The Help

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHRYN STOCKETT

As a young girl living in Jackson, Mississippi, Kathryn Stockett loved spending time with her family's maid Demetrie, an African-American woman who worked for her family since 1955. Demetrie would play games with Stockett, tell her stories, and shower her with affection. But the young Stockett also witnessed the discrimination that Demetrie faced working for a white family. Stockett's family forced Demetrie to use a separate bathroom and to sit by herself while eating lunch. After graduating from the University of Alabama with a degree in English and creative writing, Stockett moved to New York City where she turned these complicated experiences with Demetrie into her first novel, *The Help*. Rejected by over fifty publishers, the book, once published, sold over ten million copies and spent more than a hundred weeks on the *The New York Times Best Seller* list. She currently lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Set in Jackson, Mississippi during the early days of the 1960s civil rights movement, *The Help* portrays social life under the Jim Crow-era laws that enforced racial segregation. White and black people had separate hospitals, bathrooms, schools, and even graveyards. Civil rights protestors sought to dissolve "the color line," a metaphor for segregation, by integrating the facilities and institutions that were kept separate. However, the majority of white Southerners opposed these changes, with some people even resorting to violence to maintain segregation. In the early sixties, if a black man used a white bathroom, he could expect white men to burn down his house, beat him, or even lynch him. Stockett focuses on one particular low point in the civil rights movement: the violent murder of the black activist Medgar Evers by a pro-segregation white man. But the novel ends with the hope for progress. Near the end of the book, Stockett mentions the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Stockett makes frequent mention of classic works of Southern literature in *The Help*, which situates her novel in a literary tradition of examining the realities of racism in the South. In many ways, *The Help* responds to and refutes Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and its representation of Mammy, an outspoken but matronly black slave and caregiver who faithfully and happily serves her white slave-masters. Unlike the politically-complacent Mammy character, the black maids in *The Help* fight to improve the conditions of life for domestic workers. Stockett also references Frederick Douglass' famous narrative and reflects, in the character of Aibileen, Douglass' belief in the power of writing and literature for liberating the bodies and minds of oppressed African-Americans. Finally, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* serves as a powerful catalyst in the novel to inspire black characters to resist oppression and tell their stories.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Help*
- **When Written:** 2004-2009
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 2009
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical fiction
- **Setting:** Jackson, Mississippi; 1962 through 1964
- **Climax:** The white community's reaction to the publication of the book.
- **Antagonist:** Miss Hilly Holbrook
- **Point of View:** First-person from the perspectives of Aibileen, Minny, and Miss Skeeter, with the exception of chapter Twenty-Five which has a third-person omniscient point of view.

EXTRA CREDIT

Legal Trouble: Ablene Cooper, a maid who worked for Stockett's brother, sued Kathyrn Stockett, claiming she used her life story without her permission and based the character of Aibileen Clark on her likeness. Stockett denies the claim and says she only spoke to Cooper on a few occasions.

And the Oscar Goes to...: Made into the 2011 blockbuster hit, the film-adaptation of *The Help* was nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Octavia Spenser, who played the character of Minny Jackson, won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress.

PLOT SUMMARY

Set in Jackson, Mississippi, the novel begins in August 1962 with Aibileen Clark, a middle-aged black domestic worker, taking care of Elizabeth Leefolt's only child, Mae Mobley. Miss Leefolt, a white housewife, neglects her daughter, but Aibileen showers Mae Mobley with affection. The novel opens with a

luncheon at Leefolt's house where the 23-year-old white women Hilly Holbrook and Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan discuss Hilly's initiative to pass a bill that would require every white household to have a separate **bathroom** for black housemaids. Disgusted by Hilly's idea, Skeeter finds Aibileen and asks if she ever wished she could change things. Unwilling to express her true feelings to a white woman, Aibileen says that everything is fine.

A few days later, Minny Jackson, another black maid and Aibileen's best friend, loses her job working for Hilly's mother. Hilly has also spread rumors about Minny being a thief so none of the other neighbors will hire her. Minny tells Aibileen that she took revenge on Hilly, but she won't give her the details, only telling her that it involved a **pie**. Minny ultimately finds work with the white housewife Celia Foote, a woman none of the white housewives in the community befriends because she comes from a working class background. Celia is kind to Minny and does not treat her any differently for being black.

Meanwhile, Skeeter gets a job writing an advice column about housekeeping for the *Jackson Journal*. Since she knows nothing about cleaning or cooking, she goes to her friend Elizabeth Leefolt's house to ask Aibileen, her maid, some questions. While interviewing her, Skeeter learns that Aibileen's recently deceased son had been writing a book on his experiences working for white men in Mississippi. Seeing firsthand how her friends treat their maids, Skeeter, who wants to be a writer herself, gets the idea to interview Aibileen about her experiences for a book about black domestic workers in the South.

At first, Aibileen declines to be interviewed for fear of losing her job or being targeted by white racists for publically criticizing white women. Aibileen changes her mind in order to help stop the racism that people like Miss Hilly are perpetuating in Jackson. Minny also tells her stories to Skeeter, but all the other maids in the community are too scared to talk. Skeeter also steals a book on the Jim Crow laws, which Hilly unluckily finds in her satchel. Thinking that Skeeter may be a secret integrationist, Hilly distances herself from her and tells the other women in the community to shun her.

Hilly's maid, Yule May, steals a ring from Hilly so that she can afford to put her twins through college. Yule had originally asked Hilly for a loan before stealing the ring, but Hilly had refused. Despite the fact that Yule May was a loyal maid for so many years, Hilly uses her influence to have Yule thrown in jail overnight. Seething with anger at the injustice, the other maids agree to contribute their stories to Skeeter's book.

When the book is nearly complete, Skeeter starts to worry that the maid's pseudonyms won't be enough to stop the Jackson housewives from figuring out that the book is about them. Minny decides to tell Aibileen and Skeeter about what she did to Hilly as "protection." As revenge for ruining her chances of finding work, Minny baked Hilly a **pie** with her own feces in it and fed it to her. When Hilly reads this story in the book, she'll know for sure that the book is about Jackson, but she'll also use her influence to steer people away from coming to the same conclusion about the setting so that she can protect herself from the humiliation of people finding out that she ate a black woman's excrement pie.

When the book gets published, people in Jackson start to realize the book is about them, but Minny's plan works and Hilly tries to convince them otherwise. Skeeter ends up accepting a job as an editorial assistant in New York and, after a tearful goodbye with Aibileen, picks up and goes. Hilly, however, still tries to take revenge on the maids. Figuring out that Aibileen must have had a role in the project, Hilly has Elizabeth fire her. Even so, Aibileen, who has taken over Skeeter's job writing the housekeeping column for the *Jackson Journal*, leaves Miss Leefolt's house feeling unburdened and free now that she's told the stories. The book ends with Aibileen feeling ready to write more about her life and experiences.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Aibileen Clark – One of the novel's three narrators, Aibileen is a wise but reserved middle-aged black maid who takes pride in knowing that she has helped raise seventeen white children in her lifetime. Aibileen cares the most about two people in this world: her best friend Minny Jackson and Mae Mobley, the white girl she raises over the course of novel. As the novel's moral compass, Aibileen is a warm, compassionate woman who bears racial oppression with a quiet resilience. Aibileen has the uncanny ability to see the good in any person, but the death of her son Treelore causes a "**bitter seed**" to grow inside her that makes her less tolerant of racist housewives like her employer Miss Leefolt and Leefolt's friend Miss Hilly. This bitterness prompts her to help Miss Skeeter reveal the truth about how these women treat their maids. Her moral principles and desire to hold Jackson accountable for its oppression of black domestic workers then gives her the strength to continue working on the project, despite the dangers threatening her.

Minny Jackson – Another narrator and protagonist, Minny Jackson is a wise-cracking mother of five who refuses to curb her outspoken personality even though it gets her into trouble with her white employers. Quick-tempered and fiery, Minny always has a sharp word or a joke on the tip of her tongue, but her tough, sarcastic exterior hides her vulnerability. Minny's husband Leroy mercilessly beats her, and Miss Hilly tries to ruin her life by spreading racist rumors about her. In spite of all this, Minny remains fiercely determined to provide for children and give them a better life. Spurned by white people her entire

life, Minny is suspicious of her white employer Celia Foote, but soon learns of Celia's compassion and strength. By the end of the novel, they develop a deep, loving friendship that transcends the racial divide.

Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan – The third narrator and protagonist, Skeeter is a young white college graduate who comes from a wealthy Southern family. Strong-willed and individualistic, Skeeter is frustrated by the sexist expectations society has of her. Her mother Charlotte often pressures her to be more ladylike and to find a man to marry. Skeeter wants to be a famous writer, not a housewife, though she does feel compelled to take the more conventional path when the handsome Stuart Whitworth Jr. shows a romantic interest in her. Though best friends with Hilly and Elizabeth Leefolt, she pulls away from them when she starts writing her book, *Help*, with Aibileen and Minny. Writing the book leads her to realize what injustices white housewives like her friends have committed against the black women of Jackson.

Hilly Holbrook – The novel's antagonist, Hilly is on the surface the ideal of the Southern housewife: loyal to her husband, adored by her friends and neighbors, and loving to her two children. But underneath the surface, Hilly harbors viciously racist beliefs that spur her to treat the black women in the novel as if they were subhuman. Hilly jeopardizes Minny's financial security by spreading vindictive rumors about her, also uses her influence in the white community to have her own maid, Yule May, sentenced to four years in prison just for stealing one of her rings. As conniving as she is heartless, Hilly influences the other white women to accept her beliefs, spearheading a campaign to pass a bill that would require every Mississippi household to have a separate **bathroom** for black domestic workers. In the end, Minny takes revenge on Hilly by including in Skeeter's book the story about feeding her the **"special ingredient" pie.**

Celia Foote – The kind but clueless employer of Minny Jackson, Celia comes from a poor "white trash" background and does not know the conventions of how a white woman is "supposed" to treat her black maid as inferior. As a result, she treats Minny with kindness and respect. Hilly, Elizabeth Leefolt, and the rest of the white Jackson housewives shun her because of her lower class status. Internalizing society's expectations of her as a woman, Celia feels shame that she cannot give her husband, Johnny Foote, a baby. As a result of Minny's friendship and sage advice, Celia learns to put less weight on what society expects from her.

Elizabeth Leefolt – Aibileen's employer, Elizabeth is a neglectful and verbally abusive mother to Mae Mobley. She, Hilly, and Skeeter have been best friends since elementary school. Elizabeth tries to hide her family's low income so that she can gain access to Jackson's high society. Elizabeth is also seriously lacking in moral convictions. Elizabeth builds a separate **bathroom** for Aibileen just so she can seem more wealthy and fit in with Hilly and her high society friends.

Mae Mobley Leefolt – The young daughter of Elizabeth Leefolt, Mae Mobley loves her maid, Aibileen, more than her actual mother. Due to her mother's negligence, Mae Mobley lacks self-confidence, but Aibileen tries to instill in her the belief that she is good and valuable. Mae Mobley is too young "see" race—she doesn't form judgments based on the color of people's skins—but Aibileen worries that her mother will soon teach her to see black people as inferior to white people. Aibileen successfully teaches Mae Mobley that there is no inherent difference between black and white people other than skin color. Mae Mobley internalizes this lesson and passes it on to her little brother, Ross.

Stuart Whitworth, Jr. – The son of a prominent segregationist senator, Stuart courts Skeeter throughout the novel. Stuart's recent break-up with his fiancé Patricia shakes him to the core, making him drink heavily and insult those around him. What depresses Stuart the most is the shame he feels for breaking-up with Patricia in order not to hurt his father's political campaign, showing that he values what his parents think of him over the possibility for love. But Stuart is also kind, providing support and motivation to Skeeter to keep writing. Ultimately, however, he's too invested in the racist status-quo of Mississippi to see the value of Skeeter's book and breaks up with her because, once again, he fears it may hurt his father's political ambitions. Still a loyal man, Stuart does not tell anyone about Skeeter's book.

Constantine Bates – Skeeter's childhood maid, Constantine is like a second mother to her, providing love and compassion. The novel begins in the months after Constantine has left Jackson for Chicago without telling Skeeter. Throughout the novel, Skeeter tries to find out what happened to her, eventually learning the truth from Aibileen. Ashamed that her daughter Lulabelle was pale-skinned, Constantine gave her up for adoption when she was four. But Constantine feels guilt over this moment of weakness and ultimately tries to redeem herself by leaving Jackson to go live with her estranged daughter in Chicago. Over sixty years old, Constantine only lives in Chicago for three weeks before she dies.

Charlotte Phelan – Skeeter's mother, Charlotte is an old-fashioned Southern woman who tries to persuade her daughter to conform to gender norms. Though dying of cancer, Charlotte is a fighter and is still alive at the end of the novel. Charlotte also harbors racist beliefs that she never renounces. Even though Constantine had been like a mother to Skeeter, she fires her just because her daughter Lulabelle pretended to be white and mingled with her white friends.

Yule May – Miss Hilly's college-educated maid who steals a ring to pay for her twins' college education. Yule May asked Miss Hilly for a loan, but when she refused, she resorted to theft in order to give her boys the opportunity to get an education. In revenge, Miss Hilly has her thrown in jail. Miss Hilly's heartless

dealings with Yule May, a beloved member of the black community, motivates the other maids to tell Skeeter their stories in order to try to fight against the racism that black domestic workers face.

Miss Walters – Hilly's aging mother and Minny's employer at the beginning of the novel, Miss Walters is a kind but senile woman who appreciates Minny's outspoken personality. She shows that she is a good-humored woman with a sense of justice when she sides with Minny during the incident with the "**special ingredient" pie**.

Lulabelle Bates – Constantine's pale-skinned daughter who returns to Jackson while Skeeter is away at college. Disdainful of the racist white community, she embarrasses Charlotte Phelan by socializing with her white friends. A self-respecting woman, she spits in Charlotte's face when Charlotte tells her to get out of her house as if she were a stray dog.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Elaine Stein – Elaine Stein is the confident New York City book agent who inspires Skeeter to write her book about the maids. Elaine's high-power career in New York lets Skeeter see that there are opportunities open to women other than becoming a wife, mother, and homemaker.

Johnny Foote – Celia's kindhearted husband who deeply loves his wife, Johnny grew up in a wealthy Southern family. Johnny is the former boyfriend of Miss Hilly, but broke up with her so that he could start dating Celia. Because of his love for his childhood maid, he treats Minny with respect.

Treelore – Aibileen's son whose death causes the **"bitter seed"** to develop inside of her. Before his accidental death, Treelore was writing a book about working for white bosses in Mississippi, a project that motivates Aibileen to tell her own stories to Skeeter.

Medgar Evers – A real historical figure, the NAACP civil rights activist who was shot and killed by a white pro-segregationist outside his home in Jackson.

Martian Luther King – To teach Mae Mobley about civil rights and Martin Luther King, Jr., Aibileen tells her a story about the alien "Martian" Luther King who was discriminated against because he had green skin.

Robert Brown – Treelore's childhood friend who loses his eyesight after a group of white men beat him for using the white's only **bathroom**.

Louvenia Brown – Robert Brown's kind grandmother.

Pascagoula – A quiet woman, Pascagoula is the current maid at Skeeter's home.

Gretchen – The maid who accuses Skeeter of profiting from the other maids' stories.

Lou Anne – A white women who treats her maid with kindness. Lou Anne tells Skeeter that it was a good thing that she wrote the book.

Stuart Whitworth – A segregationist senator, an alcoholic, and father to Stuart Whitworth Jr.

Francine Whitworth – Stuart Jr.'s mother and lover of all things related to the Civil War and the Confederate States of America.

Leroy Jackson – Minny's abusive husband who beats her just for the pleasure of it. Minny leaves him at the end of the novel.

Ross Leefolt – Elizabeth Leefolt's second child, whom Mae Mobley tries to teach the fundamentals of tolerance.

Mammy – The fictional maid from *Gone with the Wind*. Minny thinks the character is a bad portrayal of a black woman because she is too timid and seems to enjoy slavery.

Scarlet O'Hara – The main character in *Gone with the Wind* whose family owns the slave Mammy.

Miss Myrna – The original author of the housekeeping column who has a mental breakdown.

Patricia – Stuart's former fiancé who sleeps with a civil rights activist and then goes to live in California. She calls Stuart a "whore" for his father and for the state of Mississippi.

Raleigh Leefolt – Elizabeth Leefolt's husband who is mostly absent throughout the novel.

William Holbrook – Hilly's husband who is running for a position in local government.

Dr. Tate – The stern doctor who helps Celia recover from the miscarriage and tells Minny that Celia is lazy.

Carleton Phelan –Skeeter's mostly silent father who expresses distain for the violent racism of the South.

Carleton Phelan, Jr. – Skeeter's brother who gives her the nickname "skeeter" because she looked like a mosquito as a baby.

Robert E. Lee – The famous Confederate Army general who slept in a bed at Stuart Whitworth's house during the war.

Heather Holbrook – Hilly's first child. Aibileen is surprised how Hilly, a normally heartless woman, treats her daughter with attention and care.

William Holbrook, Jr. – Hilly's second child, whom she also treats with love.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACISM

At its core, *The Help* is an exploration of the ways in which racism pervaded every aspect of social life in 1960s Jackson, Mississippi – from Jim Crow laws that sanctioned discrimination and segregation as official policy to casual conversations between middle-class white women. In particular, the novel focuses on how white housewives justified the exploitation and emotional abuse of their black maids by convincing themselves that black people are fundamentally different from – and inferior to – white people. Miss Hilly openly expresses the belief that African-Americans are figuratively and literally "unclean," prone to moral depravity and infectious diseases not carried by whites. On a larger scale, almost every white woman in the novel performs the social practices that reinforce the institutional separation of whites and blacks under Jim Crow-era law. The white women don't let their maids touch them, sit at their table, or share their food. These everyday practices dehumanize the maids and make it easier for the housewives to exploit their maids' labor.

The novel investigates and portrays how racism is not inherent to human nature, but is instead passed down generation to generation by way of education. Up to a certain point, white children in the novel are "colorblind": they do not form any racial prejudices about the black maids who raise them. But, as Aibileen has learned from her experience raising seventeen white children, the kids start to see racial differences when their parents and teachers enforce prevailing racist attitudes. When Mae Mobley draws a picture of herself with a black crayon, her teacher scolds her, saying that black people are "dirty" and she should draw herself as white unless she wants people to think she's "dirty" too. To maintain the racial hierarchy in the South that allows whites tremendous amounts of political and economic power over African-Americans, adult members of society give their children a disturbing inheritance: the belief that they are inherently superior to blacks.

However, the novel also provides a framework for how individuals can fight racism, or at least refuse to participate in its perpetuation, by establishing channels of honest and empathetic communication across color lines. After witnessing the disrespect with which her white friends treat their maids, Miss Skeeter risks spurring the violent anger of her community by helping the maids publish their stories about working for white families. Skeeter tries to see the world through the eyes of the maids, and makes the rather obvious realization that they too are valuable humans with the same capacity for emotion and intelligence as her white peers. By recognizing the essential humanity of these women, Skeeter comes to realize that the institutional laws and social practices that separate people based on race are unethical and founded on a social framework of lies and exploitation. As a result, she ultimately leaves her friends and family in the South rather than continue living in such a blindly racist community. This ability to simply leave, however, is a privilege Skeeter retains as a wealthy white woman, while the maids at the heart of the story don't have such an opportunity.

GENDER AND THE HOME

Focused as it is on female characters—white and black—*The Help* portrays how the home, a traditionally feminine space, was just as much a battleground for social change as were the courtrooms and rallies of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. While Aibileen describes how white men beat or kill black men who "stepped out of line," the novel also shows how white women used their social influence to ruin the lives of the black maids in more indirect but similarly devastating ways. A white woman could have her maid fired, her maid's husband fired, their house repossessed, or even have her maid sent to jail for as small an infraction as a parking ticket.

But the maids find ways to fight such racial injustice. The maids call themselves "domestic workers," which literally means that the home is their workplace. For white women, the home is a private space where they have control and authority in an otherwise sexist society, but for black women, the white woman's home is a public space of labor in which they must fight to earn respect and fairness. While Aibileen tries to inspire racial tolerance in the children she raises as a way to fight large-scale racial injustice, Minny refuses to curb her personality, demanding that the housewives see her as a human being with a distinct identity rather than as a nameless and obedient servant. These battles may not have been recorded by the news or in textbooks, but Stockett illustrates how the maids' resistance to racism in the home, the heart of Southern society, plays a vital part in changing the hearts and minds of women and children in the fight for civil rights.

Through the character of Skeeter, *The Help* also exposes the double standards *white* women faced in the South during the 1960s. Skeeter chafes against the sexist Southern culture that expects white women to marry, stay home, and have children as soon as possible, while white men are allowed the freedom to explore their passions in the workforce. In contrast, other female characters like Skeeter's mother and Miss Hilly embrace gender norms and try to enforce them on Skeeter by setting her up on dates or advising her on clothing choices. This pressure also comes from men like Stuart Whitworth, who tries to shame Skeeter into giving up her career goals because they are outside the approved norms for a woman. At the other end of the spectrum, book agent Elaine Stein's high-powered career provides a model for Skeeter of an alternative lifestyle beyond the proscribed path of becoming a Southern wife, mother, and homemaker.

Ultimately, Skeeter bucks the sexist conventions that dictate that her place is only in the home: instead of participating in domestic life as a wife and mother, she writes a book that

exposes the racial injustices in the Southern home. Skeeter's sense of being oppressed by gender norms might make her more sensitive to the even more powerful forms of racial oppression, inspiring her determination to address the racism faced by the black domestic workers. This personal rebellion against sexist and racist attitudes in Jackson empowers her, giving her the inner confidence to reject her community and its expectations of her. Instead of passively abiding by society standards for women, she goes on at the novel's end to craft a more authentic self as a writer living in New York City.

SOCIAL CLASS

The Help offers an in-depth meditation on the complicated effects that class has on people's social interactions, specifically with regards to race. *The Help* portrays class as providing the basis for Jackson's tiered white society: the wealthy and "well-bred" are at the top, setting the social conventions and attitudes for everyone else below. Elizabeth Leefolt and Celia Foote exemplify opposing ways of how a white Southern woman can navigate social class. Elizabeth comes from a "good" family, but her lack of monetary inheritance and her husband's low income mean that she cannot fully integrate into wealthy high society. As a result, Elizabeth conceals her family's lack of wealth with symbols of class, specifically by hiring a maid she can barely afford to pay. A maid confers class status to the average white 1960s Southern woman, since having a maid distances the housewife from the physical labor required to run a household, especially as physical labor is associated with black people and the lower class. However, this desire to increase her class status makes her less racially sensitive. For example, in order to appear wealthy and follow the conventions of her racist society, Elizabeth gives in to Miss Hilly's suggestion that she build a separate **bathroom** for "the help."

