demographic they might appeal to (consider gender, age, class etc.)

Actress	Other films	Target demographic
Emma Stone (Skeeter)		
Viola Davies (Aibileen)		
Octavia Spencer (Minny)		
Bryce Dallas Howard (Hilly)		
Jessica Chastain (Celia)		
Allison Janney (Charlotte)		

- Looking at the characters above, what issues, struggles and dilemmas do each of the women go through that may be identifiable to a female audience?

REPRESENTATION OF HISTORY

A criticism of *The Help* is that it softens the brutality and threat of the segregated South, as well as sidelining the development of and violent reaction to the Civil Rights movement. The killing of black Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers occurs off-screen and is barely covered otherwise. Some have also found that the gross-out humour (Minnie's chocolate cake!) sits awkwardly in a film that should have a serious message.

Should filmmakers give these events a serious, unflinching treatment, or is it important that younger audiences are introduced to this vital period of history in a film that is accessible to them, even if it means comedy is used and some of the ugliness of racism is 'watered down'?

- Find some opposing quotes from critics of the film. What do the positive and negative reviews have to say?
- How have political, ethical and special interest groups responded? Look, for example, at the statement released by the Association of Black Women Historians.
- How do white characters respond to the shooting of Medgar Evers and to footage of Civil Rights leaders on TV?
- What famous historical events are discussed or alluded to?
- Is Minnie's abuse at the hands of her husband (who we never actually see) given proper attention? How are the domestic abuse scenes shot so as to reduce the risk of a higher rating?

REPRESENTATION OF RACE AND GENDER

How are the following groups represented in *The Help*? Use evidence from the film. Remember, absence of representation can be as important as a group that is strongly represented in film.

- white females, young and old
- black females
- white males
- black males
- police
- politicians
- children
- wealthy white society
- Are there any other groups that are represented (or under-represented) in *The Help*?
- Is it problematic that in this and many of the other films listed earlier, white characters tend to be the ones who initiate change in the lives of African Americans, or even save/rescue them?
- Look back at the 'binary opposites' table. To what extent do the conventions apply to the characters in *The Help*?

BOX-OFFICE RECEPTION

The Help made over \$220m worldwide on a budget of \$25m, making it an incredibly profitable film. In the US, the film remained at the top of the box office for over three weeks having knocked *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* off the top spot.

- How do you account for the success of *The Help*? Consider...
 - the success of the source novel in 2009
 - controversial subject matter
 - all-female cast and previous success of films aimed at women
 - time of release

ACTIVITIES

1. Write a diary entry of one of the characters in the film or
Write an introduction to Skeeter's book
2. Pick a serious historical event or story from the news headlines. Shoot or storyboard a sequence or trailer that tackles the subject in a way that is accessible to a younger audience.

- Will you rate your film PG, 12 or even U?
- What restrictions might you encounter in undertaking this task?
- What other films have tackled serious or horrific historic events/eras in an accessible way?

Written by Gareth C. Evans



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