

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Help

by Kathryn Stockett

written by Eric Martin

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The Help

Note to Teacher

Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* has been a popular sensation since its initial publication. The book was a national bestseller and was quickly turned into a critically acclaimed film. Though some minor controversies accompanied the novel and the film into the spotlight, these were largely drowned out by accolades and applause. A novel about domestic workers and race relations in Mississippi during the 1960s, *The Help* is a work of fiction drawn, in part, from experiences and characters from Stockett's life.

Growing up, Kathryn Stockett was raised with a black maid, Demetrie. *The Help* grew out of a question that Stockett was never able to ask Demetrie regarding her treatment and her experiences working as a maid for a white family in Mississippi during the tumultuous decade of the 1960s.

In interviews, Stockett describes her feelings about her native state of Mississippi as being characterized by both pride and shame, but mostly pride. These attitudes are fully reflected in the text of *The Help*. A good deal of the reader's attention is drawn to the bigoted attitudes of some of novel's principal characters, yet many positive and redeeming stories are told alongside those that represent the dark side of the segregated South.

A number of sensitive and controversial subjects are presented in *The Help*, though they do not become the focus of the text. In addition to racism, the novel has instances of domestic abuse, a Peeping Tom, and miscarriage. There are several uses of profanity in the novel as well.

In the Teaching Unit, we have used the terms "colored" if the word is part of a quotation that comes directly from the book and "African American" or "black" when answering questions. In addition, many of the vocabulary words in this Unit have specific meanings within the book that are somewhat different from their usual definition. They have been defined in the Vocabulary section of each chapter as they are used in the book.

In addition, the maids refer to their employers as Miss, Mrs., or Mister, usually, but not always, followed by the first name. Sometimes, this distinct method of referring to a character is included in this Unit, as opposed to calling people by their last name, and sometimes, we have simply used the characters' first names, eliminating the title of Miss, etc.

All references come from the Berkley Publishing Company edition of *The Help*, copyright 2009.

Terms and Definitions

Allusion - a reference to a person, place, poem, book, event, etc., which is not part of the story, that the author expects the reader will recognize. **Example:** In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom speaks of “Chamberlain’s umbrella,” a reference to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain.

Anecdote - a brief story that is usually illustrative or humorous, similar to a vignette.

Characterization - the methods, incidents, speech, etc., an author uses to reveal the people in the book. Characterization is depicted by what the person says, what others say, and by his or her actions.

Dialect - a particular kind of speech used by members of one specific group because of its geographical location or class. **Example:** Jim, in *Huckleberry Finn* says, “Shet de do.” [“Shut the door”.]

Diction - the choice that the author makes about which words to use. Diction can be formal, as in a textbook, informal, as in a book intended for the public, figurative, as in a poem, or it can fit into numerous other categories.

Dynamic Characters - people in the book that evolve, change, or surprise the reader. **Example:** Helen Keller in *The Miracle Worker*.

Figurative Language- words and phrases that have meanings different from their usual ones in order to create a poetic and/or literary effect. **Examples:** Love certainly has its own seasons; crumbling cities made of matches.

Flashback - a scene that interrupts the ongoing action in a story to show an event that happened earlier. **Example:** The movie, *Citizen Kane*, tells its story almost exclusively through the memories of its characters, who all knew Kane before his death.