Celia Foote's social standing is the exact opposite of Elizabeth's. Since Celia comes from a poor, "white trash" family but marries into a wealthy one, she lacks knowledge of the largely unspoken rules of middle-class white conduct. Thus she treats Minny, her maid, with more respect, since Celia is unaware of how white women are "supposed" to treat black people as inferior—even though this seems culturally inaccurate, since racism is not limited to the upper class or correlated to wealth at all. In the world of the novel, however, Celia's low class means she holds less racist attitudes. Even so, the allure of acceptance into high Southern society tempts Celia, and she risks letting her upper-class peers' racist influence shape her attitudes. By the end of the novel, however, her inability to assimilate into high society turns her once and for all against the discriminatory attitudes of the wealthier-born white women. Rejected by her wealthy neighbors, Celia has a sense of what it means to be unfairly discriminated against. While she is still generally blind to her own privilege, this experience does give her the empathetic sensitivity to treat Minny, a fellow outcast, with respect and human kindness.

HELP VS. HYPOCRISY

"Help" normally signifies the giving of free services or resources to those in need, but the novel's title refers directly to the underpaid black domestic workers who, paradoxically, are the ones "helping" their wealthier and more powerful employers, people who have no real need of help. By referring to these women as "the help," the white housewives uphold the illusion that the maids are like volunteers who *want*—or should be grateful for the opportunity—to work for less than minimum wage, and for families that treat them as subhuman. The white women refuse to even consider that they could be the ones "helping" the maids by promoting civil rights in white communities.

This irrational and absurd system in which poor black people "help" the rich whites gives way to widespread hypocrisy in white society. Miss Hilly believes that her **bathroom** bill and Jim Crow segregation laws actually "help" black people. She even takes the moral high ground by raising funds to "help" needy children in Africa, but this is actually a false generosity meant to raise her class status as a charitable woman. Hilly is not capable of understanding that this desire is rooted in a racist paternalism that infantilizes black people as completely *helpless*, adding further irony to the fact that the black domestic workers are actually the ones "helping" their white employers. If Hilly truly cared about generosity and not merely the *appearance* of generosity, she would provide fair wages to the woman working in very own her kitchen – *not* as an act of charity but as a way of amending a social injustice.

The question of help becomes most complicated with regards to the relationship between the maids and the white children they raise. Stockett depicts this relationship as if the maids were as close with the children as a mother would be, despite the fact the maids are being paid to raise and be kind to the children. Unlike real mothers, they aren't allowed to snap or yell at the children, so it is no wonder the children love them more than their actual mothers. But Aibileen seems to genuinely care for Mae Mobley, wanting to give her the self-confidence she'll need to deal with her verbally abusive mother when she's older. While Aibileen's emotions may be genuine, the economic relationship between maid and employer – which makes the bond between maid and child possible – ensures that Mae Mobley will never be able to love Aibileen for who Aibileen really is. Instead, Mae Mobley's image of Aibileen will always be corrupted the fact that she was, on one level, just a kind maid who was paid to "mother" her.

Skeeter models a truer form of "help," however, by risking her own life and reputation to give the maids a platform to tell their stories. The maids have never received help from a white

person before, so at first they are suspicious that Skeeter would risk "helping the help." As the maids come to see her desire to help as a form of genuine concern for the plight of the African-American community, they agree to tell their stories. By the novel's conclusion, the maids realize that Skeeter's help consists not of monetary charity but a dogged attempt to learn about their lives in an effort to transcend racial divides and cultivate a mutual and genuine understanding based on human compassion.

WRITING, STORYTELLING, AND FREEDOM

The theme of writing is threaded throughout *The Help*, as the novel melds fact and fiction to showcase the power of storytelling. In an act of defiance against the gender norms of her time, Miss Skeeter seeks self-determination through the act of writing. As a white woman in her society, she would have been expected to maintain the social order, to not "stir up trouble." Skeeter's book allows her to pit herself against not only the racist attitudes of her friends but also the limitations imposed on women's freedom of expression. Since Miss Skeeter is a stand-in for the author, Kathryn Stockett, the novel even suggests that the writing of the book *The Help* provided Stockett with an opportunity to bridge the racial divides that she witnessed growing up in her Mississippi community.

Intimately related to the theme of writing is the idea of freedom. In the homes, the maids, unable to speak their mind without being fired, often say no more than "Yes, Ma'am." But Skeeter's book gives them the chance to record their voices, ones that are undervalued by society, so that the maids might make their mark on history. Their stories do help advance the cause of civil rights, spurring some white women in their neighborhood to educate themselves about race relations and initiate moments of dialogue with their black maids.

The connection between freedom and writing becomes most clear in Minny's and Aibileen's narratives. Minny considers the stories as an act of freedom, stories that let her reveal the secret emotions she's been repressing as a maid. These stories and the truths she reveals unburden her, giving her a psychological freedom she never knew she was missing. Though publication of the book gets Aibileen fired, she finds new employment writing an advice column, which gives her the financial freedom to stop working for racist white families. But more metaphorically, writing provides Aibileen with the freedom to assert her individuality. As a black maid, she cannot express herself publically without fear of white violence, but writing under a pseudonym gives her the freedom to tell the truth of her experiences in her own words. The novel ends with Aibileen thinking about the future, and about the stories she now has the freedom to tell.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BATHROOMS

While Jim Crow-era laws enforced racial segregation in the South on a state and local level, the everyday beliefs and social behaviors of Southern whites were just as central to the continued segregation of African-Americans as the actual laws themselves. For example, many white people in the novel believe that black people carry unique diseases that can be transmitted to others by using the same toilet seat. Miss Hilly uses this blatantly racist belief to convince other white women to build separate bathrooms for their black maids. In this way, segregated bathrooms represent the private beliefs and social practices that reinforce and expand institutional segregationist laws. Some other examples of these beliefs include the taboo in white communities against sitting at the same table with black people or sharing the same utensils. Over the course of the novel, Skeeter realizes that to overcome racism in the South, people must overturn the Jim Crows laws while also working to undo the private racist beliefs and social practices that would perpetuate racism and segregation even if the laws no longer existed. Since bathrooms are one of the most private spaces in the home, which is already a private space, overcoming segregation there represents overcoming a particularly challenging hurdle on the path towards equal rights.

MINNY'S "SPECIAL INGREDIENT" PIE

Minny is famous for her chocolate-custard pies, and many people have hired her just to get their hands on her cooking. Minny's food is so good that her employers will tolerate her "sass" and outspoken personality just so they can continue eating her food. Minny takes pride in her baking skills, and the pies are her signature dish, the outward manifestation of her unique talents and the guarantee that her employers won't fire her for expressing herself in the otherwise repressive environment of the white household. But Minny also uses pies to subvert the power dynamics in the home. After Miss Hilly jeopardizes Minny's chances of ever finding work again, Minny makes a chocolate custard pie including the "special ingredient" of her own feces, and watches Hilly savor two slices of it before telling her the truth. Minny humiliates and degrades Hilly as an act of revenge, but also gains a kind power over her. Now Minny has something to hold over Hilly's head, a secret she can reveal if Hilly continues to spread rumors about her. This act of subversion also targets Hilly's racist belief that black people carry diseases. In essence, by feeding Hilly two slices of excrement pie without her getting

sick, Minny illustrates in a decidedly extreme way the simple truth that black people do not carry racially-specific diseases.

THE BITTER SEED

Aibileen often refers to the "bitter seed" that began growing inside of her after the death of her son Treelore. The seed makes Aibileen less accepting of the white women who treat her like a lesser human being, and she often feels the seed growing every time a white woman humiliates or degrades her. The seed represents how racism can make even the most gentle and compassionate people justifiably bitter. Aibileen uses this bitterness in a productive way, however. The seed gives her the motivation to get back at the white housewives by helping Skeeter reveal their private lives in the book. If Aibileen stayed the timid, forgiving woman she was before her son's death, then she would never have had the internal impetus to fight back against oppression and racism in her society. In this way, the bitter seed is a painful but politically beneficial reminder of all that Aibileen has endured in Jackson.

THE MIMOSA TREE

The mimosa tree in Celia Foote's backyard represents her repressed hatred of the gender norms that she has internalized. Throughout the novel, Celia is confined to her home, unwilling to leave for fear she will have a miscarriage. Guilty about her inability to give her husband Johnny a baby, Celia is so attached to the idea of the importance of motherhood that she imprisons herself in the home so as to increase her chances of carrying the baby to term. Though she hates the mimosa tree, she is unwilling to get out of bed and chop it down for fear of losing the baby and letting down her husband. She even describes the tree as having disgusting hairs like those of a baby. Her disgust at the thought of baby hairs reveals her repressed aversion towards motherhood, so cutting down the tree would represent her triumph over society's expectation that she become a mother. At one point her husband plans to cuts it down for her, but ultimately he does not, symbolically suggesting that Celia must be the one to overcome the gender norms – no man can do it for her. Only after Minny—in an act of sisterhood that transcends racial divides—convinces Celia of own self-worth does she find the strength to leave the house, cut down the tree, and let go of the societal expectations that she should become a mother.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Berkley Books edition of *The Help* published in 2009.

Chapter 1 Quotes

Taking care a white babies, that's what I do, along with all the cooking and the cleaning. I done raised seventeen kids in my lifetime. I know how to get them babies to sleep, stop crying, and go in the toilet bowl before they mamas even get out a bed in the morning.

Related Characters: Aibileen Clark (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

As *The Help* opens in Chapter One, Aibileen describes Mae Mobley's birth and then immediately says these words. Though this quote serves as Aibileen's first self-introduction, it do not directly inform us about Aibileen's own past. Rather, it fittingly describes our compassionate protagonist as she relates to others (such as the seventeen children she raised). Aibileen's story (through Skeeter's writing) will become a force of social change, a story which benefits a society.

This introduction gives us a sense of who this society is. Although Aibileen does not directly mention that she lives in Jackson, Mississippi, her dialect already suggests this Southern setting. She also alludes to the tensions between Southern maids and "mamas," who co-exist in the same homes yet are divided by institutionalized and personal racism. Perhaps the most blatant sign of this personal racism occurs when housewives forbid their maids from using their houses' restrooms; the "toilet bowl" and the bathroom become particularly fraught with cultural tensions as *The Help* continues.

In this first quote we are also introduced to the way Stockett tries to replicate a Southern Black dialect in her narrative. While this is most historically realistic in writing from the perspective of a character like Aibileen, and Stockett seems to be well-intentioned, this conceit also been seen as condescending and even racist by many critics—those who essentially claim that no matter Stockett's personal intentions, the long history of oppression and racism in America make it inappropriate for a white woman to casually assume the dialect of a black maid in order to further her own personal causes (like selling this book).

Got to be the worst place in the world, inside a oven. You in here, you either cleaning or you getting cooked. Tonight I just know I'm on have that dream I'm stuck inside and the gas gets turned on. But I keep my head in that awful place cause I'd rather be anywhere sides answering Miss Leefolt's questions about what Miss Skeeter was trying to say to me. Asking do I want to *change* things.

Related Characters: Aibileen Clark (speaker), Elizabeth Leefolt, Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Skeeter has a brief conversation with Aibileen in the kitchen, during which Skeeter expresses disgust about Hilly's Home Help Sanitation Initiative and naively asks Aibileen if she wishes she could "change things." Aibileen then starts to clean the oven. With her head inside the oven, Aibileen reflects on the oven's interior—a hot, stifling place which is intimately associated with domestic servitude ("cooking and cleaning"). This suffocating space functions as a compressed symbol of the South; although its small size contrasts with the expansive plantations on which slaves toiled, the oven represents the smaller homes which now limit the lives of female Southern workers in the 1960s. And racism is still what forces that limitation, as Aibileen keeps her head in the oven to avoid the repercussions of Miss Leefolt's racism and oppressive power over her.

However, our narrator Aibileen does not directly describe this symbolism herself. She has worked as a housemaid for decades and does not believe that she could suddenly have the power to "change things." At the moment, in fact, she is trying to *avoid* facing the repercussions for Skeeter's actions. Right now, Aibileen's employer Elizabeth Leefolt is lingering in the kitchen, upset and curious about Aibileen and Skeeter's previous conversation. If Miss Leefolt directly asks Aibileen about Skeeter's question and this previous conversation, then Aibileen would be forced to tell her about Skeeter's critique of the status quo. And Aibileen knows that, given Miss Leefolt's racism and the power she holds over Aibileen, it would be Aibileen whom Leefolt would blame, not Skeeter.

Chapter 2 Quotes

I put the iron down 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. And I know she ain't saying what she want a say either and it's a strange thing happening here cause nobody saying nothing and we still managing to have us a conversation.

Related Characters: Aibileen Clark (speaker), Treelore, Elizabeth Leefolt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

While Aibileen was ironing, Miss Leefolt comes over to inform Aibileen that she has a "surprise" for Aibileen: "her very own bathroom" in the garage. However, Miss Leefolt is not just giving Aibileen a bathroom to use; she is implying that Aibileen is unsanitary, and so shouldn't share a bathroom with the white family she works for.In this conversation, Miss Leefolt keeps her racist thoughts and racist fears about supposed "diseases" superficially hidden under not just a veneer of politeness, but a veneer of generosity: her "gift" of a bathroom for Aibileen is in fact a way to stop Aibileen from using the same bathrooms that Miss Leefolt and her family use, and to keep Aibileen feeling separate and dehumanized. Aibileen similarly keeps her true reactions to herself, making this conversation a case of "nobody saying nothing."

Miss Leefolt and Aibileen keep their feelings hidden as well as their words. Aibileen particularly describes her emotions as a "bitter seed ... in my chest," which she first felt after her skinny, bookish son Treelore was crushed by a tractor during a work shift. Treelore was not physically suited for such a demanding mill job, but had to resort to such work because of the racist social structure in which he lived. Yet Treelore's sacrifice was not in vain; it motivates Aibileen throughout the novel, first making her "tongue twitchy" but eventually encouraging her to say her words in stories if she cannot say them directly.

Chapter 4 Quotes

She's got so many azalea bushes, her yard's going to look like *Gone With the Wind* come spring. I don't like azaleas and 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 of told Scarlett to stick those green draperies up her white little pooper. Make her own damn man-catching dress.

Related Characters: Minny Jackson (speaker), Scarlet O'Hara, Mammy, Celia Foote

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

While working as Celia Foote's maid, Minny watches the television show "The Guiding Light" each day. Celia Foote rather unusually joins her maid during this ritual. Right now, while "The Guiding Light" is on the television, Celia is lying on the couch, staring through the back window and looking at the azalea bushes.

Minny looks out at these bushes as well. Like the antiques and heirlooms in the Foote's mansion, these bushes reflect Mississippi's past. They remind Minny of the beautiful setting of the movie "Gone with the Wind," and the way that nostalgic views of the South's past cover up slavery's brutality. Celia Foote—a welcoming employer—starkly contrasts with most white women from the South's past and present.

Minny particularly thinks about Mammy, the slave from the movie who helped Scarlett make a "man-catching dress." Like Mammy, Minny is helping a white woman attract and please her man. Instead of helping Celia improve her appearance, though, Minny allows Celia to claim credit for all of Minny's cooking—and hopefully gain her husband's respect. Despite Celia's good intentions and charms, she is still using Minny just as Scarlett used Mammy in "Gone with the Wind."

Chapter 5 Quotes

"Now you look a here, Eugenia"—because Constantine was the only one who'd occasionally follow Mama's rule. "Ugly live up on the inside. Ugly be a hurtful, mean person."

Related Characters: Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan, Constantine Bates (speaker), Charlotte Phelan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

During a sequence of flashback scenes about Skeeter's childhood, and particularly about her relationship to her family's black maid Constantine, Skeeter describes a scene that occurred when she was thirteen. Skeeter was crying, distraught that one of her brother's friends called her "ugly." Constantine found Skeeter in the kitchen and told her these words.

Constantine's characterization of "ugly" as a defect in one's personality (which makes someone a "hurtful, mean person") demonstrates how Constantine has a wiser, more mature interpretation of the world than Skeeter's mother does. While Skeeter's mother is concerned about the superficial surface of Skeeter's appearance (because she hopes that her daughter will marry well and attract a suitable man), Constantine focuses on the richness of people's internal lives. Here, she does not treat Skeeter according to her appearance; unlike most, she even avoids using Skeeter's nickname, which Skeeter received because she looked unattractive ("long and leggy and mosquito-thin") even as a baby. Constantine transcends social as well as physical veneers; here, she treats Skeeter as an individual, who can choose what she will believe, instead of simply viewing Skeeter as the white child of her employer.

Chapter 6 Quotes

I wonder if I'll ever write anything worth anything at all. I turn when I hear Pascagoula's knock on my door. That's when the idea comes to me.
No. I couldn't. That would be... crossing the line.
But the idea won't go away.

Related Characters: Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan (speaker), Pascagoula

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

After Skeeter receives another letter from Elaine Stein (the editor at Harper & Row Publishers who personally rejected Skeeter's job application and encouraged Skeeter to send her an original piece of journalism "about what disturbs you"), and Stein rejects all of Skeeter's unoriginal ideas,

Skeeter notices the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* on her window ledge. Inspired by this book, which describes and pictures the lives of Southern sharecroppers who lived during the Great Depression, Skeeter has "the idea": the (admittedly inspired and not entirely original) thought to write and publish a depiction of how black Southern maids must now live.

Skeeter knows that she could be "crossing the line" if she sees this idea to fruition; she is cognizant of the social and racist boundaries which would cause others to view her project with anger, hostility, or any particular form of disapproval. Yet Skeeter is a stubborn individual; this idea has taken root in her mind, and some combination of altruism (for the plight of maids such as her beloved Constantine) and selfishness (for her own journalistic career and sense of righteousness) will impel her to more forward with "the idea" that "won't go away" any more than her resolve will.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ I want to yell so loud that Baby Girl can hear me that dirty ain't a color, disease ain't the negro side of town. I want to stop that moment from coming – and it come in every white child's life – when they start to think that colored folks are not as good as whites.

Related Characters: Aibileen Clark (speaker), Mae Mobley Leefolt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

After Miss Hilly sees Mae Mobley attempt to use Aibileen's toilet, she orders Aibileen to leave her alone with her daughter -- only to repeatedly spank Mae Mobley and, in supposedly whispered tones, declare that Aibileen and her bathroom are "dirty" and ridden with "disease." This disturbing scene impels Aibileen to want to scream the truth (that, as she remarks, "dirty ain't a color, disease ain't the negro side of town"). However, Aibileen cannot say anything in this situation, as she stands in her employer's kitchen. Again we see Aibileen's inability to share her thoughts and words because of her relatively powerless position in society.

Aibileen knows that Mae Mobley will, eventually, "start to think" of black people as inferior. This fact underscores the conditioned nature of racism; racist thoughts are inspired by cultural and social surroundings. Children such as Mae Mobley must be taught to be racist. For now, though, Mae Mobley serves as a reminder that change may happen in the future and in future generations.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Aibileen just stood there and I wished I wasn't in the room. *Please*, I thought, *please don't say thank you.*
"Yes ma'am." Aibileen opened a drawer and reached inside, but Hilly kept looking at her. It was so obvious what she wanted. Another second passed with no one moving. Hilly cleared her throat and finally Aibileen lowered her head. "Thank you, ma'am," she whispered. She walked back into the kitchen. It's no wonder she doesn't want to talk to me.

Related Characters: Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan (speaker), Hilly Holbrook, Aibileen Clark

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

While Hilly is at Elizabeth's house one day, Hilly tells Aibileen that her husband was responsible for the construction of Aibileen's bathroom. After Hilly describes this, she clearly waits for Aibileen to say thank you, creating the silence and social tension present in this passage. Hilly acts as if Aibileen's bathroom is a gift (a form of "help" for the help), ignoring this bathroom's other implications: that black women are "dirty" or disease-ridden and that racially-segregated spaces are more suitable than integrated ones.

Skeeter knows that this form of help from the Holbrooks is hypocritical, but again her view of social degradation becomes about Skeeter's own emotions. Skeeter reflects that Aibileen likely doesn't want to talk to her because of her friendship with Hilly. Of course, Aibileen could also not wish to talk to Skeeter because of Skeeter's own actions. Earlier, Skeeter attempted to bribe Aibileen into participating in her project. Skeeter tried to give Aibileen an envelope of money, as thanks for her help with the Miss Myrna letters but also as an incentive to encourage Aibileen to share her story as a maid. As we've seen earlier, even Skeeter is hypocritical; she'd like to help AIbileen but she'd also like to help herself.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ It's something about that word *truth*. I've been trying to tell white women the truth about working for them since I was fourteen years old…Truth. It feels cool, like water washing over my sticky-hot body. Cooling a heat that's been burning me up all my life.
Truth, I say inside my head again, just for that feeling.

Related Characters: Minny Jackson (speaker), Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan, Aibileen Clark

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

Before their church service starts, Aibileen tells Minny about Skeeter's idea to publish a book that tells the truth about black maids' lives. Aibileen had asked Minny to come early to church for this, but Aibileen pretends that she is not going to tell Skeeter her story (because "we don't want a bring all that mess up" and "tell people the truth"). Yet Minny can see through Aibileen's deception and realizes that Aibileen is actually planning on working with Skeeter on this project.

This concept of telling the truth is particularly resonant for Minny in general and in this moment. Through her sass and humor, Minny has been attempting to tell the truth since she first worked for a white woman at the age of fourteen (and was, at that point, fired for sharing her true thoughts). Through helping with Skeeter's project, Minny could speak her story more directly.

Here, Minny also describes the "heat" inside her—a motivating force similar to Aibileen's "bitter seed." Minny and Aibileen both have largely internal motivations for participating in Skeeter's book.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ On my drive home, I want to kick myself. For thinking I could just waltz in and demand answers. For thinking she'd stop feeling like the maid just because we were at her house, because she wasn't wearing a uniform.

Related Characters: Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan (speaker), Aibileen Clark

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

As Skeeter first tries to interview Aibileen about her experiences, Aibileen is terrified. She is only physically able to give short answers, before she, nauseous, leaves the room and likely vomits. The short interview then ends and Skeeter leaves Aibileen's house to drive home.

Finally, we see Skeeter begin to understand her limited perspective. She realizes that Aibileen's job as a maid is more than just a job; it is a confining way of life (so Aibileen cannot "stop feeling like the maid" as soon as she is away from her employers). Skeeter—the white, recent college graduate who is admittedly uninformed about the recent civil rights developments and dangers—begins to see that she is trying to "demand answers" which are difficult to give. She is asking black maids to participate in a dangerous act that violates Southern social norms, when they are one of the most powerless groups in that society (the maids, not Skeeter, will be punished for disrupting the status quo). Now that Skeeter realizes this reality, she finally starts to recognizes her naïveté in her desire to "kick herself."

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ I realize, like a shell cracking open in my head, there's no difference between these government laws and Hilly building Aibileen a bathroom in the garage, except ten minutes' worth of signatures in the state capital.

Related Characters: Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan (speaker), Aibileen Clark, Hilly Holbrook

Related Themes:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

When Skeeter browses at the library and searches for books that might help her describe the lives of black domestic workers, she discovers a booklet which details the "Jim Crow Laws of the South." She reads a few pages, "mesmerized" by the factual and direct wording of these laws, which everyone seems to implicitly know but never openly discusses.

Skeeter makes herself stop reading because she feels this material is off topic; she is writing about maids instead of Southern legislation. However, Skeeter then realizes that "there's no difference" between these simple, matter-of-fact laws that enforce segregation and less direct attempts to separate individual blacks and whites (such as Hilly's attempt to separate Aibileen from Miss Leefolt's regular

bathroom). All of the previous, more personal events of *The Help*are here connected to the larger legislative forces at work in the 1960s.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ I feel my lip curling. A course we different! Everbody know colored people and white people ain't the same. But we still just people! Shoot, I even been hearing Jesus had colored skin living out there in the desert. I press my lips together.

Related Characters: Aibileen Clark (speaker), Elizabeth Leefolt, Hilly Holbrook

Related Themes:

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

One afternoon, Hilly brings her children over to Miss Leefolt's and, while the children are playing, Hilly tries to prod Aibileen into saying that she would prefer segregated schools. When Aibileen refuses to comply with Hilly's implicit command, Hilly responds that"colored people and white people are just so... different."

Now, Aibileen must revert back to her silence; she could only briefly stand up to Hilly. Turning quiet, she reflects that white and black folks are indeed different, but are both "just people." This quote essentially captures the (rather over-simplistic) "moral" of the book—that if everyone would fully recognize that blacks and whites are both "just people," racism would end.

Furthermore, it's likely that Jesus—the supposed center of these religious white women's lives—himself "had colored skin." When Aibileen comments on this, she draws our attention to other characters' hypocritical practice of religion.Religion is a complicated force in *The Help*: we see Aibileen selflessly use prayer to intercede for other members of her community; we see Skeeter pretend to participate in religious gatherings or initiatives in order to disguise her true activities (while she works on her book with Aibileen and Minny); and we see Miss Hilly wholeheartedly believe she is a Christian, despite her attempts to dehumanize the black individuals around her.

❝ But this bag is different. Even what would fit me in that paper sack, I can't wear. Can't give to my friends either. Ever piece in that bag—the culotte pants, the shirt with the Peter Pan collar, the pink jacket with the gravy stain on it, even the socks—they all got the letters *H.W.H.* sewn in. Red thread, pretty little cursive letters. I reckon Yule May had to sew them letters. Wearing those, I'd feel like I's personal-owned property a Hilly W. Holbrook.

Related Characters: Aibileen Clark (speaker), Yule May, Hilly Holbrook

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

While Aibileen sits at her kitchen table, a cockroach scuttles under the unopened bag of clothes which Miss Hilly gave her a few months ago. Although Aibileen often uses clothes which other white women similarly give to her, she knows she could never bring herself to wear a piece of Hilly's donated clothing. The clothes—with their "red thread, pretty little cursive letters"—represent Hilly herself, and indeed have all been marked with her initials, so that Aibileen would feels as if she was almost branded with Hilly's "ownership" if she wore the clothes (a poignant echo of how slavery has ended in the South, but institutionalized oppression has not). With her put-together, elegant appearance, beautiful looking children, and veneer of politeness, Hilly seems to embody the pretense of well-meaning Southern society.

Yet, Aibileen knows what lies under Hilly's appearances. She sees how Hilly's greed for control extends into the way she treats black people as individuals who must obey her demands (as"personal-owned property"). Hilly represents the South that Aibileen attempts to stand up against, through her writing. "Miss Hilly" was Aibileen's reason for helping Skeeter with this project, and when Aibileen refuses to use or even unpack the clothes which Miss Hilly gave her, we see that Aibileen is rising against Hilly in whatever ways she can.

After while, my mind done drifted to where I wish it wouldn't. I reckon I know pretty well what would happen if the white ladies found out we was writing about them, telling the truth a what they really like. Womens, they ain't like men. A woman ain't gone beat you with a stick. Miss Hilly wouldn't pull no pistol on me. Miss Leefolt wouldn't come burn my house down.
No, white womens like to keep they hands clean. They got a shiny little set a tools they use, sharp as witches' fingernails, tidy and laid out neat, like the picks on a dentist tray. They gone take they time with em.

Related Characters: Aibileen Clark (speaker), Elizabeth Leefolt, Hilly Holbrook

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier that afternoon, Aibileen heard Miss Hilly tell Elizabeth "I read it," in regards to something in Skeeter's satchel. Aibileen knows that Hilly might have read her stories, but there is nothing she can do in this situation; she can't even call Skeeter because it would be too difficult to explain why a black woman is calling Skeeter's house. Aibileen can only think about the possible repercussions of her stories. She knows that, if white women such as Hilly or Elizabeth found out, they would use indirect means ("a shiny little set a tools") such as gossip, firing, and manipulation to ensure that Aibileen would lose her life as she knew it—her job, home, and stability.

As Aibileen here describes, and Minny's difficulty finding a job revealed, a white woman can be just as much of a cruel, racist segregationist as her man, although she uses less obvious means. These white women gain their unfortunate power because of their ability to hold a grudge and "take their time." Because women with maids are typically women in well-off homes who lack major economic worries, they can afford to take whatever time they need to fully satisfy their grudge and destroy the lives of those who are powerless.

Chapter 17 Quotes

See, I think if God had intended for white people and colored people to be this close together for so much of the day, he would've made us color-blind. And while Miss Celia's grinning and "good morning" and "glad to see"-ing me, I'm wondering, how did she get this far in life without knowing where the lines are drawn? I mean, a floozy calling the society ladies is bad enough. But she has sat down and eaten lunch with me every single day since I started working here. I don't mean in the same room, I mean at the same *table*. That little one up under the window. Every white woman I've ever worked for ate in the dining room as far away from the colored help as they could. And that was fine with me…There are so many things Miss Celia is just plain *ignorant* about.

Related Characters: Minny Jackson (speaker), Celia Foote

Related Themes:

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

While working for Celia, Minny is constantly reminded how Celia's childhood in Sugar Ditch makes her ignorant about the social tension and segregation in Jackson, Mississippi. Through Celia's naivete (the way she is "just plain ignorant"), we realize that the racism in Jackson is largely upheld by members of the economically higher social class.

Celia's little actions—insisting on eating with her maid, giving Minny a friendly greeting each morning, innocently offering Minny extra money as if Minny was begging for money when she was just venting about her situation—actually grate on Minny, although they seem kind, and Celia's intentions are good. They put Minny in an uncomfortable situation: having to explain and define the social boundaries which constrict her every day as a black maid for a well-off, white woman. It's not just an employer's unkindness that might bother black maids such as Minny; the larger social structure is the real issue at hand. Celia's kindness only underscores the broader, unfortunate realities of racism and institutionalized oppression.

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. And I know there are plenty of other "colored" things I could do besides telling my stories or going to....the mass meetings in town, the marches in Birmingham, the voting rallies upstate. But truth is, I don't care that much about voting. I don't care about eating at a counter with white people. What I care about is, if in ten years, a white lady will call my girls dirty and accuse them of stealing the silver.

Related Characters: Minny Jackson (speaker), Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 256

Explanation and Analysis

When Minny and Aibileen walk home from church one Sunday afternoon, Aibileen asks her to come to that week's "Community Concerns" meeting, only to find out that Minny characteristically spoke up to its organizer at the last meeting and will not be coming to meetings anytime soon. Minny thinks about how much she "needs" to tell Skeeter her stories, though.

She acknowledges that storytelling feels different from more common, more political actions that bring together the black community. Yet, to Minny, storytelling is more important. It provides Minny with a way to address the everyday racism she encounters in the home, which may seem less important (because it focuses on things like being "dirty" or "clean" and everyday actions like polishing silver) but forms the foundation of many maids' lives (because the simple accusation of stealing silver can make a maid unemployed, poor, and fundamentally stuck). As Minny's reflection reveals, black individuals may not always have the time to work towards change in the typical sense because of their family responsibilities or struggles to earn a living. Simply sharing their experiences might be all they can do, but as *The Help* suggests, it may be enough.

Chapter 21 Quotes

"It is my job, Skeeter! You know well as I do, people won't buy so much as a slice of pound cake from an organization that harbors racial integrationists!"
"Hilly." I just need to hear her say it. "Just *who* is all that pound cake money being raised for, anyway?"
She rolls her eyes. "The Poor Starving Children of Africa?"
I wait for her to catch the irony of this, that she'll send money to colored people overseas, but not across town.

Related Characters: Hilly Holbrook, Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 331

Explanation and Analysis

This scene occurs moments before Skeeter calls Hilly a hypocrite for the first time and threatens to tell Hilly's hero Genevieve von Hapsburg (the national League president) about Hilly's hypocrisy. Here, Hilly is enraged that Skeeter has not included the Home Help Sanitation Initiative in any weekly League newsletter over the past five months. Hilly is also upset that Skeeter's blossoming integrationist beliefs could harm the League's image.However, Skeeter is also upset. Stuart broke up with her, she is fed up with Hilly's only superficially charitable works, and she is stressed about her mother's declining health. With all of these factors in play, finally Hilly and Skeeter's friendship begins to erupt.

Only in this scene of anger and conflict does Skeeter so directly address a fundamental theme of *The Help*—the tension between help and hypocrisy. Although Skeeter has been bothered by Hilly's hypocritical ways in the past, as she heard Hilly make Aibileen say "thank you" for her garage bathroom or saw Hilly disguise her social climbing with the veneer of philanthropy for struggling communities, Skeeter confronts Hilly when her own life is already in shambles (and, for instance, she does not need Hilly to introduce her to Stuart anymore). This, of course, does not take away from the truth underlying Skeeter's comments; Hilly may not understand the "irony" Skeeter pinpoints, but the reader certainly should.

Chapter 22 Quotes

"She needs to learn that she can't carry on this way. I mean, around us it's one thing, but around some other people, she's going to get in big trouble."
"It's true. There are some racists in this town," Miss Leefolt say.
Miss Hilly nod her head, "Oh, they're out there."

Related Characters: Elizabeth Leefolt, Hilly Holbrook (speaker), Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 343

Explanation and Analysis

After Skeeter edits a newsletter announcement so that members of the League drop off old *toilets* instead of coats at Hilly's house, Hilly removes Skeeter from bridge club and discusses her other plans against Skeeter with Elizabeth. According to Hilly, Skeeter could "get in big trouble" for carrying around the Jim Crow laws pamphlet, as there are "some racists in this town," as Elizabeth says, who might more severely punish Skeeter.

Here, we see that Hilly's hypocritical kind of "help" extends to her former friends as well; she frames Skeeter's punishments as gifts that will help Skeeter learn an essential lesson. We also see Elizabeth and Hilly describe racism in terms of particular individuals who are "racists." These "racists" perform physical actions that display their beliefs, whereas Hilly and Elizabeth do not. This contrast—between physical violence and more psychological and social realities—is what allows Elizabeth and Hilly to (hypocritically) maintain their own self-identity as well-meaning individuals.

Chapter 24 Quotes

❝ She's got no goo on her face, her hair's not sprayed, her nightgown's like an old prairie dress. She takes a deep breath through her nose and I see it. I see the white trash girl she was ten years ago. She was strong. She didn't take no shit from nobody.

Related Characters: Minny Jackson (speaker), Celia Foote

Related Themes:

Page Number: 365

Explanation and Analysis

The morning after Leroy physically abuses Minny all night, Minny and Celia spot a naked white man from Celia's kitchen window. The man threatens and attacks the women, but Celia beats him with a fireplace poker. Minny finally sees Celia as more than just a naive white lady; during her time in Sugar Ditch, Celia experienced a great deal more than Minny had assumed. To Minny, Celia becomes "the white trash girl she was ten years ago"—an individual scorned by her own society but deserving of respect because of an inner strength most of the wealthy ladies in the novel lack.

This is one of the few scenes of physical violence in *The Help*. A sharp contrast to the mundane realm of housekeeping, this scene reminds us that the home is not always a safe space. Violence can come from within (in the case of domestic violence) or even from outside, particularly when one's home is as far from the town as Cela's is.

This scene also suggests how separated Minny and Cecilia are from the rest of their communities. They only experienced this physical combat at all because they were so far from the police and from neighbors. Minny and Celia are strong survivors who are united by their isolation. Although Minny exiled herself from the "Community Concerns" meetings and Celia never even entered a League meeting to begin with, both of these women are united in their isolation.

Chapter 28 Quotes

❝ "Why would you want to go stirring up trouble?"
I can tell, in his voice, he sincerely wants an answer from me. But how to explain it? He is a good man, Stuart. As much as I know that what I've done is right, I can still understand his confusion and doubt.
"I'm not making trouble, Stuart. The trouble is already here."

Related Characters: Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan, Stuart Whitworth, Jr. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 449

Explanation and Analysis

Once Stuart begins to propose to Skeeter, Skeeter tells him the entire story about the book she is attempting to publish with Aibileen and Minny. Stuart realizes that "the talk...in town" about Skeeter's integrationist beliefs is actually true; Skeeter is more than the woman he thought she was. This inspires Stuart to rethink his decision and creates the "confusion and doubt" in his voice. Stuart cannot understand why Skeeter should be involved in the black community's problems.

Although Skeeter does understand, she continues to believe that Stuart is "a good man." She views Stuart as a fine individual, who is merely entrenched in larger structures beyond his control (and, perhaps, beyond his comprehension as well). Skeeter is caught in-between two perspectives; able to understand the culture she grew up in, yet unable to forget the true stories the maids have told her—Skeeter does not quite belong in any community anymore.

Chapter 30 Quotes

❝ So I lean my hand on the sideboard because the baby's getting heavy on me. And I wonder how it is that I have so much when she doesn't have any. He's crying. She's crying. We are three fools in the dining room crying.

Related Characters: Minny Jackson (speaker), Johnny Foote, Celia Foote

Related Themes:

Page Number: 476

Explanation and Analysis

The day after Miss Hilly receives a copy of their book, Minny discovers Mister Johnny home in the morning when she arrives. He and Celia are in the dining room and Celia has just told him about Minny's role over the past few months—and about all of her miscarriages. Johnny offers Minny a job working for them for the rest of her life and Celia asks Minny to stay in the room with them for awhile.

In this emotional scene, Minny reflects that Celia and Johnny have enormous material wealth but she has a separate kind of familial wealth, with her five children and unborn baby. This is yet another moment where Minny is united with Celia; they are just "fools in the dining room crying." This scene displays many themes of *The Help* together—work, mothering, material wealth, and knowing or revealing the truth.

Chapter 32 Quotes

❝ One time I asked him, "Why? Why are you hitting me?" He leaned down and looked me right in the face.
"If I didn't hit you, Minny, who *knows* what you become." I was trapped in the corner of the bedroom like a dog. He was beating me with his belt. It was the first time I'd ever really thought about it. Who *knows* what I could become, if Leroy would stop goddamn hitting me.

Related Characters: Leroy Jackson, Minny Jackson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 485-486

Explanation and Analysis

Minny lies besides Leroy early one morning, afraid that he will find out about her role in the writing of the book. He hits her face but does not continue to physically abuse her because she is pregnant. However, Minny remembers the many times she faced more strenuous beatings, including the first time she wondered "what I could become" if her husband would stop abusing her.We see how personal relationships can create individual boundaries, which might be as strong as societal barriers.

This scene also introduces a new perspective on Minny's character. Always the strong woman to the rest of the world, Minny views herself as a far weaker individual. She blames herself for loving her husband and putting up with his alcoholism and abuse. Though *The Help* generally dwells on other societal forces more than domestic violence, with this scene, it provides an intimate picture of an abused woman. We are invited into the most private places within a home and see Minny's most intimate secrets, which she keeps hidden even as she shares other secrets to the world in the recently published book.

Chapter 33 Quotes

❝ 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.*

Related Characters: Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan (speaker), Lou Anne

Related Themes:

Page Number: 492

Explanation and Analysis

While Skeeter picks up her mother's medicine at the drugstore, she runs into Lou Anne Templeton, a young woman who is still in the League. However, Lou Anne tells her that she would never follow Hilly's advice to fire her maid Louvenia. As Lou Anne tells Skeeter, Louvenia is a source of guidance for her, who helps her through her mental health challenges. Skeeter now sees Lou Anne in a wholly new way and reflects that, perhaps, this was the "point" of the book: for women to "realize ... we are just two people."

Although Skeeter's reflection is moving, it significantly interprets the book in the contexts of her own, white experiences. For Skeeter, the "point" of the book is not the improvement of black maids' lives; rather, it is a more universal lesson of understanding and compassion. Even the author does not view this book as solely a work of social justice. This scene captures how complicated this book's meanings are.

Chapter 34 Quotes

I walk out the back door, to the terrible sound a Mae Mobley crying again. I start down the driveway, crying too, knowing how much I'm on miss Mae Mobley, praying her mama can show her more love. But at the same time feeling, in a way, that I'm free…Freer than Miss Leefolt, who so locked up in her own head she don't even recognize herself when she read it. And freer than Miss Hilly. That woman gone spend the rest a her life trying to convince people she didn't eat that pie. I think about Yule May setting in jail. Cause Miss Hilly, she in her own jail, but with a lifelong term.

Related Characters: Aibileen Clark (speaker), Yule May, Hilly Holbrook, Elizabeth Leefolt, Mae Mobley Leefolt

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 521

Explanation and Analysis

After Hilly accuses Aibileen of stealing silver and makes Elizabeth fire her, Aibileen leaves the Leefolt's home for the last time. Like Minny, who recently decided to leave her abusive husband, Aibileen now feels free to decide her future. She is no longer stuck caring for others' children; instead of providing Mae Mobley with daily love, she will only hope that Mae Mobley will experience such love in the future. Aibileen's storytelling has cost her a former way of life, but it provides her with the internal power to determine a more fulfilling future.

Aibileen recognizes how her storytelling simultaneously removed some of Hilly's freedom; Hilly will forever try to convince others that she did not "eat that pie." The truth of Aibileen's stories set her free, but Hilly's willingness to engage in lies makes her lack freedom, "in her own jail ... with a lifelong term." As *The Help* closes, we see Hilly as a kind of chained figure, no longer the character with the most authority and control.

The sun is bright but my eyes is wide open. I stand at the bus stop like I been doing for forty-odd years. In thirty minutes, my whole life's . . . done. Maybe I ought to keep writing, not just for the paper, but something else, about all the people I know and the things I seen and done. Maybe I ain't too old to start over, I think and I laugh and cry at the same time at this. Cause just last night I thought I was finished with everthing new.

Related Characters: Aibileen Clark (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 522

Explanation and Analysis

The Help ends on an uncertain note. Though Aibileen, Minny, and the other maids have had too-determined futures of housekeeping, and Skeeter has been stuck in various characters' expectations (such as Stuart's and her mother's), now these characters have new lives looking forward. Minny and Skeeter have moved on from their old homes and Aibileen has moved beyond Mae Mobley, her almost-daughter. The future is circumscribed in "maybe."

Yet, Aibileen's eyes are "wide open." She realizes that she has a future, although she does not know exactly what it is. The book did help her, although it initially cost her a job. Of course, it did not help her as much as it helped Skeeter. Skeeter has a new city, a new job, and, fittingly, new hair. Aibileen does not have any of these benefits. Though *The Help* described a genuine friendship between a black maid and a young white woman, it also suggests that there is much more social progress to be made, until characters such as Skeeter and Aibileen can be truly equal and have equally promising "new" beginnings.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

It is August 1962 in Jackson, Mississippi and Aibileen Clark, a 53-year-old African American housemaid, narrates her experience working in white households. She has taken care of seventeen white children in her life and now she helps raise one more: the 2-year-old Mae Mobley Leefolt. Miss Elizabeth Leefolt, the 23-year-old mother, feels little love for her child, even avoiding any physical contact with her. Aibileen provides Mae Mobley with the nurturing affection that Miss Leefolt refuses to give.

To write in the voices of the black maids, Kathryn Stockett, a white modern-day Southerner, adopts a version of what she thinks black women sounded like in the 1960s. In this way, Stockett tries to provide a more accurate depiction of the black characters' perspectives, but she also risks rendering these women's speech patterns in stereotypical and potentially racist ways, an accusation many critics have made of the book.

Aibileen remembers losing her own son, Treelore, two years earlier. At twenty-four, Treelore was writing a book on his experiences being black in Mississippi. One night at the lumber mill where he worked, he slipped off the loading dock and was crushed by a trailer. For three months after her son's death, Aibileen was unable to leave her bed. When the money started to run out, she took a job raising the newborn Mae Mobley. The death of her son makes Aibileen feel as if a "**bitter seed**" is growing inside of her, making her less accepting of the people around her.

With her biological son recently deceased, Aibileen figuratively "adopts" Mae Mobley, introducing the theme of gender and the home. Societal conventions in the 1960s dictated that white women should stay at home and raise the children, but Miss Leefolt's lack of affection for her daughter shows that she is emotionally unsuited for motherhood. Thus, she employs Aibileen as a sort of substitute mother to Mae Mobley.

Aibileen resents Miss Leefolt for taking pleasure in telling her what to do. Miss Leefolt lives in a small house with her husband and child and pays Aibileen only ninety-five cents an hour. On this day, Miss Leefolt holds a luncheon for her friends Miss Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan and Miss Hilly Holbrook. Both women are also twenty-three. Miss Hilly's elderly mother, Miss Walters, also arrives. Miss Skeeter offers a friendly greeting to Aibileen but Miss Hilly walks right past her without saying a word.

Skeeter's friendly greeting foreshadows her compassion for the maids, while Hilly's snub shows that she has so little concern for black people that she barely even sees them. Most white people expected black maids to be "invisible"—to blend into the background and stay silent except when addressed. Over the course of the novel, however, Aibileen will fight for her right to be heard and seen.

Aibileen serves the women food and overhears Miss Hilly accuse her mother's maid Minny Jackson, Aibileen's best friend, of stealing family heirlooms. Miss Hilly tells them about a sanitation bill she and her husband are sponsoring. If passed, the bill would require every white household in Mississippi to have a separate **bathroom** for black housekeepers. Miss Hilly claims black people "carry different kinds of disease than we do." Shocked by her ignorance and lack of compassion for the maids, Miss Skeeter quips that maybe she should have a separate bathroom outside. Insulted, Miss Hilly threatens to remove her from her position as editor of the local women's Junior League newsletter.