Foreshadowing - the use of hints or clues in a story to suggest what action is to come. Foreshadowing is frequently used to create interest and build suspense. **Example:** Two small and seemingly inconsequential car accidents predict and hint at the upcoming, important wreck in *The Great Gatsby*.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Is Skeeter the novel's protagonist? If she is, what evidence proves this? If not, who else can be considered the protagonist of the novel?
2. Discuss the various meanings of the novel's title.
3. Explain how the use of multiple first-person narrative voices helps to support some of the novel's themes.
4. Compare and contrast Skeeter and Celia. What do these characters have in common? What significant traits make them different from each other?
5. In what ways can Hilly Holcomb be seen as a hypocrite? Cite specific examples of attitudes and behaviors associated with Hilly that demonstrate moral contradictions or lack of moral integrity.
6. Consider Stuart Whitcomb's decision to retract his marriage proposal to Skeeter. What are his reasons for making this decision? Is his decision predictable or unexpected? Is it justified?
7. *The Help* presents a number of anecdotes relating to highly moral and highly immoral behavior. Select two anecdotes that highlight good and bad behavior in Jackson. Summarize, and explain how these episodes portray a complex image of Jackson.
8. Is Skeeter's participation in the book project morally defensible if she knows that what she is doing will hurt one of her oldest and best friends? Explain your opinion.
9. How is the book project at the center of the novel related to the Civil Rights Movement, its aims, achievements, dangers, and leaders?
10. One common cliché is that the pen is mightier than the sword. Cite specific examples from *The Help* that imply or discuss the power of the act of writing. Do they prove or disprove the cliché?
11. What sacrifices does Skeeter make in pursuing the book project, and what does she stand to gain if the book is a success? What does Skeeter stand to lose if the book is not a success or if things related to it go wrong?
12. What risks do Aibileen, Minny, and the other maids take in participating in the book project? Since these risks are great and involve money and, in Minny's case, violence, why do you suppose they are willing to undertake the project?

The Help

Chapter 1 Aibileen

VOCABULARY

bawling – crying loudly
colic – stomach upset in babies
congealed – settled into a firm gel
endorse – to publicly support
favor – a similarity
fuss – to complain
heirloom – an inherited family possession
initiative – a formally defined, official goal
lanky – thin and long
malnourished – thin and sick from lack of food
palsy – a shaking
perk – to lift up; gain energy
plug – a small chunk
rotunda – a round construction
spindly – thin, long, and weak
tacky – in poor taste

1. Aibileen notices something wrong about Miss Leefolt almost immediately upon coming into the Leefolt house for the first time. What does she notice, and what does it signify?

2. What is the reader told about Aibileen's background in the opening chapter?

3. How has Aibileen changed because of her son's death?

Chapter 6

VOCABULARY

banned – barred; made illegal
bolts – the blooms of the cotton plant
condescending – arrogant; disrespectful
defoliant – a chemical that causes plant leaves to fall off
degrading – demeaning; humiliating
faze – impress; impact
gauzy – foggy; hazy
mimeographs – copies
mulling – considering; thinking about
mutters – speaks without clarity or enunciation
obstinacy – stubbornness
propriety – proper manners; authority
riveting – fascinating; highly interesting
shuck – to remove the outer shell
squat – [*slang*] a very small amount

1. Summarize the letter Elaine Stein sends to Skeeter. Include the advice that Stein offers to her.

2. What two things does Skeeter do in response to the letter from Elaine Stein?

3. Explain the irony of Skeeter's job at the local newspaper.

Chapter 13

VOCABULARY

dungarees – sturdy pants
franticness – anxiety; worry
inconsequential – of no importance
lamine – to coat with clear plastic
mesmerized – enthralled; captivated
paranoid – irrationally fearful
pathetic – powerless and worthy of pity
pithy – briefly and sharply worded
podium – a stand for a speaker
seizing – stopping; experiencing pain
tick – to count
wary – leery or cautious

1. How does Skeeter initially treat Stuart Whitworth when he comes to visit? How does he defend his behavior on their first date?

2. List the changes in Skeeter's life that have taken place so far in the novel.

3. What does Skeeter find and steal from the library in Jackson? Describe the contents.

Chapter 21

VOCABULARY

excusal – a release; permission
hypocrite – one who acts against his or her stated beliefs
insipid – dull; ineffectual
placate – to calm; subdue
pucker – a wrinkled portion
retching – vomiting
singed – burnt on the edges
tendrils – vines; stringy plant extensions
woozy – light-headed
vaporous – empty; gaseous

1. What two lies is Skeeter maintaining with her mother? Why does she lie?

2. What do Hilly and Skeeter argue about at the League meeting?

3. What condition does Hilly set for Skeeter to get her Jim Crow laws booklet back?

4. Skeeter claims that Hilly is a hypocrite. What are some examples that indicate her assessment of Hilly is correct?