By legitimizing segregation on the basis of "sanitation," Hilly tries to make her personal racist practice of having a separate bathroom for the maids a law for everyone in the state. As a result of Hilly's bill, bathrooms in the novel become symbols of how white people's personal racist social practices and beliefs reinforce and uphold institutional segregation. In the same vein, the bathroom represents a battleground over segregation in the home, a traditionally feminine space, rather than in the public sphere, which, at this time, men almost exclusively controlled.

After Miss Hilly and Miss Walters leave, Aibileen finds Miss Skeeter waiting for her in the kitchen. She asks Aibileen if she ever wished she could change things. Without any sign of emotion, Aibileen says that everything is fine. Miss Leefolt interrupts their conversation and Miss Skeeter leaves. Upset that Aibileen was talking to her white friend, Miss Leefolt stares with disapproval at Aibileen. To avoid her gaze, Aibileen sticks her head deep into the oven to clean it. She knows that tonight she'll have the recurring dream of being stuck inside the oven when someone turns on the gas.

While Skeeter's question reveals her dissatisfaction with racism, it also shows her limited perspective as a white woman. Skeeter doesn't realize that Aibileen cannot speak her mind without risking getting fired for criticizing the racist status quo. Aibileen's dream, however, reveals her true dissatisfaction. Life for a black woman in the violently racist city of Jackson is not so different from life in an oven: it's hot, oppressive, and extremely dangerous.

CHAPTER 2

Aibileen explains that in Jackson white families live in nice neighborhoods, but the black families have to live in an enclosed area that the local government never expands or develops despite the growing black population. On the bus from Miss Leefolt's neighborhood to her own, Aibileen sees a group of maids surrounding Minny, who's entertaining them with stories of her deaf and crazy employer, Miss Walters. Aibileen sits beside Minny and warns her that Miss Hilly complained about her. Offended by Hilly's accusation, Minny threatens to give Hilly "a piece a Minny for lunch" and storms off the bus.

Aibileen's description of the segregated neighborhoods reveals the hypocrisy in the belief that segregation was "separate but equal"—the legal doctrine that allowed local governments to separate public services like education and housing for blacks and whites. Aibileen's neighborhood, which is actually just a ghetto, shows just how unequal things actually were. The "separate but equal" doctrine hypocritically purported to create equality while actually reinforcing institutional racism. Minny's threat also foreshadows "the special ingredient" she'll put in Hilly's pie.


Two days after the talk about the **bathroom**, Aibileen arrives at work where Mister Raleigh Leefolt (Miss Leefolt's husband) is yelling at Miss Leefolt for wanting to a build a separate bathroom that they can't afford. Awoken by the shouting, Mae Mobley comes out from her room. Before leaving, Mister Leefolt yells that Miss Leefolt is squandering Mae Mobley's college fund just so she can use a different bathroom than the maid. Aibileen swallows her anger for the parents when she realizes that the child has been sleeping in her dirty diaper all night.

Miss Leefolt's desire to build a bathroom that her family cannot afford introduces the theme of social class. In Jackson, a separate bathroom for the help is a status symbol meant to increase one's class status. Miss Leefolt, who does not necessarily believe that black people carry racially-specific diseases, still perpetuates that racist belief by building another bathroom in order to seem wealthier.


That evening, Aibileen realizes that increases in bus fare and rent means that she'll only have thirteen dollars to spend on food and other expenses every week. Minny calls and tells her that Miss Hilly is putting her mother into a nursing home so she has to find a new job.

Like most housewives, Leefolt pays Aibileen less than minimum wage. The housewives rationalize the exploitation of their maids by convincing themselves that black people are inferior to white people and so do not deserve equal pay.

The next morning, construction at the Leefolt house starts on the separate **bathroom** in the carport (an outdoor shelter for cars consisting of a roof held up by poles). Inside the house, Mae Mobley tries to get Miss Leefolt's attention while she's on the phone. Mae Mobley pulls the phone cord, causing the phone to fall and Miss Leefolt to pick her up and slap her hard against the leg. When Aibileen picks her up to console and protect her from her mother, Mae Mobley hits her against the ear.

Miss Leefolt personifies the tragic effects of mindlessly following social conventions. Her lack of affection for her daughter shows that she followed the societal conventions that dictated she become a mother, despite her natural aversion to motherhood. Likewise, she perpetuates segregation by obeying the racist convention that she and her maid use separate bathrooms, even though her family can't afford the expense.

Minny calls Aibileen at work and tells her that Miss Hilly is telling the other white women that she's a thief. Minny says she's never going to be able to find work again and that she did something bad to Hilly. Refusing to tell Aibileen what she did, Minny just says it had something to do with a **pie**.

Hilly's rumors put Minny's financial security in complete jeopardy. With few job opportunities open to a black woman at the time, these rumors threaten to take away any stability from Minny's life.

The next day, a woman named Celia Foote calls the Miss Leefolt's residence and speaks to Aibileen. She wants to join the Children's Benefit, an organization Miss Leefolt helps run. She also mentions she's looking for a maid. Aibileen lies and says the maid, Minny Jackson, is available and comes highly recommended from Miss Leefolt and the other neighbors. Celia agrees to give her a call.

Aibileen selflessly puts her own financial security at risk in order to protect Minny in an act of a friendship. Throughout the novel, Aibileen's relationship with Minny will provide a model of deep, compassionate friendship, in contrast to the superficial friendships that exist between the white female characters.

The **bathroom** is ready by the next afternoon. Miss Leefolt tells Aibileen, who feels the **bitter seed** growing in her chest, that she should be happy that she has a bathroom of her own. Aibileen knows that Miss Leefolt wants Aibileen to thank her for the bathroom, but Aibileen refuses to say it.

Here the bitter seed becomes a symbol for Aibileen's hatred of racist hypocrisy. After installing the bathroom, Miss Leefolt acts as if she is helping Aibileen rather than simply helping herself by increasing her class status.

CHAPTER 3

Minny narrates this chapter. Celia Foote's large mansion is way out in the country. Celia wears a lot of makeup and Minny thinks she looks like Marilyn Monroe. Celia invites Minny to sit at her table so she can bring her a cold drink. A white woman has never done this before and Minny, suspicious of Celia, refuses the drink and asks to see the house instead.

Celia treats Minny with the same respect she would a white woman, revealing that Celia doesn't seem to have the same prejudices against black people that the other housewives do. In contrast, Minny's suspicions reflect her past experiences of white people being racist and cruel.

After showing her around, Celia offers Minny the job, but doesn't know how to go about hiring her. Minny has to tell her what questions to ask. Unlike most housewives, Celia gives Minny the freedom to pick what days she would like to work and what time she'd like to arrive and leave. Celia offers her two dollars an hour – twice as much as she was paid at Miss Walters'.

Celia's lack of knowledge about how to hire a maid shows that she is unfamiliar with the societal conventions of how a white woman is "supposed" to interact with a black maid. Thus, the power balance between maid and employer shift to Minny's favor: she now gets to direct the hiring process herself.

Minny remembers when she was fourteen and her mother, who was also a maid, explained the rules of housekeeping at a "White Lady's." Her mother said that a maid must keep her complaints to herself, keep out of the family's business, use her own silverware, and, most of all, must not sass. On the first day of her first job, Minny talked back to the woman of the house and was fired five minutes later.

Lumping all white women into the category of "White Lady," Minny's mother teaches Minny to see all white housewives as essentially the same. Minny's life experiences so far have confirmed her mother's opinions, but Celia's kindness will eventually show Minny that not all white women are racist "White Ladies."

Celia's home is a mess – dirty clothes everywhere, rust under the carpets, tons of dust. Celia is friendly, but Minny, suspicious of a white woman's friendless, bristles at her kindness. At Celia's request, Minny teaches her how to cook for her husband – it's the first time she's ever told a white woman what to do. A good cook, Minny takes pride in the food she makes and refuses when Celia suggests she burn some of the food so that her husband doesn't get suspicious why the food tastes so good. Without telling Minny her reasons, Celia keeps the fact she hired a maid a secret from her husband, but she agrees to tell him about her before Christmas day.

Celia's friendlessness does not yet alter Minny's suspicions. However, the normal balance of power between maid and employer does shift again. For Minny's whole life, white people have told her what to do, but now Minny is the one in charge, instructing Celia on the fundamentals of cooking. Unlike the severe power imbalance in most maid-housewife relationships, the power dynamic here might allow Minny and Celia to form an actual friendship based on a foundation of equality.

CHAPTER 4

Minny finds Celia's mansion creepy because it has so many rooms and no children. Celia only ever leaves the house to go to a hair stylist and Minny cannot help but wonder why this white woman stays inside and lies in bed all day. Without Minny asking, Celia explains that she needs to lie down so much because every night she has nightmares of returning to her ugly, "white trash" hometown.

Celia's revelation that she comes from a "white trash" background explains—supposedly—why she lacks knowledge of the largely unspoken rules of middle-class white conduct. Since Celia almost certainly did not have a maid growing up, she never saw her parents treat the maid with disrespect, and so wasn't trained to see black maids as inferior. This lesson about racism being taught makes sense in the world of the novel, but in actuality poor whites are just as likely to be racist as rich whites. Celia would have plenty of opportunities to "learn" racism even without a black maid, so her lack of prejudice paints a broader picture of her upbringing.

Looking out at the untended azalea bushes in Celia's yard, Minny thinks that Celia's property looks like the plantation in *Gone with the Wind*, a movie Minny dislikes because it makes the slaves look like they enjoy slavery. Minny thinks that if she played the black maid Mammy from the movie, she'd tell her mistress Scarlet O'Hara to stick her green drapes up her "white little pooper." Celia says she doesn't mind the bushes, but that she hates the **mimosa tree** because its "hairy flowers" remind her of "little baby hairs."

Minny is like an updated and more realistic version of the Mammy character. They share similar names and positions, but Mammy was a flat stereotype of a character—a slave loyal to her masters—whereas Minny is a complex individual who dislikes her racist employers. Minny will ultimately distinguish herself from the politically complacent Mammy character by fighting to improve conditions for domestic workers. Celia's hatred of the mimosa tree's "baby hairs" introduces the tree's significance as a symbol for her repressed anxiety about motherhood and childbirth.

One day while Minny is in the kitchen, she hears the sound of a car coming up the driveway and assumes Mister Johnny, Celia's husband, has come home early. When Minny yells to Celia that her husband is home, Celia jumps out of bed faster than she's ever done before. Minny hides in the guest **bathroom** so Johnny doesn't think that the black stranger in his house is a burglar. Minny catches a glimpse of herself in the bathroom mirror. She feels shame for having to stoop so low just to make a living.

Celia's refusal to tell her husband about Minny is an act of disrespect towards Minny, one that forces Minny to humiliate herself by hiding in the bathroom as if she were a burglar rather than a paid employee. Until Celia tells Johnny about Minny, Celia will still have power over her maid, preventing them from ever developing an equal relationship.

CHAPTER 5

The novel jumps back in time to Skeeter's perspective on the day of the bridge game when Hilly brought up the **bathroom** bill. After the game, Skeeter drives home to her family's cotton plantation in a fury. She recalls how Hilly turned on her so quickly, threatening to fire her for just making a joke. Skeeter, Hilly, and Elizabeth Leefolt have been friends since elementary school. Skeeter and Hilly went to college together at the University of Mississippi, but Hilly dropped out when she got engaged. Skeeter stayed on to graduate.

In the 1960s, society expected men to go to college in order to join the workforce, while women were supposed to go to college to meet their future husbands. Having internalized these gender roles, Hilly sees no reason to graduate as soon as she finds a husband. But Skeeter's decision to graduate implies that she values a college education as more than just a fast track to marriage.

At the plantation, black men are in the field waiting for the cotton to bloom so they can begin the harvest. Skeeter's mother, Charlotte Phelan, tells her to use her college education to get a job in a "man-meeting situation" where she can find a husband. Skeeter doesn't tell her that she wants to be a writer, because she knows her mother won't understand. Skeeter also thinks that marriage is out of the question for her. Over six feet and with kinky hair, Skeeter imagines herself living alone in an apartment with other plain-looking spinsters.

Like Hilly, Charlotte does not see the value of a college education other than as a way of meeting men. Skeeter, however, does not conform to genders norms, since she wants to stay single and pursue her passion for writing. Skeeter's physical appearance also does not conform to female beauty standards, suggesting that Skeeter, inside and out, opposes what society expects a woman to be.

Skeeter remembers her brother, Carleton Jr., giving her the nickname "Skeeter" because she looked like a mosquito as a baby. In her bedroom, Skeeter looks at the wanted ads in the newspaper for a job. There's one column for women, another for men. Most of the women's jobs consist of secretarial work. The men's list has a wide selection of jobs for higher pay.

Again we see the gender double standards in Jackson. While white men can explore their passions in the workforce for fair pay, white women have a seriously limited range of job opportunities.

Hilly calls and says she's set Skeeter up on a date with her husband's cousin, Stuart Whitworth – the handsome son of a state senator. She also tells Skeeter to run an ad for the **bathroom** bill in the League newsletter. Hilly is president of the newsletter. Looking at the separate help bathroom in her own home used by their current maid Pascagoula, Skeeter remembers her beloved childhood maid, Constantine Bates.

Hilly, in many ways, is the prime enforcer of societal conventions in her white community. Hilly pressures Skeeter to conform to gender norms by setting her up on a date, while simultaneously trying to get Skeeter to conform to the racist status quo by upholding segregation and inequality.


Skeeter remembers growing up under Constantine's care. One time, Skeeter came home crying after being called ugly at age thirteen. Constantine told her that ugliness is the cruelness on the inside. On another night, the two of them spent hours doing a jigsaw puzzle of Mount Rushmore. Constantine points to the image of Lincoln and says that her own father was a kind white man who looked like Lincoln. Intrigued, Skeeter asks some questions about Constantine's white father but Constantine doesn't reveal anymore about her past.

Constantine's wisdom about the difference between external appearances and internal realities is a truth that relates directly to the theme of racism. In America at the time, conventional beauty standards considered dark skin to be inherently ugly, but Constantine recognizes that true ugliness is not about looks or skin color. Instead, ugliness is the cruel and racist way people treat others.

Skeeter and Constantine sent each other letters when Skeeter went to college. Weeks before her graduation, Constantine sent her a letter about a special surprise waiting for her when she got home. But when Skeeter arrived home, her mother informed her that Constantine quit and had gone to live with her family in Chicago. This news hits Skeeter hard, making her feel as if her only true ally disappeared into thin air.

Skeeter most likely considers Constantine a truer ally than her own mother, because Skeeter's mother pressures her to conform to gender norms, while Constantine gives Skeeter the self-confidence to disregard society's standards of feminine beauty.

CHAPTER 6

Skeeter had previously applied to a few editorial jobs in NYC and today she receives a response letter. The author of the letter, Elaine Stein, writes that she's too inexperienced for the job and advises her to build her resume by getting a job at the local paper. She also offers to look over some of Skeeter's ideas for nonfiction pieces because an older female colleague had done that for her once. Motivated by Stein's interest in her, Skeeter writes a list of ideas she's passionate about and mails them to Stein's New York office.

Unlike Charlotte or Hilly, Elaine Stein ignores societal conventions that tell women that their place is in the home raising children, rather than in the workplace. Stein's career thus provides a model for Skeeter of an alternative lifestyle beyond the prescribed path of becoming a Southern wife, mother, and homemaker.

The next day, Skeeter goes to *Jackson Journal*, a local paper, and gets an entry-level job writing the weekly housekeeping advice column "Miss Myrna." The real Miss Myrna had a mental breakdown. With no housecleaning experience, Skeeter goes to Elizabeth's house to ask her maid, Aibileen, for advice on common cleaning problems. Elizabeth agrees to let them talk the next morning for a few minutes as long as it doesn't interfere with Aibileen's duties.

The job offer illustrates the tremendous difficulty of overcoming double standards for women. The only job Skeeter can get is related to housekeeping, as if she as a woman couldn't write about anything else. The journal symbolically forces Skeeter back onto the traditional path that leads women into the realm of the home.

The next morning, Skeeter reads Aibileen a few of the housekeeping questions that people have sent to the newspaper and Aibileen quickly dispatches the answers. Before she leaves, Skeeter asks if Aibileen knew why Constantine, a well-known and beloved woman in the black community, would quit and move away. Aibileen gets tense and says that she didn't quit – she was fired. Mae Mobley starts to cry and Aibileen rushes out to avoid having to answer any more questions about Constantine.

Skeeter is still so ignorant of how to treat black people with respect that she exploits Aibileen's knowledge for her own personal and financial gain—passing off Aibileen's advice as her own without giving Aibileen any compensation. At the same time, the journal passes off Skeeter's advice as Miss Myrna's. All this upholds the idealized illusion of the flawless, all-knowledgeable homemaker when, in fact, the real Miss Myrna had a mental breakdown—perhaps under the pressure of this same illusion.

Upset about the news that Constantine was fired, Skeeter returns home and asks Charlotte if she fired Constantine. At first, her mother denies it, but when Skeeter says she heard people talking about it town, her mother admits that she fired her over a "colored thing." Charlotte refuses to talk about it further, saying that it's all in the past now. Skeeter feels outraged that her mother would fire their family maid of twenty-nine years who raised Skeeter from the time she was a baby.

We have already seen Charlotte uphold traditional gender norms, and now she also upholds the racist status quo in Jackson. Charlotte fires Constantine as if it were no big deal, illustrating that she had no emotional bond with Constantine or concern for her financial security. Skeeter's outrage shows that she is finally beginning to see how unjustly white people treat African Americans.

On a day when Elizabeth is out of the house, Skeeter returns to Aibileen for more advice. With Elizabeth out, Aibileen feels more comfortable speaking openly about herself and her past, even telling Skeeter about how her son, Treelore, was a writer. She tells Skeeter that he was inspired to write about what it was like working for white bosses after reading a book called *The Invisible Man*. Skeeter tells her that it was a brave idea for her son to write a book like that.

In their first interaction, Hilly treated Aibileen as if she were invisible. Now, Aibileen references Ralph Ellison's famous book The Invisible Man, which depicts the inability of white oppressors to see the black protagonist because of his skin color. Like the main character of that book, Aibileen must find ways to assert her visibility and individuality in the racist white world.

Feeling a small connection develop between them, Aibileen tells Skeeter that it's wrong that she doesn't know the truth about why Constantine left. Aibileen says her mother, Charlotte Phelan, fired Constantine because of something to do with Constantine's daughter coming to find her. Skeeter, who never knew Constantine had a daughter, presses Aibileen for more information, but she won't say anything else.

Skeeter felt some empathy for Treelore when she commented on his bravery in speaking out against his employers. Now, Aibileen sees from Skeeter's perspective, realizing that Skeeter must be in pain because of Constantine's disappearance. These genuine attempts at understanding allow the women to speak openly in a way they were incapable of doing before.

A few days later, Skeeter receives another letter from Elaine Stein. Elaine writes that her ideas were dry and boring and that she only has permission to write her again if she comes up with an idea that has more life to it. Wondering if she'll ever write anything important, she hears Pascagoula leaving and gets an idea. She knows the idea would be "crossing the line," but it won't go away.

"Crossing the line" is a play on words: superficially, it signifies Skeeter's concern over transgressing or "crossing" some social taboo or official rule. But, it also refers to the phrase "the color line"—a metaphor for segregation. Skeeter combines these two meanings, showing that in her society, crossing the color line also means crossing a legal and social line.

CHAPTER 7

It's late October and Aibileen finds the **bathroom** in the carport a cold and isolating place. After witnessing Miss Leefolt berate her daughter for not eating in her high chair, Aibileen decides that she will tell Mae Mobley "something good" about herself everyday. Mae Mobley is old enough to begin toilet training but she's having trouble learning because Miss Leefolt won't demonstrate for her how it's done. Knowing she'll only learn if she sees someone do it first, Aibileen takes Mae Mobley to the outdoor bathroom and shows her what to do. Mae Mobley hops on the toilet with glee and learns quickly.

Aibileen's feelings about the bathroom enforce its symbolism. Bathrooms are already private spaces, but segregation makes them more "isolating" than "private" because they become symbols of the treatment of black people as second-class citizens. This scene also shows Aibileen unconsciously teaching Mae Mobley more than just toilet training – she teaches her that it's okay to "cross the color line" by using the separate bathroom.

When Miss Leefolt comes home, Mae Mobley runs to Aibileen's **bathroom** to show her mother her new skill. Horrified, Leefolt slaps Mae Mobley on the leg and tells her she'll catch diseases if she uses the "colored bathroom." On the way home, Aibileen feels the **bitter seed** growing inside her when she thinks about how Miss Leefolt is teaching her daughter to see black people as less than white people. Aibileen hopes she has more time before Mae Mobley learns that lesson.

As Aibileen recognizes, children are not inherently racist. Up to a certain point, white children are "colorblind": they do not form racial prejudices about the black maids who raise them. The home, however, becomes the site of racist education. Aibileen worries that since Mae Mobley grows up in a racist home, she will soon internalize and perpetuate her parents' racist beliefs.

While shopping at the white supermarket with Mae Mobley, Aibileen runs into another maid and friend who tells her that two white men beat Robert Brown, Treelore's best friend, for accidently using the whites only bathroom at a store. Aibileen thinks that the boy's grandmother, Louvenia Brown, is the "purest, kindest person they is."

Segregated bathrooms may seems like a small issue in the grand scheme of civil rights, but the violent beating of Robert Brown reminds us of the real, horrific consequences of segregation in all its forms. This violence adds weight and significance to the symbol of the bathroom for segregation.

Returning home from work, Aibileen sees Miss Skeeter waiting for her on her porch. Tired and distraught from the day's news, Aibileen is annoyed that Skeeter didn't call before showing up, a courtesy she knows Skeeter would have paid to a white woman. Skeeter asks to interview Aibileen for a book she wants to write about the lives of black maids in Jackson.

Here we see the bitter seed shaping Aibileen's view of white people. Aibileen immediately assumes that Skeeter hasn't treated her with the same respect she would a white woman—and she's probably right, no matter how good Skeeter's intentions are.

Aibileen tells Skeeter it's too dangerous – black people in Jackson get killed for just going down to the voting booth. If she were to write this book, it would be as if she was burning her *own* house down. Skeeter asks her to consider it and Aibileen sighs and gives her a gentle "No Ma'am." The neighborhood boys playing ball in the street stand silently as they watch Skeeter's car drive away as if it were a hearse.

Skeeter's ignorance about the risks involved in speaking out shows her lack of knowledge about what it means to be black in Jackson. This ignorance prevents Skeeter from reaching a cross-racial understanding with Aibileen. Skeeter's request terrifies Aibileen so much that Aibileen describes Skeeter's car as if it were a funeral car, a foreboding sign that shows that she thinks Skeeter is only going to bring trouble and suffering.

CHAPTER 8

Driving back from Aibileen's, Skeeter feels the "narrow eyes" of Aibileen's black neighbors watch her fancy Cadillac car as it passes. She remembers how a week ago, Elaine Stein called and expressed interest in her idea to write about the maids' lives but doubted any maids would tell her the truth because of the racial tension in Jackson. When Skeeter lies and tells her that she's already got one maid to talk, Elaine says that she should send the first interview before they talk again.

In another sign of her ignorance, Skeeter seems critical of the suspicious eyes following her car. She doesn't recognize that her fancy car driving through the poor black neighborhood is a sign of white oppression following the workers even into their homes. If Skeeter's going to get her interviews, she must learn to see with more empathy and a wider perspective.

A few days later, Skeeter arrives at Elizabeth's to ask Aibileen more questions about housekeeping. After a few questions, Skeeter brings out an envelope full of cash for her help with the advice column. Thinking the money is a bribe to get her to do the interview, Aibileen refuses. Skeeter realizes the money has only made Aibileen more uncomfortable.

Once again, Skeeter is incapable of seeing things from Aibileen's perspective and thus alienates her further. Skeeter naively and insultingly thinks that money will be enough to sway Aibileen to risk her life—that just because she is poor, she will take a bribe.

At home, Charlotte helps Skeeter apply a hair care product that she bought to straighten her hair. While Skeeter waits two hours for the product to take effect, she remembers going to Elizabeth's house with Hilly. When Aibileen had brought them coffee, Hilly asked Aibileen demeaning, rhetorical questions about the **bathroom** like, "It's nice to have a place of your own, now isn't it?" Aibileen agrees, but Hilly isn't satisfied until Aibileen lowers her head and says thank you. Recognizing that Aibileen most likely hates Hilly and probably mistrusts all of Hilly's friends, Skeeter thinks to herself, "It's no wonder she doesn't want to talk to me." When the two hours are up, Skeeter and her mother stare in the mirror, shocked. Her hair, completely straight, looks great.

Skeeter's recognition that Aibileen probably mistrusts her shows that she is beginning to empathize better and step back from her own narrow worldview. We also see Hilly's extreme hypocrisy here—she acts as if she's helping Aibileen when, in fact, she's only upholding her own power by reinforcing segregation. Charlotte again supports gender norms by insisting that Skeeter conform to traditional beauty standards. The transformation of kinky hair to more "beautiful" straight hair also shows how whiteness is the assumed standard of beauty, but Skeeter doesn't recognize this more domestic, seemingly innocuous aspect of white privilege.

CHAPTER 9

On the day of the double date with Stuart Whitworth and Hilly and her husband William, Skeeter straightens her hair and buys a nice black dress. She hopes that with the new hair and clothes, there's a chance that the date will work out.

At this point, Skeeter still feels tied to societal conventions about looks and marriage. She hopes that by conforming to white beauty standards (straight hair, nice clothes) she will win Stuart's affection.

Skeeter meets up with Hilly and her husband at their home. Stuart is already there, two drinks in. He's handsome and taller than she is. The four of them drive together to the restaurant where Stuart keeps drinking and ignores Skeeter, even ogling another woman. When they are left alone for a moment, he minimizes her contribution to the *Jackson Journal* and insults her and her college, saying women only go there to meet men.

Stuart's sexist and chauvinistic behavior squashes Skeeter's hopes for love. At this moment, Stuart personifies Constantine's words of wisdom about how ugliness is the cruelty on the inside. Though Stuart is handsome on the surface, he is ugly in his behavior.

After dinner, the four of them drive back to Hilly's where William asks Skeeter to drive the drunk Stuart home. Before they get into the car, she breaks into tears and Stuart apologizes, saying he wasn't ready for a date. Skeeter runs inside and tells William to drive Stuart himself.

Stuart's apology is his redeeming moment, showing that there's at least some good inside of him. His apology suggests that readers shouldn't be too quick to judge Stuart—though he already has a lot to make up for.

Two days after the date, Aibileen calls Skeeter's home and asks what guarantee she has that Skeeter won't turn on her once she starts telling bad stories about white people. Skeeter says Aibileen is just going to have to trust her. Aibileen agrees to the interview and explains that she changed her mind by saying only two words: Miss Hilly. Hearing the bitterness in Aibileen's voice, Skeeter thinks of Hilly's **bathroom** bill and all the terrible things Aibileen must have heard her say about black people.

Skeeter describes Aibileen's voice as bitter, recalling the symbol of Aibileen's bitter seed. While we normally think of bitterness as a negative trait, here it gives Aibileen the motivation to fight against the oppression and racism that Hilly represents. Instead of letting the bitterness fester inside of her, she uses it to politically productive ends.

CHAPTER 10

On the first day of December, Minny starts to fear what Celia's husband, Johnny Foote, will do when he finds out she's been working there. Minny remembers how she saw a picture of Johnny and realized that he was the man who dumped Miss Hilly in college. Minny realizes Miss Hilly must still be jealous and must have told the other white women not to befriend Celia, which explains why no white women ever visit Celia at home or call her on the phone.

Though Celia treats Minny with kindness, the two of them will never have a chance of an equal relationship until Celia tells Johnny about Minny. If Johnny were to come home and find Minny, Celia could deny ever seeing her before, leaving Minny to fend for herself. This imbalance in the power dynamics—along with the obvious inequality of their maid-employer relationship—prevents any deep friendship from developing between them.

At church one evening, Minny sits besides Aibileen. Aibileen says that she's thinking about telling Miss Skeeter the truth about what's it like working for white people. Minny is scared for Aibileen's safety, but understands the urge to tell the truth. The desire to tell the truth is what makes Minny talk back to her white employers. Minny refuses Aibileen's suggestion that she talk with Skeeter too.

In the white homes, the maids are unable to speak their minds or tell the truth without being fired. Minny, an outspoken woman, knows the importance of telling the truth as a way of resisting the oppressive silencing of black people. By refusing to stay silent, Minny demands to be seen as a human being rather than as a nameless servant.

Celia starts going pale with worry about the approaching day when she has to tell her husband about Minny. One day, she snaps at Minny, telling her to go home early so that she can make a private phone call. It's the first time she's yelled at Minny. When she comes back the next day, Celia apologies and gives her a hug. Touched and made a little uncomfortable by the kindness, Minny forgives her.

Celia's angry outburst could have turned Minny against Celia by confirming Minny's belief that, deep-down, Celia is just as racist as all other white women. But Celia is different: no other white woman Minny has met would apologize to her maid, let alone go in for a hug. Minny's forgiveness shows that she is beginning to see Celia as an individual with the potential for friendship rather just another racist "White Lady."

While Celia is getting her hair done, Minny is cleaning the bedroom when Mister Johnny, holding an axe, walks in. Terrified at what he may do, Minny yells that he and his axe better get out of her way. Johnny smiles and says he's not going to hurt her and puts down the axe. Johnny tells her that he knows a maid has been cooking this whole time because the food reminds him of what his childhood maid used to make.

Recall how Minny objected to the racist characterization of Mammy from Gone with the Wind *because she thought Mammy was too timid and docile. Here Minny practices what she preaches by confronting a white man who has an axe, showing herself to be a powerful, formidable woman.*

The revelation that Johnny likes her food and had a maid growing up calms Minny's fears. Johnny tells her that he's doesn't know why Celia has been keeping her a secret. He only came home early to cut down the **mimosa tree** in the yard as a surprise. He says that Celia seems unhappy but doesn't know why. Before leaving, he asks Minny to watch out for Celia, and not tell her that they've met because it would only contribute to her unhappiness.

In supporting his wife, Johnny provides a striking contrast to the other men in the novel, including the boorish Stuart and the emotionally and fiscally stingy Mr. Leefolt. Johnny even tries to chop down the tree – the symbol of Celia's repressed anxiety over motherhood – for her. But as we'll later learn, he doesn't chop it down, suggesting that no man can overcome Celia's struggle with gender norms for her – she must do it herself.

CHAPTER 11

At Aibileen's home, Skeeter interviews her in a small parlor room while Aibileen serves tea. Skeeter has never sat at the same table as black person who wasn't being paid to do so. Aibileen has never had a white person in her house as a guest before. Aibileen is nervous answering Skeeter's questions, unwilling to divulge more than a few sentences about her past or her opinions about being a maid. But Aibileen does manage to tell Skeeter that her grandmother was a house slave and that her mother was a maid. She says she always knew she'd be a maid too.

This meeting represents a first conscious attempt at crossing the "color line" between the women. So far, Skeeter and Aibileen have mostly remained in their segregated racial spheres, only interacting with people of the other race in the context of the maid-housewife relationship. Now, the women must find ways to interact with each other on a more equal footing without replicating the power imbalances of their usual roles.

During the interview, Skeeter asks Aibileen what she doesn't like about her job. Beginning to sweat heavily, Aibileen is terrified to speak out against her white employer because of the risks involved. She tells Skeeter she's too uncomfortable to continue the interview. Skeeter, meanwhile, realizes she must find another way of interviewing Aibileen so that she stops feeling like she's just a maid who has to withhold her true thoughts and feelings.

Aibileen cannot break free from her social role as the maid. Since Aibileen still sees Skeeter as a white woman not so different from her other white employers, she finds it hard to speak openly about herself – something her white employers prohibit her from doing.

A few days later, Skeeter gets a call from Aibileen. Aibileen says that she wants to write down her experiences as a maid and then read them to Skeeter at the next interview. Aibileen hopes that writing the stories in her own words will make it easier for her to talk about her past. Assuming that Aibileen is a bad writer because she's a black woman, Skeeter discourages her, saying that writing isn't easy. Aibileen responds that writing these stories mustn't be that different than writing her prayers every night. When Skeeter asks why she writes her prayers instead of saying them, Aibileen responds that she can get her point across better in writing. Skeeter agrees to Aibileen's plan, thinking she'll have to rewrite Aibileen's whole story because Aibileen's writing won't be good enough to send to Elaine Stein.

By writing down her stories in her own words, Aibileen takes control over her personal narrative. At the previous meeting, Skeeter had the power to direct the conversation by asking questions, giving their interaction an unequal basis: Skeeter interrogates, Aibileen answers. Now Aibileen directs the conversation, introducing more equality into the relationship and business interaction. Skeeter's assumptions about Aibileen's writing also show that she too harbors many prejudices against black people—her good intentions don't make her suddenly non-racist. For this relationship to work, Skeeter must abandon her stereotypes.

Skeeter returns to Aibileen's for the second interview. To make Aibileen more comfortable, Skeeter asks to sit in the kitchen instead of the parlor. Skeeter also brings two glass cokes so that Aibileen doesn't feel like she has to serve her. Sitting with Skeeter in the kitchen, Aibileen takes a sip of the coke, seeming more relaxed than last time.

Skeeter's attempts to make Aibileen feel more comfortable show that she's trying to inhabit Aibileen's perspective. By being more empathetic, Skeeter starts to find ways to make Aibileen feel less like a maid and more like an equal partner in the writing project.

Aibileen takes out a notebook and starts reading the story she wrote about raising her first white kid who one day badly cut his hand. Not allowed to go to a white hospital, she took him to the black hospital where a white policeman stopped her before she could get in. Enthralled by the story, Skeeter is eager to know what happens next but Aibileen says that's all she had time to write so far. Skeeter realizes that Aibileen's method of writing down her stories might work.

Aibileen's story shatters Skeeter's preconceptions about Aibileen's writing. Skeeter's attempts to equalize their interactions might have contributed to the ease with which Aibileen tells her story, but it's truly Aibileen who finds a way to express her personal narrative, thereby breaking free from her social role as the maid.

CHAPTER 12

Every other night for two weeks, Skeeter goes to Aibileen's to hear Aibileen read her stories. Skeeter realizes that Aibileen's clear, honest style of writing means that Skeeter won't need to rewrite the stories herself. During the fifth session, Aibileen reads to Skeeter about the day Treelore died. She reads about how his body was thrown on the back of a pickup by the white foreman and taken to the black hospital. The nurses told Aibileen that the men rolled his body off the truck and then just drove off.

Aibileen's decision to tell this very personal story to Skeeter shows that they are beginning to develop a bond of intimacy and trust that crosses the color line. The story about Treelore also emphasizes how white men in Jackson put little value on the lives of black men, treating Treelore more like a dying animal than a man.

After a few meetings, Aibileen asks Skeeter to check out some classic works of literature from the white library so that she can improve her own writing. Skeeter agrees, but asks why Aibileen why she waited so long to ask for this. Aibileen says she doesn't know which white rules Skeeter follows and which she doesn't. Skeeter says that she's tired of these rules and Aibileen chuckles softly and looks out the window. Skeeter realizes how "thin this revelation" about the rules must seem to Aibileen.

Their bond of trust continues to develop, giving Aibileen the confidence to ask Skeeter to cross another racial divide: checking out books from the white library. By hearing Aibileen's personal stories, Skeeter begins to see what it must be like for black women in Jackson. Skeeter finally begins to recognize the many injustices of segregation.

After the two weeks of interviews, Skeeter spends four days straight organizing Aibileen's stories into a twenty-seven page manuscript. Whenever her mother Charlotte asks what Skeeter is up to all day, Skeeter lies and says she's writing down all the things she loves about Jesus. Skeeter knows that her mother, an old-fashioned Southern woman, would try to put a stop to her writing if she found out that Skeeter was helping a maid speak out against her white employers. On the morning of the fifth day, Skeeter mails the manuscript to Elaine Stein.

Charlotte wouldn't want Skeeter to help Aibileen because doing so would constitute a breach of Jackson's racist and sexist conventions. In Charlotte's mind, Skeeter would be betraying her race by helping black people speak out against whites. Charlotte would also object to Skeeter writing any *book about a controversial subject because, in Jackson society, a woman is not supposed to have strong opinions of her own, especially ones that might make men uncomfortable.*

The following day, Skeeter plays bridge with Elizabeth and Hilly at Elizabeth's. Elizabeth announces that she is pregnant and that the baby is due in October. The women congratulate her and Elizabeth lights a cigarette and says without emotion that she's "real excited." Before Skeeter leaves, Hilly gives her the **bathroom** bill ad that she wants Skeeter to run in the next newsletter. The ad says that whites can catch "colored diseases" because "we lack immunities coloreds carry in their darker pigmentation" and that "some germs carried by whites can also be harmful to coloreds too." The ad ends with the lines, "Protect yourself. Protect your children. Protect your help."

Elizabeth's emotional response to the congratulations shows her repressed aversion to motherhood, but she still feels compelled to have a second child because of the societal conventions that tell women to have children. Hilly's ad also spreads the racist myth that white and black people are somehow inherently or different, and that one is superior to the other. Hilly's ad is highly hypocritical and patronizing, suggesting that she is "protecting" the help when she's actually reinforcing the culture of racism and segregation.

Ten days later, Elaine Stein gets back to Skeeter, saying she likes the material and that she wants Skeeter to get interviews from twelve more maids. Skeeter gasps with excitement that Elaine wants her to write a whole book's worth of stories. Elaine says that she wants a draft of the book before New Years so that she can decide if she wants to publish it "before this civil rights thing blows over." After Stein hangs up, Skeeter realizes that no other maids are willing to contribute their stories, which dampens her excitement about the possibility of publishing her first book.

At this point, Skeeter's motivations for writing the book are still unclear. Rather than being excited about the possibility of helping the maids tell their stories and having their humanity recognized, Skeeter seems more excited about publishing any book at all because it will further her career as a writer. Though Skeeter starts writing the book with more self-serving ambitions in mind, her focus will soon shift from helping herself to helping the maids.

That evening, Skeeter informs Aibileen that Elaine said that they need twelve more maids if they want the book published. Aibileen says she already asked thirty-one maids in the community, but they all said no. Aibileen sighs and says she'll ask them all again. A few days later, Aibileen calls Skeeter to tell her that Minny has agreed to be interviewed. Aibileen says that Minny only has one requirement: Skeeter must sit on the opposite side of the table from Minny. Minny, suspicious of white women, wants to be able to keep an eye on Skeeter the whole time.

The overwhelming amount of refusals to contribute to the book show how scared the black community is of speaking out. Jackson society is so racist that these maids could lose their jobs or even be lynched just for telling the truth about their employers. Living her entire life in the context of such a racist, threatening environment, Minny does not trust any white woman, including Skeeter.

The interview takes places at Aibileen's house. Aibileen is there to support and encourage Minny who is visibly distrustful of Skeeter. Minny asks why a white woman would want to help black people and if Skeeter truly knows the danger she's put them all in. Feeling attacked, Skeeter cannot come up with any answers for her. Aibileen interjects, telling Minny that it's okay if she doesn't want to contribute her stories any more. Minny slowly settles into a chair and says that she'll do it.

Skeeter can't come up with an answer to Minny's question because Skeeter herself doesn't truly know why she's helping the maids. Right now, one of her major motivations entails advancing her own writing career, which is a superficial answer that would further alienate Minny. Skeeter's motivations will eventually become more substantial, however, as she begins to see the necessity for change.

Aibileen nods at Skeeter, giving her the okay to begin the interview. Skeeter asks Minny to talk about her experiences working as a maid. The whole time Minny looks at Aibileen as she talks. Skeeter feels as if Minny is trying to forget that Skeeter is even in the room. Minny tells a story about how one employer made her work every evening for weeks and then, without warning, moved out of town before Minny had time to find another job. Telling this story makes Minny angry and she storms out.

Since maids in white households have to stay silent and blend into the background as if they were invisible, Minny, now in a black household, reverses these power dynamics by refusing to look at Skeeter. Now Skeeter is the invisible one. For the women to overcome the racial divide between them, both Minny and Skeeter must learn to see each other as individuals.

CHAPTER 13

Skeeter is in her room typing up some of Minny's day-to-day experiences when Charlotte knocks on her door and tells her that Stuart Whitworth is downstairs. Dressed nicely, he apologizes for the date three months ago, saying that he was still getting over a bad break-up with his fiancé, Patricia. Stuart compliments Skeeter, saying she's different from the other women he knows because she speaks her mind. Skeeter agrees to get a drink with him.

Stockett portrays Stuart and Skeeter's relationship as following the common literary convention wherein two future lovers start off with contempt for each other and then slowly fall in love. Here Stuart also acts different than the average Southern white man: he actually likes that Skeeter has strong opinions of her own.

At the restaurant, Stuart is quiet at first and Skeeter fears he's going to start drinking again. But he soon asks what she wants from life. She says she wants to be a writer. He tells her she is smart and pretty and hopes that she writes about something she cares about. They talk for a while and suddenly he leans over the table and kisses her softly on the mouth. She feels her insides fill with light.

Stuart's personality seems to have made a 180-degree turn. Instead of ignoring and insulting Skeeter as he did on the last date, Stuart now acts attentive, thoughtful, and supportive. He also breaks the South's prim and proper dating conventions by kissing her very publically on the mouth. Skeeter falls for him and seems to forget his earlier boorishness.

A few weeks later, Skeeter goes to the library to look for books on race relations in the South. She finds a copy of *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, but its pages are ripped out and replaced with the words "nigger book" scribbled in purple crayon. What disturbs her the most is that it looks like a child wrote the slur.

The purple-crayon slur indicates how children learn racist beliefs from a very young age. Though children aren't born racist, they quickly learn from their parents and their society to dehumanize and degrade black people.

At the library, Skeeter finds a book on Jim Crow laws and is shocked by all the laws that are on the books to separate whites from blacks. Skeeter realizes that there is no real difference between official laws and Hilly's racist attitude about separate **bathrooms**. She steals the book because she can't check it out without the women working at the library gossiping to everyone about it.

Skeeter's realization underscores how segregated bathrooms represent the beliefs that reinforce segregation. Skeeter sees that there is little difference between official laws and social practices—even if the Jim Crow laws were overturned (as they eventually are), racism will still be perpetuated by the status quo and people's personal prejudices.

At a League meeting, Skeeter brings a satchel that contains the stolen book and her notes from the interviews. Hilly is telling the other women to donate canned goods for the "Poor Starving Children of Africa" fund. When one woman asks why can't they just send them a check, Hilly rolls her eyes and says you can't give "tribal people" money because they'd just spend it on "voodoo" and "satanic tattoos." The women nod along and Skeeter notices how easy it is for Hilly to convince these women of anything.

Hilly's "charity" work is a key instance of the help vs. hypocrisy theme. Hilly is not capable of understanding that her desire to "help" African children is rooted in a racist paternalism that treats Africans as if they were primitive savages. If Hilly truly wanted to help people in need, she would provide fair wages to the black woman working in her very own kitchen – not as an act of charity but as a way of amending a social injustice.

When Skeeter joins the group of women surrounding Hilly, the women suddenly bombard Skeeter with questions about if the rumors are true that she's seeing the handsome Stuart Whitworth. Skeeter confirms the rumors, thinking to herself how Stuart has made a routine of coming by her house to talk with her late into the night. Skeeter affectionately remembers how Stuart sometimes brushes her hair away from her face.

These prying questions effectively enforce the social convention that Skeeter should *date and that she* should *try to get married. But Skeeter is not dating Stuart because she feels a compulsion to follow societal standards – she's doing it because of the growing feelings she has for him.*

That day when Skeeter arrives home, Hilly calls to tell her that she left her satchel at the meeting but that it's safe with her now. Terrified that Hilly will snoop through the bag, Skeeter asks her mother Charlotte to drive her to Hilly's. Charlotte agrees, saying she'll drop Skeeter off on the way to the doctor for some "routine" tests for her ulcers. Skeeter doesn't remember her mother ever having ulcers before. They get in the car and drive.

Charlotte's offhanded remarks about her ulcers foreshadow the more serious medical condition that Charlotte will face near the end of the novel. The ulcers may also represent the outward manifestation of the stress of repressing knowledge, specifically Charlotte's true reason for firing Constantine.

When Hilly opens the door Skeeter can tell by her friend's expression that she's already peeked through the documents. Hilly gives her back the satchel and Skeeter sees that Aibileen and Minny's notes are safely tucked away in a side pocket but that the law book is gone. As Skeeter is about to leave, Hilly casually says that Senator Whitworth is very pro-segregation.

Hilly is now suspicious that Skeeter is secretly anti-segregation. Hilly's reference to Senator Whitworth, Stuart's father, is a thinly-veiled threat that she'll tell Stuart about Skeeter's interest in Jim Crow laws in order to turn his father against her. Of course, Skeeter sees no problem with Stuart's family being racist, as long as the issue never comes up—she has the privilege of simply avoiding the subject.

CHAPTER 14

On a hot March 1963 day, Miss Leefolt and Miss Hilly watch their children play in a plastic kid's pool at the Leefolt's. Miss Leefolt is a few months pregnant. Aibileen is surprised to see that Miss Hilly, normally such an unkind woman, is a very loving mother to her two children, Heather and William Jr. Miss Hilly asks Aibileen, "You wouldn't want to go to a school full of white people, would you?" Not wanting Mae Mobley to grow up hearing her agree with Miss Hilly, Aibileen says she wouldn't mind if there were whites and blacks together. Miss Hilly responds with a cold smile and says but "colored people and white people are just so different." Aibileen feels her lip curl.

Hilly's love for her children is her only redeeming quality, yet this very love ends up causing more harm for others—she is willing to do anything to protect her beloved children from what she sees as the dangerous influence of being around black people. Thus love for her children makes her an even more outspoken supporter of segregation. Aibileen's love for Mae Mobley, however, gives Aibileen the confidence to speak out against Hilly's racism in order to instill better values in Mae Mobley.

Miss Hilly turns away from Aibileen and starts telling Miss Leefolt that her husband is running for office and she can't have civil rights sympathizers in her friend group. Hearing this, Aibileen thinks that Hilly must have found out about Skeeter's book. At that moment, thunder booms and Aibileen swaddles the children and takes them inside.

The thunder's threatening presence foreshadows Hilly's crusade against Skeeter. Aibileen—not the white mothers—protects the children, heightening the irony that Hilly wants to protect her children from black people when, in actuality, she needs a black woman to protect her own children.

At her home, Aibileen sees a bag of old clothing Miss Hilly gave her, ones she'll never wear because Hilly's initials are stitched into the lining. Wearing the clothes would make her feel like property. Aibileen gets up and kicks the bag.

Hilly gave Aibileen this clothing in order to "help" her, oblivious to the fact that Aibileen would feel humiliated wearing it because it would make her feel like a slave. This scene symbolically suggests that Hilly believes the best way to "help" African Americans is by making them slaves again – a belief she will express more overtly later on.

Aibileen tries to write down her prayers, but she cannot stop thinking about what Hilly would do if she found out about the book. Aibileen thinks about how women take revenge on black folk differently than men do. Men kill you and burn down your house, but women fire you, make sure you can't get hired elsewhere, make your landlord evict you, make their friends fire your husband and children, and get you thrown in jail for something as small as a parking ticket.

With her list of things white women can do to hurt black maids, Aibileen refutes any misconceptions that women are less hostile than men. In a counterintuitive, depressing argument against sexism, Aibileen shows that men and women are "equal" – they have the same capacity for destroying the lives of others.

Skeeter calls Aibileen and tells her about Hilly going through her satchel. Aibileen responds that she already knew that something was up. Skeeter says it's unlikely that Hilly knows about Aibileen or Minny's involvement since Hilly hasn't made Elizabeth Leefolt fire her. Aibileen decides to continue working on the stories despite the risk.

Aibileen continues to work on the book, showing her determination to speak out and oppose people like Hilly. With the book, Aibileen finds a way to express herself and show the world that she is an individual human being and not some white person's "property."

Aibileen is coming home from work late one night when the bus stops at a police roadblock. The driver tells all the black people to get off. Scared, Aibileen runs to Minny's nearby home. Minny and her five children are standing around the table, listening to the radio: the NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers has been shot and killed by a pro-segregationist. They turn off the radio and Minny sends her kids to bed. Minny wonders aloud if these racist men would lynch them if they found out about the stories they're telling. Aibileen tries to comfort Minny, saying they're not "doing civil rights," only telling the truth.

The murder of Medgar Evers (a real historical figure) shows what risks Aibileen and Minny are taking by speaking out. For Aibileen the book is mostly about self-expression at this point, so she doesn't yet recognize that by telling the truth, she and Minny will have a large impact on others—they are basically "doing civil rights." They might not be changing laws, but they are trying to undo racist attitudes, which is just as crucial for ending racism in daily life.

CHAPTER 15

One afternoon, Mae Mobley asks Aibileen to tell her a story before her nap. Tired of reading her the usual stories, Aibileen makes one up about a white girl and a black girl who notice for the first time that they have different skin colors. After the girls list all the physical features they have in a common, they conclude that they're both just humans beings with different skin colors. Mae Mobley asks for the story to be repeated four times before she falls asleep.

Aibileen is worried that Mae Mobley will be turned into just another racist white woman, so she uses storytelling to fight against the many racist influences acting on the child. Specifically, she teaches Mae Mobley to recognize that white and black people are equally valuable and human—a lesson Skeeter is also finally learning in growing closer to the maids.

A few days later, Miss Hilly invites Miss Leefolt and her child to the fancy country club. Miss Leefolt brings Aibileen so that Aibileen can watch Mae Mobley. Miss Leefolt doesn't belong to the club because she can't afford membership. Aibileen thinks that she's probably been to the club as a maid more times than Leefolt has been as a guest.

Aibileen recognizes one of the ironies of social class—though Aibileen is not allowed to join the club because she is black, she still has been there more times than her white employer. Aside from a common racism against non-whites, white society is still divided by wealth and social class.

At the club, Miss Skeeter is playing tennis and comes over to Miss Leefolt and Miss Hilly. Skeeter tries to start a conversation, but Hilly is cold towards her, eventually blurting out that she saw the law book in her satchel. Hilly says she can't have integrationist friends while her husband is running for office. Skeeter gets mad, saying that her husband is never going to get elected. But after Skeeter steals a glance at Aibileen, she realizes she must make up with Hilly or else Hilly will continue to investigate into Skeeter's activities, which could jeopardize the book and Aibileen's safety.

At first Skeeter acts selfishly, engaging Hilly in a fight without realizing that she's endangering Aibileen's safety.But when Skeeter looks at Aibileen, she is reminded of her own power and privilege, and she recognizes that Aibileen has much more to lose than Skeeter does. Swallowing her pride, Skeeter decides to mend things with Hilly in order to protect Aibileen, a sign that Skeeter is growing more empathetic and less self-centered.

Trying to mend things with Hilly, Skeeter flatters her intelligence, saying that if she were up to anything sinister, Hilly would have figured out everything and stopped her by now. As a kind of apology or excuse for accusing Skeeter of being an "integrationist," Hilly sighs and says that she's just been so stressed and tired because of the political campaign. Skeeter walks back to the tennis court. Among all the smiles and laughter at the pool, Aibileen and Skeeter look at each other and think the same thing: are they fools to think that Hilly is no longer suspicious?

Skeeter's actions could be described as "helpful hypocrisy." Skeeter pretends to be against integration while secretly writing a book against segregation. Hilly's hypocrisy is unconsciousness and motivated by self-interest, while Skeeter knowingly and temporarily acts hypocritically so she can help Aibileen. But Skeeter isn't being entirely hypocritical, of course, since she is also dating a segregationist with actual political power and makes no attempt to sway his views.

CHAPTER 16

At Aibileen's all-black church, the community meets to pray for Medgar Evers. Aibileen sits behind Yule May, a college-educated maid who works for Miss Hilly. Aibileen hasn't asked Yule May to contribute her stories because anyone attached to Miss Hilly makes her nervous.

Aibileen is still frightened by Hilly's potential to do her harm. As Aibileen slowly finds her voice and realizes her power to affect change, she will stop fearing Hilly and gain the strength to take her on directly.

At the meeting, a young black man barges into the room. His hands balled into fists, he asks how the community is going to respond to the fact that black men are being shot like dogs in the street. When the preacher says pray, the man stomps off. Yule May just shakes her head.

Yule May's reaction is ambiguous. She could be shaking her head in shame over the young man's outburst, or in sympathy with him at how little she thinks the black community has done to fight racially-motivated violence.

After the prayer meeting, Aibileen asks Yule May about her college days and tells her that she's been doing some writing herself. Yule May says she knows about what Aibileen has been doing with the white woman but says she can't afford helping her right now since she is about to send her twin boys off to college. Aibileen says she understands and Yule May responds that they should talk again in private, which gives Aibileen hope that she will help. Aibileen smiles and mutters to herself, not caring that everyone in church will think she's crazy.

Yule May's suggestion that they talk in private indicates that she probably agreed with the young man's frustration about the lack of political activism in the black community. Aibileen's muttering might make the congregants think she's crazy – but it's really her risky decision to speak out against her employers that makes her seem "crazy."

CHAPTER 17

In June, a heat wave strikes, making Celia even more housebound. In order to get Celia out of the house, Minny suggests that she cut down the **mimosa tree** that she hates so much, but Celia doesn't want to get out of bed. Minny wonders if a mental or physical illness is making her stay inside or if she's just lazy. Being so close to a white woman all day makes Minny uncomfortable. She doesn't even like eating at the same table as Celia. Minny thinks that Celia is "ignorant" for treating her in the same way that Celia would a white woman.

Normally the word "ignorant" refers to people who harbor racist beliefs, so it's ironic that Minny thinks Celia is "ignorant" for actually treating her with respect and kindness, instead of according to the usual racist social conventions. We see here that Johnny never cut down the mimosa tree, implying that Celia will have to overcome gender norms (which the tree represents) herself.

One day on a walk with Aibileen, Minny thinks about how the stories she tells Miss Skeeter have become a great relief to her. She doesn't care about the rallies and sit-ins of the civil rights moments, but she does care that in a ten years, white ladies won't accuse her daughter, who's also a maid, of being dirty and stealing silver. She hopes Skeeter's book will make that happen.

Unlike Aibileen, who sees Skeeter's book as a platform for self-expression, Minny is more aware of the book's potential for affecting positive change by altering the attitudes and perception of the white women. At some level, Minny recognizes that the privacy of the home is just as important a battleground for social change as the sit-ins and rallies of the Civil Rights Movement.

One day at Celia's, Minny brings in a large package from the mail. Celia takes it straight to her bedroom. Minny's curiosity about what's going on with Celia is so overwhelming that she ignores her mother's advice to stay out of a "White Lady's" business. The next day, Minny sneaks upstairs and peers into Celia's room where she sees Celia drinking alcohol out of unlabeled bottles that had arrived in the box. Minny hates drunks because she had to take care of her drunk father for twelve years.

Minny's decision to ignore her mother's advice shows that she's starting to see Celia as an exception to her mother's "White Lady" rules. Minny's curiosity is partly born of actual concern for Celia, indicating that Minny is letting go of some of her bitterness and starting to see Celia as an individual and potential friend.

At lunch, Celia says that she's lucky to have a friend like Minny. Minny says that they're not friends and Celia asks if it's because they're different races. Minny says that it's because she doesn't respect her enough to tell Mister Johnny she is working in his home. Minny also says that she saw Celia drinking and that Celia should tell Mister Johnny about the bottles. If she doesn't, Minny says she'll tell him herself. Celia gets angry and tells her not to come back to work on Monday.

Celia naively thinks that race, not racism, is what hinders their friendship. Skin color in itself doesn't prevent cross-racial communion—instead, white people's racist attitudes and behaviors alienate black people, making friendships a challenge. For example, Celia doesn't respect Minny enough to tell Mister Johnny about her. Minny indirectly explains that a friendship can transcend racial lines only when white people truly treat black people with the respect they deserve.

CHAPTER 18

On Monday morning, Minny drives to Celia's with the plan to apologize. But Celia, who seems ill, lets her in and goes upstairs before Minny can say anything. When Minny goes to clean the upstairs bedroom, the **bathroom** door is closed. Minny tells Celia through the door that she's going to clean the bedroom now, but Celia doesn't respond. Thinking she might be unconsciousness from drinking too much, Minny opens the door to find Celia covered in blood. There is a dead fetus in the toilet bowl. Minny realizes that Celia had a miscarriage. At Celia's request, Minny calls her doctor, Dr. Tate, to come.

Minny and Celia symbolically bridge the racial divide here. Stockett has emphasized the bathroom as a symbol of segregation and inequality in daily life. Thus, by occupying the bathroom at the same time, Celia and Minny symbolically cross the color line, which anticipates how, in the following passages, the women will repair their deteriorating relationship through mutual understanding and honest communication.

Celia reveals that she was five months pregnant. Minny says that drinking hurts the baby, but Celia responds that she's doesn't drink alcohol, only a special Indian tonic that's supposed to help women who have trouble with their pregnancies. Celia hoped that by hiring a maid and lying down all the time, she could carry the baby to term. She's desperate to try anything that might help because this is her fourth miscarriage.

In the bathroom, the most private space in the home, Celia confesses her most private, secret information. With nothing left to hide, Celia can now rebuild her relationship with Minny on the basis of honesty rather than of lies and deceit. This crisis might allow them to form a real friendship.

Celia says Johnny only knows about her first miscarriage, the one she had soon after getting married. She asks Minny not to tell him about the miscarriages because he wants a baby and she doesn't want him to think that she can't give him one. Minny confesses that she met Mister Johnny months ago and that he's a kind man who loves Celia and will understand what she's going through. Celia is losing a lot of blood and she passes out. Minny heaves her to the bed as the doorbell rings.

An intimacy grows between the women as they divulge the secrets they've kept from each other, making way for their relationship to start anew on a more honest foundation. We also see why Celia hates the mimosa tree and its "baby hairs": it reminds her of her inability to conform to the societal expectation that women give their husbands children.

Dr. Tate is a pale, cruel-looking older man. While Minny anxiously waits to hear about Celia's condition, a nurse comes out of the room with a tin box that Minny thinks must contain the baby. Dr. Tate takes care of Celia and gives her a sedative. He says he's not coming to the house again since she's just too lazy to come to his office. It's 5 p.m. and Minny has thirty minutes to clean the bathroom before Mister Johnny arrives home so that he doesn't find out about the miscarriage.

Dr. Tate's accusation that Celia is lazy recalls how, in earlier chapters, Minny also thought Celia was lazy. Now, both Minny and the reader know that Celia is not lazy, but instead struggling with the physical and emotional toll of trying to carry a baby to term in order to please her husband and society.

CHAPTER 19

At her home, Skeeter reads a magazine article about a black man near Jackson who criticized the Mississippi governor. A few days later, a group of white men lynched the man for speaking out. With the racial tensions so high in Jackson, Skeeter realizes how unlikely it is for the other maids to speak about their stories.

It is important to recognize that racism in the home, which may seem less significant than overtly violent acts like this, influences the larger climate of racism that devalues black lives. It's likely that when these white men were children, they learned from their parents to dehumanize black people, making it easier for them to commit such atrocities as adults.


Stuart arrives at Skeeter's home and asks her to join him on a three-day business trip where they'd share a hotel room. They've been going out twice a week for two months now, making this the longest relationship Skeeter has ever been in. She considers the offer and thinks about losing her virginity to Stuart. It surprises her that she would even consider sleeping with him since most Jackson women fiercely hold onto their virginity until marriage. Skeeter declines, but before Stuart leaves, he invites her and her parents over for dinner to meet his family. She agrees and they plan to have the dinner in three weeks.

The fact that Skeeter considers having sex with Stuart shows that she is having misgivings about societal taboos that make women feel guilty for having or even wanting to have premarital sex. However, her refusal suggests that she still sees some value in keeping her virginity and is not yet willing to abandon this particular social convention.

At breakfast a few days later, Skeeter thanks her maid Pascagoula sincerely for the first time. When Skeeter's mother is out of earshot, Pascagoula whispers to Skeeter that Hilly's maid, Yule May, has agreed to be interviewed for the book.

Hearing Aibileen's and Minny's stories makes Skeeter more considerate to her own maid. While Skeeter has thanked Pascagoula before, now she does so with a better understanding of the challenges that Pascagoula faces as a black woman.

A few days later, Skeeter gets a letter from Yule May. She writes that she didn't have enough money to send both her twins to college and couldn't face picking one over the other so she decided to steal an ugly ring from Hilly, one she never wore, to pay for the last part of the tuition. When Hilly found out, she pressed charges. Yule May lost the case and the court fines wiped out all their savings. Now neither of her boys can go to college. Yule May writes that she can't help with the interviews any longer. The letter is signed from the Mississippi State Petitionary.

Yule May's theft recalls the classic ethical dilemma: would you steal a loaf of bread to feed your family? In Yule May's case, the question becomes more obvious: would you steal from your racist employer who pays you less than minimum wage to put both of your sons through college? Yule May's theft is understandable, if not also justifiable.

That night, Skeeter goes to Aibileen's where her church has gathered to pray for Yule May. They have started a fund to put both of her boys through college. Aibileen tells Skeeter how Yule May first asked Hilly for a loan but she refused, saying charity shouldn't go to those "well and able." When Hilly found out that Yule May stole from her, she used her social influence and connections to get Yule May thrown in jail over night. For the small crime of stealing a ring, Yule May is serving a four-year prison sentence. Now seeing the dire need to change Jackson's racist society, eleven maids from the community come up to Skeeter and commit to telling their stories.

Here we truly see the power imbalance in the white household. The justice system in Jackson is so racist and corrupt that Hilly, or any white woman for that matter, can use her social influence to have her maid thrown in jail for the smallest crime. This scene also reveals Hilly's hypocrisy. While she's willing to raise money for black children in Africa, she won't even give her maid a loan to put her boys through college.

Over the next few days, Skeeter interviews the women at Aibileen's. Aibileen sits beside the women while they talk, giving them the confidence to tell their stories. Skeeter notices how the women tell stories mixed with undisguised hatred and inexplicable love. Hatred for the way the men would try to touch them, the terrible pay, and the indignities of the work, but also love for the children they raised. Some women tell stories of having babies die in their arms and of wearing their maid uniforms to the children's weddings.

The image of maids at weddings encapsulates the emotional complexity of being a black maid in Jackson. The maids are like second mothers to these children, yet the white families make them wear uniforms because the families don't want to appear as if they are "integrating" with African Americans. A maid can only attend the weddings as a "maid," and not in the more complicated (and dignified) role of friend or mother-figure.

One woman named Gretchen comes but refuses to contribute her stories. She accuses Skeeter of profiting from the black women's stories even though Skeeter has already agreed to split any profits evenly with all the maids. When Gretchen says that Skeeter thinks of black women as nothing but "niggers," Aibileen stands up and demands that Gretchen leave. Taken aback by Gretchen's accusations, Skeeter sits in silence until Aibileen apologizes for Gretchen, saying that she wouldn't have let Gretchen come if she knew Gretchen would say what she did. Skeeter says that it's not Aibileen's fault and they move on to the next interview. After the interviews are over for the night, Skeeter thinks about how all the women except Gretchen agreed to contribute whatever money they make from the book's publication to the college fund.

Gretchen's accusation may not apply to Skeeter, but it does apply to Kathryn Stockett. Stockett profited off of The Help, *which dramatizes the suffering of black women. Perhaps the greatest irony is that Stockett's brother's maid (whose name was Ablene) accused Stockett of stealing her life story and profiting off of her suffering. Stockett might have even added this unflattering portrayal of Gretchen in order to implicitly criticize anyone who might accuse her of profiting off the historical oppression of black women.*

CHAPTER 20

In mid-July, Skeeter, Charlotte, and her father Carleton arrive at Stuart's house for dinner with his parents, Francine and Senator Stuart Whitworth. Stuart's mother gives Skeeter and Charlotte a tour of the house, which is full of civil war antiques like a bed that Robert E. Lee slept in. There are even bullet holes in the walls from "Yankee" guns. From upstairs, Skeeter hears Stuart yelling at his father downstairs for mentioning Patricia to him. Skeeter tries to listen for more, but she can't hear anything else of their conversation.

The Whitworth's Civil War memorabilia reveals how many white people in the South romanticized the Civil War as a noble fight against "Northern Aggression," rather than a truly horrific bloodbath based on the South's desire to keep their slaves.

After the tour, the families sit down for dinner. Skeeter is disgusted by the dining room wallpaper that shows slaves happily picking cotton as if they enjoyed slavery. Skeeter glances at Stuart every few seconds and sees that the anger in his face from when his father mentioned Patricia is not fading away. Senator Whitworth, a big drinker, asks Skeeter if she heard about the lynching of the black man who spoke out against the Mississippi government. Before she can respond, Carleton says that such brutalities sadden him and that sometimes he is ashamed of living in Mississippi. Skeeter never knew her father held these opinions.

The wallpaper shows that many white Southerners thought that life was better for African Americans when they were slaves. With such a warped worldview, it's no wonder that people like Hilly might believe that segregation actually benefits black people. While Carleton reveals his disapproval with extreme racism in the South, he doesn't condemn segregation, only the violence used to maintain it. It's not the most enlightened view of racial politics, but even such small amounts of compassion surprise Skeeter given the overwhelming racism she's now starting to recognize everywhere.

After dinner, the parents retire to the porch for drinks while Stuart and Skeeter stand in the hallway. Stuart is sweating and feverish-looking and complains about his father bringing up Patricia to him. Skeeter says it's okay, but Stuart doesn't calm down, his eyes glancing past her as if she isn't even there. Skeeter realizes that all night he was looking at her while thinking about Patricia. Skeeter can almost see Patricia reflected in the anger in Stuart's eyes. Skeeter tells him she needs to go to the bathroom. Looking at herself in the mirror, she tells herself that everything will be fine with Stuart once tonight is over.

Stuart's inability to let go of his past relationship mirrors his family's inability to let go of their distorted image of the pre-Civil War South. The wallpaper suggests that Stuart's parents believe the South was an idyllic paradise where blacks happily worked for white slave masters. Unwilling to recognize the true horrors of slavery, Senator Whitworth, a staunch segregationist, cannot confront the injustice of segregation in the present. Likewise, Stuart, too focused on his past relationship, has lost sight of his present love for Skeeter.

When Skeeter leaves the bathroom, she runs into Senator Whitworth. Drunk, the Senator takes Skeeter aside and asks if she knows how Stuart handled the break-up with Patricia. When Skeeter says she knows that he was very upset, the Senator responds that Stuart wasn't just upset, he was like a dead man. The Senator says he would visit Stuart at Stuart's house and find him staring out of the window and cracking pecans without actually eating the nuts. The Senator wants to know if his son is okay now. Skeeter says she doesn't know, realizing that she knows little about Stuart and the break-up.

As we have seen in Celia and Minny's relationship, keeping secrets prevents the development of a deeper connection based on honesty and trust. Here, Stuart's unwillingness to tell Skeeter about his past is putting the strength of their relationship in jeopardy. Yet, at the same time, Skeeter has yet to tell Stuart about her book. Only when Stuart and Skeeter come clean about their secrets will they have a chance at building a lasting relationship.


On the back porch, Skeeter takes Stuart asides and confronts him about what happened with the break-up. With anger still in his eyes, Stuart says that his fiancé, Patricia, slept with a white civil rights activist. Stuart broke up with her because she cheated on him, but he still continued to love her. Stuart says he almost got back together with Patricia after she apologized, but he stopped himself because he was afraid rumors might spread that Senator Whitworth's future daughter-in-law had slept with an integrationist, a rumor that would ruin his father's campaign. Telling Skeeter the story brings up bad memories for Stuart and he decides that they need time apart so that he can think. When the Phelan family leaves, Stuart smiles and waves so that both sets of parents don't think anything is wrong.

Though Stuart's confession derails their relationship even further, as we will see later, it was also a necessary starting point for potentially rebuilding their relationship on a stronger foundation of honesty. Stuart's confession reveals a significant weakness in his character as well—he would rather give up the possibility for love than disappoint his segregationist father. This doesn't bode well for the future, when he will inevitably find out about Skeeter's book, and it also doesn't say much about the strength of Stuart's moral principles when under pressure.


CHAPTER 21

For the next two weeks, Skeeter feels so "singed and hurt" from what happened with Stuart that she thinks she might catch fire. She still hasn't told her parents that she and Stuart are taking some time off. Skeeter throws herself into her work on the book in order to distract herself from the pain of thinking about Stuart. Charlotte's ulcers are also getting worse. Skeeter notices that every day her mother looks just a little bit more tired.

Skeeter uses her writing to distract herself from her emotional pain, while Aibileen uses writing to articulate the pains of racism and her personal experience. While the maids tell stories and write to express themselves, Skeeter writes in order to escape from herself and her emotions.

As she works on turning the last five interviews into stories, Skeeter thinks about the need to protect the maids' identities. She has given all the maids' and housewives' pseudonyms to prevent the housewives from finding out that the stories are about them. Skeeter gives Jackson a fake name and decides to publish the book anonymously so that none of the women know that Skeeter was involved in its composition. Skeeter also starts to worry for her own safety. These stories will make the town's blood boil and her white skin might not be enough to protect her from the fallout.

Skeeter's decision to publish the book anonymously shows a shift in her priorities. Since Skeeter cannot tell future employers that she wrote the book without exposing the maids' contributions, she sacrifices the self-serving potential of publishing a book under her own name in order to protect the other women.

At a League meeting, Hilly tells Skeeter she wants the ad about her **bathroom** initiative in this week's journal or else she'll have her fired as editor. Skeeter says she won't publish it and calls Hilly a hypocrite for raising money for African children without providing any support to the black people in their own town. When Skeeter asks for her Jim Crow book back, Hilly says it's her responsibility to protect the League from racial integrationists. Before Skeeter leaves, Hilly agrees to return her "Negro activist materials" if she prints the ad.

Skeeter explicitly calls out Hilly for her hypocrisy, highlighting the help vs. hypocrisy theme. Hilly's desire to "help" the African children is ultimately just a false generosity meant to raise her class status as a charitable woman. If Hilly truly cared about generosity and not merely the appearance *of generosity, she would give Yule May a loan to send her sons though college.*

Sitting at her desk at home, Skeeter feels ashamed while she types up Hilly's ad. She worries what Constantine would think of her now.

Skeeter again is an example of "helpful hypocrisy" – though she disagrees with the ad, she publishes it anyway in order to stop Hilly's crusade, which could expose and endanger the maids. At the same time, however, she is compromising her principles and possibly hurting many other people by giving the racist ad a public platform.

CHAPTER 22

On Mae Mobley's third birthday, Aibileen prepares her a special breakfast while Miss Leefolt is off getting her hair done. Mae Mobley tells Aibileen that she is her "real mama." Aibileen remembers how other babies she raised would get confused like this. Aibileen recalls one of those babies who was confused in other ways too. Aibileen thinks that her worst experience as a maid was hearing the boy's father whip him for wearing skirts and perfume. Aibileen wishes she could go back in time and tell the boy that it was okay to like boys.

Miss Leefolt is certainty Mae Mobley's biological mother, but Aibileen is the one who gives her love and support, as a real mother should. In one sense "real" motherhood is more about how one treats one's children, biological or otherwise, than about giving birth to them. Aibileen is also a better parent to the other child than his biological father, as she accepts the boy for who he is rather than forcing him to fit homophobic norms. This would have been progressive indeed for the 1960s South.

The day after Mae Mobley's birthday party, which Aibileen wasn't invited to, Miss Leefolt receives an irate phone call from Miss Hilly. Miss Leefolt rushes out of the house and Aibileen and Mae Mobley follow. When they arrive at Miss Hilly's, they see her yard covered in old toilet bowls. After they return to the Leefolt's home, Miss Leefolt tells Aibileen that Miss Skeeter published the ad about Miss Hilly's bill, but included a line about dropping off old toilets at Hilly's house. Pictures of Hilly's lawn make the front page of the *Jackson Journal*.

Throughout the novel Miss Hilly is concerned with regulating bathroom politics in Jackson. Now, in an ironic twist, Skeeter has people bring their toilets to her lawn as if to say, "You care so much about our toilets? Then here they are!" In this way, Skeeter humiliates Hilly and her bill, perhaps hoping to diminish her social standing, and thus her powerful and malicious influence in Jackson.

Later at Miss Leefolt's, Miss Hilly shows her Skeeter's Jim Crow book and says they have to stop whatever integrationist plans Skeeter's cooking up. Miss Hilly says they're doing this for Skeeter's own safety because there are real racists out there. When Aibileen later tells Skeeter about all this, Skeeter shrugs it off, saying she doesn't care what her friends think. Aibileen realizes that Miss Skeeter doesn't understand how badly Miss Hilly wants to ruin Skeeter's life.

Miss Hilly and Miss Leefolt are almost farcically hypocritical in warning Skeeter against the "real racists" out there—probably the white men who lynch black people in the streets. Hilly doesn't realize that by perpetuating racist myths, institutional inequality, and throwing Yule May in jail, she too is a "real racist."

CHAPTER 23

Aibileen tells Mae Mobley a "secret story" about a wise alien named Martian Luther King who looked like a human except for one detail: he had green skin. Because of the color of his skin, people treated him poorly. While she tells these stories, Aibileen gives Mae two identical candy treats – one wrapped in brown paper and one in white.

Again Aibileen uses storytelling to teach Mae Mobley about civil rights and the fundamentals of tolerance. The candy also teaches Mae Mobley to recognize that skin color – whether black, white, or green – doesn't matter, but what matters is kindness on the inside. All this is basically a childlike echo of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

During one of Elizabeth Leefolt's bridge games, Aibileen opens the door for Celia Foote. She's come to ask Miss Leefolt about working for the Children's Benefit. Leefolt comes to the door and, without inviting her in, says they don't need any more help. She does say that Celia and her husband should attend the Benefit. Miss Hilly comes over and sells two tickets to Celia, saying she should buy ten for all her friends so that she can have her own table. Celia keeps talking casually, not realizing she was just insulted.

The women don't respect Celia enough to pay her the simple kindness of inviting her inside. In part, the women treat Celia poorly because she is from a working-class background, but the irony is that Elizabeth, who is of a lower class status than Hilly, hypocritically enforces this prejudice. Elizabeth is actually hurting herself by doing this, upholding the class hierarchy that makes her spend money just so she can seem wealthier.


Celia mentions her maid Minny and Miss Leefolt's "recommendation" for Minny. When Celia leaves, Aibileen hears Miss Leefolt tell Hilly she never recommended Minny. Hilly say she'll get to the bottom of what's going on with "that Nigra" even if it kills her.

By calling Minny a "Nigra" rather than using her real name, Hilly refuses to acknowledge Minny's individual human identity. Even at this time, "Nigra" was an offensive term for black people because of its association with slavery, showing that Hilly is still holding onto the language – as well as the beliefs – of the racist past.

CHAPTER 24

Aibileen calls to tell Minny what happened at Miss Leefolt's and Minny begins to fear that Celia will fire her as soon as she finds out about the false recommendation. One day, Minny arrives at work with a bad cut on her forehead from the previous night when her husband, Leroy, beat her just for the pleasure for it. He's beaten her before, but always when he was drunk. This time he was sober.

Minny's abusive husband reveals how Minny is the victim of both racist and sexist oppression. Minny commutes from the oppressive environment of her own home, where she has no defense against her husband's physical attacks, to the homes of her white employers, who have power over her socially, economically, and politically.


Celia acts normally around Minny, which gives Minny the hope that Hilly hasn't contacted her yet. In the kitchen, they suddenly see a naked white man in their yard, stroking himself and making threatening gestures at them. Celia calls the police while Minny takes a knife and goes outside to confront him. The man punches her where Leroy had hurt her.

In a strange, darkly comic way, the naked man represents the constant dangers for women in an oppressive patriarchal society. The man strokes his penis as if it were his weapon, and the fact that he hits Minny on the same spot that her husband did emphasizes the two men's shared connection as male aggressors who abuse women.

While Minny is on the ground bleeding from the reopened cut, Celia comes out and beats the man almost to death with a fire poker. Minny cannot believe a white woman is protecting her from a white man. The man, barely able to walk, stumbles off and Minny sees Celia as the strong "white trash" woman she once was.

Celia uses a phallic instrument (the fire poker) to beat the man, thus emasculating him and asserting her power as a woman. Minny recognizes that Celia's true strength comes from the very aspect of her identity that she must downplay in order to maintain her class status: her "white trash" background.


That night, Minny goes to Aibileen's and tells her about what happened with Celia and the white man. Minny comments that Celia doesn't see the lines between people – both the ones between whites and blacks and those between Celia and people like Hilly. Aibileen says that the line between black and white people is imaginary and that Minny should tell Celia that she's too good for Miss Hilly.

Minny once again thinks that Celia is "ignorant" of the lines that separate people, but Aibileen illustrates that Minny is the one being ignorant about this. Aibileen suggests that individuals can transcend the "color line" by focusing on what connects them instead of what divides them. This is a rather simplistic lesson considering the complexities of institutional racism and a history of inequality, but the novel focuses on the private sphere of the home, and Stockett's advice (through Aibileen's voice) is aimed at changing racist opinions one at a time.

The next day, Celia asks Minny why the other women aren't friendly to her. Trying to follow Aibileen's advice, Minny tells her it's because they think she's a white trash hick who stole Hilly's boyfriend by getting pregnant. Misunderstanding what Minny is saying, Celia mistakenly thinks that if she explains to Hilly that she got pregnant *after* Hilly and Johnny broke up, then Hilly will accept her into the friend group. Minny suggests she forget about those women and give Miss Skeeter a call because she's a good lady who'll respect her. Celia says that the League women hate Skeeter so there must be something wrong about her. Minny always knew that Celia wasn't too bright, but now she realizes she's a hypocrite too.

Celia and Minny find a common ground as women struggling against male oppression. Minny hopes this shared experience has brought them close enough for her to be honest with Celia, but Celia's desire for acceptance by the white women makes her deaf to the truth Minny speaks. Celia's hypocrisy shows that she is highly susceptible to the opinions of the society women. As a result, Celia's desire to fit in might lead her to absorb the society women's racist beliefs in the same way Elizabeth Leefolt does when she builds another bathroom to seem wealthier and higher class.

On the night of the Benefit, Celia dresses in a tight hot-pink dress. As in past years, Minny will be working in the kitchen at the Benefit. Minny knows that most women barely show elbow at the event, but she can't find a way to tell Celia she's going to embarrass herself if she wears such a revealing dress. Celia has already started drinking champagne and feels confident that she looks like a movie star.

Celia's outfit shows how little she understands about high society. Her lack of knowledge about the rules of middle-class white conduct makes her treat Minny with more respect than the average white woman, but it also makes her unable to integrate into Jackson high society.

CHAPTER 25

In third person, the narration describes the event. Aibileen and Minny are in the kitchen working and Skeeter is standing silently against a wall. Hilly has made sure that everyone will shun Skeeter in revenge for putting toilets on her lawn. Celia arrives with her husband Johnny. Most of the men in the room ogle Celia while their wives stare at her with either scorn or stifled laughter. Celia feels overdressed but her husband kisses her and says that she looks gorgeous. Celia tries to get Hilly's attention, but Hilly keeps avoiding her. Celia keeps drinking.

This is the only time the narrative goes into the third person point of view, and this chapter describes Celia's experiences rather than that any of the main characters. Stockett may have wanted to narrate Celia's point of view without the lens of Minny's opinions about her, or this stylistic decision might just highlight the Benefit event as a climactic scene where all the major characters are gathered together. Johnny shows that he doesn't care about Celia's class status. He loves her for her personality, not for the way she dresses.

During the silent auction for the Poor Starving Children of Africa fund, Hilly wins Minny's famous chocolate-custard **pie**. For some reason, Hilly seems distressed that she won the pie, thinking that someone must have signed her up for it as a joke. Celia, very drunk at this point, comes over to Hilly and grabs her sleeve. Hilly tries to walk away and the sleeve rips.

To cope with her nervousness and feelings of exclusion, Celia drinks heavily, another faux pas in high society that only further excludes her from the rest of the guests. What happened between Hilly and the pie is a mystery that will soon be revealed.

The music suddenly cuts when Celia tells Hilly that Johnny never cheated on her, that she and Johnny only slept together after he and Hilly broke up. People are glaring at Celia. Hilly completely ignores Celia's attempt at friendship and accuses Celia of signing her up for the **pie**, but Celia, confused, says she didn't sign anyone up for any pie. Hilly calls her a liar. Feeling the shame of being called a liar in front of everyone, Celia vomits and rushes to the **bathroom**.

Celia thinks that honesty will make Miss Hilly like her, but Hilly is too self-centered and concerned about the pie incident to comprehend what Celia is saying. Honest communication requires the participation of both speaker and listener, and Hilly has no interest in communicating with Celia.

At the end of the night, Hilly's mother, Miss Walters, comes over and says she was the one who bid on the **pie**. Walters says she may be forgetting a lot in her old age, but she will always remember what happened between Hilly and Minny's pie. Hilly calls her mother old and useless and then rushes out of the building.

Hilly normally expresses her cruel personality through off-handed insults, veiled threats, and indirect but devastating attacks on the people' lives and livelihoods. But whatever happened between Hilly and that pie was been bad enough to make her openly insult her mother, revealing Hilly's true, hateful nature in public.

CHAPTER 26

All day after the Benefit, Celia stays in bed without getting dressed or putting on any makeup. Mister Johnny is on a deer-hunting trip and has asked Minny to watch over Celia while he's away. While cleaning, Minny sees an opened letter from Hilly, stating that Celia can give the two hundred dollars she owes her for the ripped dress to the Benefit fund. She also writes that Celia is not allowed to attend any more events at the club.

Celia is so insecure about the idea of her social class that she becomes depressed now that she no longer has the chance to integrate into Jackson high society.

For the entire week, Celia doesn't shower, barely eats, and doesn't leave her room. On the day Mister Johnny is returning home, Celia tells Minny that she's going back to her hometown because Johnny's too good for her. She says he deserves to marry someone from his own social class. Celia says that the worst thing about the night of the Benefit was being called a liar about the **pie** in front of everyone. She doesn't even know what Hilly was talking about.

Because Celia has internalized societal beliefs about the importance of social class, she comes to the conclusion that she's an embarrassment and a burden to Johnny, not realizing that Johnny loves her for herself and not for her class status.

Minny decides to tell Celia about what happened with Hilly and the **pie**, hoping it will make Celia see that Hilly is a cruel person not worth getting upset about. Minny explains how she lost her job working for Miss Walters (Hilly's mother) after Hilly put her mother into a nursing home. Hilly, then, started spreading rumors that Minny stole from Miss Walters, which made the other white women refuse to hire her. Knowing Minny had nowhere to work, Hilly told her she should come work for her. When Minny refuses, Hilly says she's doing her a favor and that Minny should be so grateful to her that she should be willing to work for nothing. Minny tells her to "eat my shit."

Hilly's reasons for telling Minny to work for her are totally self-serving. It's likely that Hilly wants the other women to think that she is a forgiving, charitable Christian for offering Minny, now an alleged thief, a job and a second chance. Thus, Hilly hurts Minny just so she can appear as if she is helping her. Hilly's suggestion that Minny work for nothing is also extremely offensive, because Hilly is implicitly suggesting that Minny should offer herself up as a slave.

Minny goes home, bakes a chocolate **pie**, and then returns to the house and gives it to Hilly, who thinks it's a peace offering. Hilly has two big slices. When Miss Walters asks for a piece, Minny says she shouldn't have any because the pie has a "special ingredient" in it. Realizing what's inside, Hilly vomits. To Minny's surprise, Miss Walters starts laughing, saying that Hilly can't tell anyone about what Minny did or else everyone will know she enjoyed eating "two slices of Minny's shit."

Minny humiliates Hilly as an act of revenge, but also gains some power over her. Now Minny has a secret she can use to blackmail Hilly if she continues to spread rumors. Minny's revenge also targets Hilly's racist belief that black people carry diseases. In one sense, by feeding Hilly two slices of excrement pie without her getting sick, Minny illustrates the simple truth that black people do not carry racially specific diseases.

The next day, Celia takes an axe and goes out in the rain to cut down the **mimosa tree** she hates. At the kitchen table, Minny sees a check made out to Hilly for two hundred dollars with a note that says, "For Two-Slice Hilly."

Minny's story makes Celia recognize that she shouldn't put so much stake in Hilly's opinion, or in the classist, sexist, and racist societal expectations that she embodies. With this knowledge, Celia now finds the strength to cut down the mimosa tree, symbolically letting go of her guilt about not having children.

CHAPTER 27

In early December, Skeeter looks at the phone, finding herself wishing that Stuart would call. Skeeter hasn't heard from him for five months. Skeeter picks up the phone and calls Elaine Stein to inform her on the progress of the book. Skeeter says she will complete the book by the second week of January, but Stein moves up the deadline to December 21st. Stein says that after December, the editorial staff is flooded with more projects they can handle, so she must submit her manuscript before everyone takes their winter vacations. Stein also tells Skeeter that she needs to include a story about her own maid to make the book more personal.

Stein's request that she add a personal story heightens the connection between Stockett's and Skeeter's books. Like Skeeter, Stockett grew up in Jackson, had a family maid she loved, and eventually wrote a book (The Help) *about the lives of black maids. Thus, Skeeter's narrative perspective in* The Help *acts as a personal, almost autobiographical retelling of Stockett's own experiences in Jackson.*

At Aibileen's, Skeeter tells her what Stein said about adding a more personal story. Aibileen agrees to tell Skeeter about what happened with Constantine. She just needs a few days to find the best way of telling her. A couple of days later, at a League meeting, Hilly initiates a vote to elect a new editor for the newsletter. No one votes for Skeeter and Hilly becomes the new editor.

The novel's mysteries are beginning to be revealed. We know the truth about the pie, and soon Skeeter will learn the truth about Constantine. These revelations anticipate the more significant revelations that will occur when Stein publishes the book and the housewives learn of the maids' stories.

On her way back home from the meeting, Skeeter wishes she could leave Jackson. When she arrives home, she sees Stuart waiting for her on the porch. He says that he visited Patricia in California. She was wearing a peace sign and had on no lipstick. Stuart says Patricia called him a whore for supporting his father and a whore supporting for Mississippi, which he finds ironic because she's the one who cheated on him. Stuart says he wants to mend things with Skeeter now that he's finally over the break-up. Skeeter feels love for him mixed with a fear of getting hurt again. She says there's no place left in her heart for him and he says he doesn't believe that. When he asks if he can come by to talk again, Skeeter says she doesn't care what he does.

Patricia has clearly rejected the Southern gender norm that women wear makeup in public, and her peace sign shows that she's adopted a new set of norms, specifically those of the Hippie movement in the 1960s. Stuart has so little self-awareness that he doesn't recognize that Patricia calls him a whore as a way of turning the sexist meaning of the word on its head. Patricia implies that Stuart is the real whore because he debased himself by upholding the segregationist politics of his father instead of following his heart and marrying her.


That night, Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter meet at Aibileen's to pick a title for the book. Skeeter suggests a long, academic title, but Aibileen says they need something simpler. She suggests calling the book, *Help*. They all agree and Minny only half jokes that they're going to need some help if this book gets published.

The book's title is a play on words: it is about the help, a plea for help, and itself help. Superficially, it refers to "the help" (the maids), but it is also a plea for "help" on their behalf. The title also suggests that the book itself is the very help that the maids need, since these stories will hopefully make the white women treat them with more respect.


Aibileen takes a day off of work to meet with Skeeter and tell her Constantine's story. Twenty years ago, Constantine's daughter, Lulabelle, was born with very white skin and blonde hair. With a white-looking child, Constantine wasn't welcome in the black community or in the white. Ashamed of her daughter's appearance, Constantine gave her up to an orphanage in Chicago when the girl was four. While Skeeter was in college, Lulabelle, then twenty-five, came to visit Constantine. Aibileen gives her a note with the rest of the story written on it, saying she better read it at home.

The reactions to Lulabelle's physical appearance reveal that race is not a simple biological fact, but actually a complex social convention that has to do with one's appearance, ancestry, and culture. The white community considers her black because her parents are black, but the black community considers her white because she has pale skin. Because the girl doesn't fit the simple and limited definitions of "race," she is an outsider everywhere.

At home Skeeter reads the story. Right away, she starts writing about Constantine for the book, but she finds that she can't stand writing about what her mother did to their beloved family maid. She calls Aibileen to tell her that she's not going to include what her mother did to Constantine because it would be a betrayal of her mother. Aibileen says she would respect Skeeter less if she *did* include it.

Skeeter's decision not to put the story into the book and Aibileen's support of that decision shows that, for these two women, loyalty to one's family takes precedence over publicizing, and possibly rectifying, social and political wrongs.

The next day Skeeter tells Charlotte she knows about everything that happened with Constantine, but that she wants to hear her mother's side of the story. Feeling judged by her daughter, Charlotte angrily accuses her of not knowing what truly happened. Her mother says that Lulabelle had arrived at their home while she was throwing an event for local white women. Having never seen her before, Charlotte thought she's just white woman from the community. Lulabelle introduces herself as Constantine's daughter who has come back to Jackson to live with her mother.

Over the course of the novel, Skeeter has learned to see things from other people's perspectives in order to better understand what they are going through. Thus, Skeeter's desire to hear her mother's side of the story shows that she is once again trying to inhabit another's perspective in order to find some redeeming quality in her mother's behavior.

Charlotte says that Lulabelle walked straight passed her and started mingling with the other women who also think she's white and treat her with the respect and kindness they would have only paid a white woman. Enraged that a black woman would dupe her white friends, Charlotte yells at Lulabelle, saying that she can never come to her house again. Lulabelle spits in her face. Charlotte, even angrier, tells Constantine she cannot work in their home if she stays in touch with her daughter. Unwilling to abandon Lulabelle again, Constantine returns to Chicago with her daughter, but dies only three weeks later.

Even now that we have Charlotte's side of the story, there is nothing sympathetic about her behavior. Charlotte treats Constantine quite cruelly: she not only forces her to lose her job in order to be with her daughter, but she also makes Constantine abandon Skeeter. Charlotte puts Constantine in the impossible position of picking between her flesh-and-blood daughter, whom she hasn't seen in years and Skeeter, a girl she loved and cared for like her own child.

Back at Aibileen's, Skeeter brings over the whole manuscript to show Minny and Aibileen. As they look over the manuscript, they start worrying about what will happen if the housewives figure out that the book is about them. Minny decides to tell Skeeter and Aibileen about what happened with the **pie** so that they can put the story in for "protection." That would mean Hilly would know the truth about where the events of the book take place, but would use her influence to steer people away from believing it was about Jackson so that no one would find out that she enjoyed two slices of Minny's excrement pie. Minny says it's their best chance to protect the maids, and they all agree. The next day Skeeter mails it to Elaine Stein.

By including this story in the book Minny takes the largest risk upon herself, since she will inevitably incite the fury of Miss Hilly. While Hilly might be too embarrassed to reveal the truth that Jackson is the setting of the novel, she'll still be able to make Minny's life a living hell. Minny essentially sacrifices her own safety and security in order to protect the other maids, showing her unqualified bravery and selflessness.


CHAPTER 28

At the home that Skeeter shares with her parents, the family doctor informs her that Charlotte has cancer in her stomach lining. The doctor says her mother has two months to live. Skeeter's father consoles her as she cries. A couple of days later, Stuart drops by again on Christmas day to try and talk with Skeeter again. Skeeter lets him kiss her, saying it's only because her mother is dying.

With her mother dying, Skeeter doesn't seem to think it worthwhile to hold a grudge over what happened with Constantine. She does not forgive her mother, but she also does not reject Charlotte in her time of need.

Over the next few weeks, Stuart and Skeeter start seeing each again. Sometimes they go out to dinner, but they usually just talk and watch television together at Skeeter's home so that Skeeter can be close to her ailing mother. One night while they are watching TV, Stuart mentions that Hilly is spreading rumors that Skeeter is "some kind of crazy liberal" who wants integration. Stuart says he knows it's all lies because Skeeter's "too smart to get mixed up in anything like that." Feeling guilty that she has kept the truth about her book a secret from him, Skeeter just nods and smiles.

Stuart's defense of Skeeter is an example of dramatic irony, which is when the reader knows something – in this case, that Skeeter's book might help the integrationist movement – that a character (Stuart) does not. Skeeter also seems hypocritical here, since she kept her book a secret from Stuart, even though she demanded he come clean about what happened with Patricia.

One day, in preparation for a date with Stuart, Skeeter buys some modern woman's clothing with short hemlines. Stuart takes her to the fanciest restaurant in town. While they eat, Stuart comments that she looks "different" and says that her dress is "so…short." Skeeter thinks that he seems more confused with her new look than impressed.

At the Benefit Johnny complimented Celia even though her outfit clashed with high society conventions, showing that he was supportive of her no matter what. Stuart, in contrast, implicitly criticizes Skeeter for her outfit, effectively shaming Skeeter into conforming to a more conventional dress code.

After they finish eating, Skeeter notices that Stuart's parents are at the restaurant bar having drinks. She asks if they should go over to say hello, but Stuart directs her away from his parents because he's afraid of what his mother, Francine, will think about her dress. Skeeter feels hurt that he's ashamed of her.

Stuart once again shames Skeeter by directing her away from his parents, showing that he is more concerned with how his parents – politically conservative guardians of the status quo – will see him than about the feelings of the woman he supposedly loves.

It's past eleven when they arrive back at Skeeter's home. Stuart walks her to the door and then holds out a ring and asks her to marry him. Smiling while on the verge of tears, Skeeter says yes, but that she needs to tell him a secret first. She tells him everything about the book except the names of the maids who participated. Confused about why she's writing the book, he asks why she even cares about the maids. Skeeter flinches at his ignorance and looks down at the ring again. It looks "sharp and shiny" now.

Since the previous passages demonstrated that Stuart cares deeply about societal conventions, it is unsurprising that Stuart doesn't understand why Skeeter would so brazenly disobey the most important taboo in Southern white communities: do not cross the color line. No longer excited by the proposal, Skeeter thinks the ring looks "sharp," as if it, and the commitment to marriage it represents, were a weapon of oppression.

Stuart says that everything is fine in Mississippi and that Skeeter shouldn't "go stirring up trouble." Skeeter sympathizes with Stuart's inability to see the grim truth about how bad things are in Mississippi for black people. When Skeeter says that she's not stirring up trouble because trouble is already here, Stuart takes back his proposal, saying that he can't marry someone he doesn't know. Still loyal to her, he promises to keep the book a secret.

Before she heard the stories of the black maids, Skeeter was not unlike Stuart, unable to recognize the oppression that black women faced in white households. Stuart's ignorance highlights Skeeter's own transformation into a more racially conscious and ethically enlightened person.

In mid-January, 1964, Skeeter meets with Minny and Aibileen at Aibileen's house and tells them that Elaine Stein just called. Her publishing house will release a few thousand copies of the book and pay them eight hundred dollars total. It's not a lot of money spread between all the maids, but Aibileen and Minny are ecstatic. The book will be published in August.

Aibileen and Minny's ecstatic excitement shows that they did not contribute to the book for the self-serving reasons of fame or wealth. Instead, they did so in order to tell the world the truth about life for a black woman in Jackson.

CHAPTER 29

From the kitchen of Miss Leefolt's, Aibileen watches Mae Mobley plays with her newborn brother, Ross, who is only a few months old. Mae Mobley, now four-years-old, begins school. Each day Mae Mobley comes home with a little more education, making Aibileen worry that Mae Mobley will soon learn to see black people as inferior. One day, Mae Mobley tells Aibileen that her teacher said black children don't go to white schools because they're not smart enough. Aibileen asks Mae Mobley if she thinks Aibileen is dumb. Mae Mobley says no and then says that her teacher is wrong. She hugs Aibileen and says she's smarter than her teacher.

Aibileen's fears are coming true, as Mae Mobley is already being influenced by her racist society. But the stories Aibileen told her about civil rights have instilled in her an inner resilience against these beliefs. Confused by what her teacher said, because it contradicts these stories, Mae Mobley comes to Aibileen with a genuine desire to understand the nature of race. Mae Mobley resists her teacher's racist influence (for now) because of her love for Aibileen.

From inside the black church, Aibileen watches Skeeter drop a brown package at the steps of the church and walk away. Aibileen and Skeeter haven't met in person for six months in order not to arouse any suspicions before the book's release. Aibileen opens the package to find enough copies of the book for her and the other maids. On the cover is a white dove, the symbol of peace.

Stuart accused Skeeter of "stirring up trouble" by publishing these stories, but Skeeter truthfully countered that trouble was already in Jackson, because the whites had created a segregated society. Thus, the dove on the cover indicates that her book is not meant to incite violence or disunity among the people of Jackson, but instead intended to put an end to "trouble" by repairing some social injustices in the South.

Aibileen and Minny, who's six months pregnant, go to a church event. When they arrive the whole congregation starts clapping for Aibileen. The reverend says that the congregation knows it's too dangerous for her to talk about the book publically, but they wanted, at least once, to celebrate her accomplishment. He hands her a copy of the book that has hundreds of names signed over its front and back covers. He says that since she can't have her name on the cover, black people from communities all around Jackson signed their names instead. Aibileen feels love for the community well up inside her. The reverend then gives her another signed copy of the book for Skeeter. He says their community will love Skeeter like family.

The black community's hugely supportive reception of the book anticipates and contrasts with the impending white community's negative, even violent reception. While the book gave Aibileen a platform for self-expression, the signatures show that she also gave a voice to many other black citizens who face daily racism. The gift for Skeeter also shows that the black community is being far more forgiving and accepting than the white community in these racial conflicts. Skeeter now represents the possibility of having white allies in their struggle against oppression. At the same time, this exaggeratedly positive response to Skeeter's book seems presumptuous on Stockett's part—as if the present-day black community should be happy and grateful to her for writing The Help.

So far there has been little change in the white community since the publication of the book, but a popular news program that is going to review the book may change all that. At Miss Leefolt's, Aibileen turns on the television to watch the program in the living room while she irons. Aibileen gets nervous when Leefolt comes into the room and starts watching with her. The male cohost praises the book as "enlightening," suggesting that it may even be about Jackson, which worries Aibileen. The female co-host calls the book a disgrace to the South for telling lies about the good Southern women "who've spent their lives taking care of their help." Intrigued that such a controversial book might be about Jackson, Leefolt goes out to buy a copy.

White people might find the book superficially "enlightening" if they read it simply to uncover the identities of the white women or maids identities in order to gossip about or punish them, but the book also has a potential for providing deeper enlightenment for white people who are truly willing to engage with it. Because the book gives a voice to those who are usually voiceless, it could help privileged whites widen their perspectives and gain some empathy for their black domestic workers.

CHAPTER 30

Minny watches the same news program and starts worrying what Miss Hilly will think when she gets to the last chapter – the one about her and the **pie**. When Minny arrives at work the next day, Mister Johnny and Celia are in the kitchen waiting for her. Celia reveals that she told him about all the miscarriages. Johnny thanks Minny for saving his wife's life the day of the most recent miscarriage.

This is the first time we've seen Celia since she cut down the mimosa tree. With that symbolic act of destroying societal expectations, she gains the confidence to tell Johnny the truth about her inability to have children. Given Johnny's disregard for societal conventions in the past, it's unsurprising that love prevails.

Mister Johnny says that Minny will always have a job at their home. Minny looks at her own pregnant stomach and wonders how she can have so much and they have so little. They all hug and start crying together.

Though Johnny and Celia are wealthy, live in a big house, and have the advantages of being white in a white supremacist society, Minny thinks that she is the one who is metaphorically "rich" because she has five children with another on the way. The schmaltzy group hug signifies that Celia and Minny have learned to truly respect and care for each other as people.

CHAPTER 31

Aibileen sees the book on Miss Leefolt's nightstand and worries each time Leefolt's bookmark inches closer to the second chapter – the one about her. When Miss Hilly comes over one day, Aibileen overhears her saying that she's up to chapter seven and thinks that the book is about Jackson. She says she'll hunt out which maids gossiped about the families. Aibileen hopes that Hilly will get to the last chapter soon.

Stockett ramps up the tension as the climax of the book approaches, raising questions of whether Miss Leefolt will recognize herself as the white woman in chapter two and fire Aibileen, and whether Miss Hilly will get to the last chapter before she has a chance to ruin the lives of the maids.

The next day, Aibileen sees that Leefolt has already read past the second chapter. Since she doesn't treat Aibileen any differently, Aibileen realizes that Leefolt must not know that the chapter is about her. When Mae Mobley comes home crying a few days later, she tells Aibileen that her teacher yelled at her for drawing a picture of herself with a black crayon. The teacher told her that black means dirty and, if she draws herself that way, then that means she's dirty too. Aibileen consoles her, but worries that Mae Mobley will soon start acting like all the other white people who treat black people as being lesser than whites.

Mae Mobley's tears show that there is a war being waged inside of her between her respect for Aibileen and the societal pressure to see black people as lesser-than. If Mae Mobley stays true to Aibileen's teachings and refuses to conform to society's racist norms, then she too risks becoming an outsider of sorts. The irony here is that Mae Mobley's teacher teaches the untruths of hate and racist stereotypes, while Aibileen, an uneducated maid, teaches her more important and truthful lessons.

CHAPTER 32

Lying in bed next to her husband Leroy, Minny fears that Leroy is drunk and will beat her. He doesn't know about the book's publication or her role in it, but he can tell something is making her nervous. Only the baby inside of her prevents him from beating her. She thinks about how once she asked him why he hit her. He said, "If I didn't hit you, Minny, who *knows* what you become." Minny wonders what she could become if he didn't beat her.

Racism is not the only oppressive force in Minny's life. Minny recognizes that her husband's violence is preventing her from realizing her full potential. Now that Minny finally works for an employer who respects and does not exploit her, she can perhaps now focus on ending oppression at home.

The next night, Minny dreams of eating at a large feast and suddenly wakes up in the middle of the night, thinking someone is in the room. She realizes the feeling that woke her was the knowledge that Miss Hilly has just screamed while reading the last chapter.

As archenemies, Miss Hilly and Minny have developed a strange kind of psychic connection. Their hate for each other has intertwined their thoughts and feelings, giving them a paradoxical kind of intimacy.

CHAPTER 33

Skeeter also wakes up in the middle of the night from a scream. Skeeter wants to get out of Mississippi but she doesn't want to leave Aibileen and the rest of the maids to deal with the fallout from the book's publication. Feeling trapped, she realizes that the scream was hers.

Skeeter has changed so much in the last two years that she now wants to leave her hometown, family, and former friends. She now fully realizes how oppressive Jackson really is – for both white women and all black people.

At a drugstore, Skeeter picks up medicine for Charlotte, who is still alive and battling cancer. There, she runs into a woman named Lou Anne, one of the white housewives included in the book. Lou Anne's maid, Louvenia Brown, had told good stories about her employer, including one about how Lou Anne drove Louvenia's grandson, Robert Brown, to the black hospital after white men beat him. Lou Anne waited there all night with Louvenia. Lou Anne tells Skeeter that Hilly is spreading rumors that Skeeter was the one who wrote the book. Lou Anne says that Hilly also accused Louvenia of contributing to the book and told Lou Anne to fire her maid for speaking out against a white woman.

Louvenia's stories about Lou Anne illustrate that not all white people in Jackson are racist employers. Lou Anne seems to genuinely care for Louvenia and her grandson and to respect them as equals. Stockett, as a white writer who loved her own black family maid, reveals her own personal bias here as well. By emphasizing that not all white women were bad to their housekeepers, she suggests that she and her family were also "one of the good ones."

Lou Anne says that she recognized that Louvenia's chapter was about her. Instead of getting mad, Lou Anne thanks Skeeter for writing the book. Lou Anne reveals that she has depression and that Louvenia is the only person who truly listens to her and supports her. Lou Anne felt even more grateful to her maid after reading all the nice things Louvenia said about her in the book.

Skeeter sees firsthand the positive effect the book has on at least one of the housewives. Instead of "stirring up trouble" (as Stuart accused her of doing) by creating distrust and animosity between maid and employer, the book strengthens the intimate connection between Lou Anne and Louvenia.

Lou Anne continues, saying that if Hilly ever tells her to fire Louvenia again, she'll respond that Hilly deserved that **pie**. Skeeter thinks to herself that the pie secret is out and that the maids will have no protection from Hilly's wrath. But before Skeeter can ask how Lou Anne found out about the pie, Lou Anne says that Hilly has been acting odd lately. All morning, Hilly has been frantically telling people that the book isn't even about Jackson. Skeeter realizes that Hilly must have read the last chapter. She feels relief that Minny's plan seems to be working.

The book does drive a wedge between Lou Anne and Hilly, however. Hilly's influence over the other white housewives was very strong, but the humiliating story about the pie diminishes her social standing, giving Lou Anne the strength to take a stand against her. Hopefully now the white women will feel more free to think for themselves without fearing the consequences of Hilly's anger.

Back at home that evening, Skeeter wonders what life would have been like if she had never wrote the book. Skeeter has started to grow her hair out and wear shorter dresses, but she thinks that if she never wrote the book, she would be married to Stuart, have short hair like all the other women and never wear short dresses. Skeeter goes out to her porch for a breath of fresh air. Right then, she sees Hilly's car pull up to the house.

Skeeter's physical appearance reveals her transformation. With long hair and short dresses, Skeeter revolts against the societal conventions that shame women who don't follow the strict dress code. These outward rebellions reflect her inner rejection of the racist and sexist belief systems in Jackson.

Hilly, who's gained weight and developed a cold sore on her lip, marches up to the porch with a letter accusing Skeeter of writing the book. She plans to give the letter to Charlotte, which worries Skeeter because this info will be a shock to her ailing mother. Hilly barges into the house, but when she sees Skeeter's dying mother she decides not to give her the letter. She tells Skeeter that she knows that Aibileen told stories about Elizabeth Leefolt because of a small, identifying detail she included about Elizabeth's house. She implies she's going to take revenge on Aibileen and that she has "big plans" for Minny.

Hilly has also undergone an outward transformation, but instead of reflecting an inner change, her outward appearance merely reveals her true nature—and also makes her seem like an even more stereotypically villainous, repugnant character. Hilly has tried to uphold the illusion that she is the ideal housewife—beautiful and charitable like a good Christian—but Skeeter's book unmasks her hypocrisy, showing her for the cruel, ugly woman she really is. This also provides a literal example of Aibileen's lesson that "ugliness is on the inside."

Skeeter calls Aibileen at her house. Minny is also at Aibileen's. She tells them about Hilly's threats and then says she got a job offer as a copy editor's assistant in a NYC publishing house. She says she's going to refuse the offer so that the maids won't have to fend off Hilly for themselves. Aibileen and Minny tell her that she has no life in Jackson anymore and that she can't protect them anyway. They convince her to take the job.

Though Skeeter's desire to stay comes from a genuine desire to help the maids, she still holds the paternalistic view that black people need white people for protection—a belief that Hilly often expresses. The difference between Hilly and Skeeter is that Skeeter truly listens to Aibileen and Minny and follows their advice. It is unclear if this means she has lost her conception of herself as a "white savior," however, or if she is just relieved to have her friends' approval of her move. Unlike the maids, Skeeter has the privilege of simply leaving Jackson instead of dealing with the fallout from her book.

CHAPTER 34

Aibileen arrives at Minny's to talk about the reception of the book. Minny heard about one white woman who, after reading the book, sat at the same table as her maid for the first time and listened as her maid told stories about all the good and bad things that white women had done to her. Aibileen is happy that something good is coming out of the book.

Once again, we see the book having a positive effect that reflects the cover image of a dove, the symbol of peace. Instead of dividing Jackson into even more contentious racial groups, the book is a conversation piece that opens up channels of communication across the color line, helping to bring some people together.

At Miss Leefolt's, Mae Mobley is playing with her little brother Ross, still only a few months old, in her bedroom. She tells him to pretend to be black, sit at the counter of their imaginary diner, and not move no matter what she does to him – a game Aibileen played with Mae Mobley to teach her about civil rights. Her father, Raleigh, hears them playing this game and asks Mae Mobley where she learned this stuff. To protect Aibileen, she lies and says her teacher. Raleigh tells Miss Leefolt to have Mae Mobley switch classes at school.

Mae Mobley's game shows that she has internalized Aibileen's lessons about tolerance, despite her many other negative influences. In the same way that the adults can pass down hate and racism from generation to generation, so too can people pass down tolerance and love.

One night a few days later, Skeeter arrives at Aibileen's to say goodbye before she flies out to New York tomorrow. It's the first time they've seen each other since they finished the book. Having seen no large-scale changes in how people treat their maids, Skeeter questions if the book was really worth all the trouble and risk. Aibileen gives her copy of the book with all the signatures, telling her that each signature is a reminder of the good she's done. Tears fill Skeeter's eyes and she tells Aibileen that she convinced the *Jackson Journal* editors to give Aibileen the job writing the Miss Myrna columns. Skeeter is leaving for New York tomorrow, but with a one-day layover in Chicago to visit Constantine's grave. Before Skeeter leaves, Aibileen says, "Go to New York, Miss Skeeter. Go find your life."

In reassuring Skeeter that the book really does matter, Aibileen suggests that it affirms black voices in a white world that tries to silence them. Even if no laws or attitudes change, this resistance against oppression is enough to make the risks worthwhile. In the last words Aibileen speaks to Skeeter, she uses the prefix "Miss," suggesting that Aibileen still feels as if she must act deferentially towards Skeeter because she is a white woman. Likewise, the fact that Skeeter doesn't tell Aibileen to drop the prefix shows that a part of her still wishes to retain her position of power in their relationship. This "Miss" reveals that these women haven't fully transcended the color line, and indicates that there is still a long way to go before racism is eradicated.

Late that night, Aibileen gets a call from Minny. Minny says that Miss Hilly used her connections to get Leroy fired. When Leroy came home, he threatened to kill Minny, but she ran out of the house before he could do anything. She tells Aibileen she's at a gas station with her children now, waiting for her sister to pick her up. She says she'll never return to her husband.

While it's not exactly clear what gives Minny the strength to finally leave her husband, it is possible that the financial security Mister Johnny guaranteed her and the empowerment she feels from resisting racial oppression inspire her to leave Leroy.

While Aibileen is at work at the Leefolt's the next day, Hilly and Miss Leefolt call Aibileen into the parlor. Hilly accuses her of stealing silver and says she's calling the police. Miss Leefolt is stunned but doesn't say anything. Hilly tells Miss Leefolt to go into her kids' bedrooms to tell them Aibileen is leaving. While Leefolt is out of earshot, Hilly says she can't send Aibileen to jail for the book, but she can for stealing. Aibileen says she can write a lot of letters in jail that could do Hilly a lot of harm. Mae Mobley, who is sick with a high fever, runs out and tells Aibileen not to go. Aibileen takes Mae Mobley to the kitchen to give her some medicine and tells her how good and smart she is. Aibileen feels that she can see a glimpse of Mae Mobley in the future as a strong, proud woman.

Aibileen's threat that she will write letters in prison shows that she has learned to trust in the power of writing to resist oppression. No longer the timid maid at the beginning of the novel, Aibileen now takes Hilly head-on, threatening to expose the secret about the pie. Aibileen's premonition might also be an example of "metatextuality" – when a text shows awareness of itself as a text. In this case, the glimpse Aibileen sees of the future might actually be Stockett foreshadowing herself. Born in the 1960s, Stockett, like Mae Mobley, was also raised by a caring black maid and grew up to write this fictionalized account of her experiences being raised in Jackson.

Miss Leefolt fires Aibileen but Hilly says it's not worth pressing charges. Aibileen leaves the house and feels as if she is free. She thinks Leefolt is so locked in her own head that she can't recognize herself in the book and that Hilly is living a lifelong jail sentence trying to convince people that she didn't eat that **pie**. Aibileen thinks that she might write a book about her life. Last night, Aibileen thought she was finished with everything new because, with the book published, she assumed she would be returning to her old life as a maid. Now, as she walks out of the house, she feels like laughing and crying because of all the new but terrifying possibilities that lie ahead of her.

Aibileen closes the novel just as she opened it. Skeeter was arguably the "white savior" and stand-in for Stockett herself, but she at least doesn't have the last word in The Help*—although it is still Stockett speaking through Aibileen, of course, and assuming a black voice. Aibileen is able to recognize that despite all their privilege, Miss Leefolt and Miss Hilly are in many ways less free and "wealthy" than she is, especially now that Aibileen has found her voice and a new future for herself. The novel began with Aibileen unable to express herself because of the oppressive conditions of the white household, but now she thinks about the future, about the stories she has the freedom to tell. The novel concludes with the terrifying but exhilarating freedom of Aibileen setting out on a new journey of self-expression.*

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Plaue, Ethan. "*The Help*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 4 Oct 2015. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Plaue, Ethan. "*The Help*." LitCharts LLC, October 4, 2015. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-help.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Help* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Stockett, Kathryn. The Help. Berkley Books. 2009.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Stockett, Kathryn. The Help. New York: Berkley Books. 2009.