

Characteristics of African- American literature in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

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1. Introduction

This study analyzes whether Kathryn Stockett's novel *The Help* can be called African-American literature, despite the author being a white American. Treating the subject of oppressed black maids in the United States during the 1960s, Stockett touches upon race, class and gender issues, much like the famous African-American writer Alice Walker does in *The Color Purple*. Moreover, both Kathryn Stockett and Alice Walker write about black female empowerment, and it is then perhaps no wonder why the two novels have been compared ever since *The Help's* publication in 2009. In this paper, I investigate whether common characteristics of African-American literature can be found in *The Help*, and whether they are treated in a similar way to *The Color Purple*. I also look briefly at two other white authors who have written novels on African-Americans long before Stockett's time, namely Harriet Becher Stowe and Harper Lee, and how the public received them. Before starting on the literary analysis, I outline the results obtained from computational analysis, comparing *The Help* to a larger corpus of African-American texts.

African-American literature has had a long trajectory since its first appearance in the 18th century. Starting out with the slave narratives, its principal objective was to show the immorality of slavery as an institution. Later, African-American literature would go from being only a political tool to also develop an artistic value, with exquisite poets like Langston Hughes leading what was called the Harlem Renaissance in the 20th century. However, African-American literature never lost its roots in politics, as the subject continued to be the oppression of the black community in the United States. To this day, there is a debate around the responsibility of the black writer in contributing to the struggle for Black Power. Some writers, like William Edward Burghart Du Bois, felt that African-American literature's main goal should be black empowerment, whereas others, including Langston Hughes, felt that the individual African-American writer should be free to choose the subject matter of his text. (Gibson 6)

In her thesis *Defining elements of African-American literature*, Ebony Gibson discusses the academic disagreement around the definition of African-American literature. Many literary critics feel that it should be a literature strictly by, for and about African-

Americans in the United States, and their struggle against oppression. However, this definition would exclude many contemporary black writers, who are not necessarily writing about black characters and their struggles any more. New genres have appeared, such as mystery, urban, erotica/romance and science fiction, which all have been classified as African-American literature mainly because the writers are black. (Gibson 77) Stockett, on the other hand, is writing what we thematically could call a more typical African-American novel in terms of theme, focusing on her black characters' struggle against segregation and racism. However, she is not a black writer, and many in the black literary community have troubles accepting white authors into the canon of African-American literature.

For her thesis, Ebony Gibson interviewed eight African-American literature professors on what should and should not be classified as African-American literature. All have many years of experience in teaching the subject at university level, and have also published academic writing on African-American literature. Still, they disagree on something as simple as the definition of their field. When Gibson specifically asked the professors to consider whether or not to include white writers who write about black characters in the canon, the professors could not come up with a uniform answer.

Lawrence Jackson, a black professor at Emory University in Georgia, disagrees with white writers forming part of the African-American canon. He does however realize that it is mostly "a personal decision", that is, a personal preference, and that his rejection is not based on research. Moreover, he repeatedly uses the word "disagree" when talking about the subject, making it clear that there is little consensus on the topic within the literary circles. Also, he doesn't completely reject the white writers. Rather, Jackson thinks it is the black community that isn't yet ready to welcome the white writers into their literature. (Gibson 91)

Bess Montgomery, professor in African-American literature at Clark Atlanta University, uses stronger words when talking about white writers. She thinks they lack the experience needed to write about black characters, and that they all write from a "white sensibility", even though their main characters are black. (Gibson 92) Professor Vinyard, who teaches at the same university, disagrees, arguing that it may be possible for a

significant experience to provide a non- black writer with a black sensibility. “If they are not African American, they should have a significant African American experience somewhere in the life or their background or their growing up. Not just observing afar. They have to have some element of the experience in their life. Therefore, it would guide them to that language, that style, that text that will make it more genuine than one who does not have that experience”, Vinyard explains. (Ibid)

Looking at Kathryn Stockett’s background, it becomes clear that she has some experience with the African-American community. Growing up in Mississippi, her childhood, adolescence and parts of her adult life are marked by life in the South, where black and white people live side by side, although segregated during the novel’s setting. We also discover a direct parallel between the story of Miss Skeeter’s disappeared maid Constantine and the maid that previously worked in Stockett’s family, Demetrie. *The Help* was written out of love, respect and gratitude for Demetrie, are we to believe what Stockett writes in the afterword. She has included a passionate afterword called “Too little, too late” at the end of *The Help*. In this section, she makes it clear that her field of interest is the same as that of Alice Walker, worrying about Demetrie who must have felt what it was like to be “poor, colored and female”. (Stockett 200)

However, Stockett’s black experience seems to be limited to Demetrie and to living in the South. She does not mention any other black influences, besides seeing colored people living segregated in her hometown as a child, and feeling pity for them. She adds that she is “so embarrassed to admit that [feeling pity] now”. (Stockett 200) Stockett also cites Howell Raines, who wrote that “there is no trickier subject for a writer from the South than that of affection between a black person and a white one in the unequal world of segregation. For the dishonesty upon which a society is founded makes every emotion suspect, makes it impossible to know whether what flowed between two people was honest feeling or pity or pragmatism.” (Ibid 201) Both this quote, and the fact that she mentions her embarrassment for having felt pity for the black workers, make it clear that Stockett had no intention for *The Help* to be a sentimental novel in which she pities her black characters. However, my hypothesis is that although it is not her intention, Stockett makes victims of her black characters. I believe her novel is too marked by the “white sensibility” that professor Bess Montgomery highlights, and that

The Help therefore is destined to show blackness only from the outside, never from the inside.

This thesis focuses on the treatment of black identity and black gender studies in *The Help*, as these are the two main areas Dana Williams mentions as crucial to African-American women's writing. This is undoubtedly true for *The Color Purple*, where we can find all the elements that Williams lists as crucial. I hereby reproduce her ideas on African-American women's writing:

1. It is a literature that explores the self
2. It makes inquiries into black womanhood
3. It proclaims the message of loving oneself and one's culture
4. It criticizes blacks who cling on to western culture
5. It is a rebellion against patriarchy and racism
6. It is about mental and spiritual healing
7. It makes connections between the past and the present

(Williams 75)

As stated earlier, my hypothesis is that Stockett is too much of an outsider in order to explore black identity and black womanhood.

In her afterword, Stockett also voices her fear of stereotyping her black characters. "I was scared, a lot of the time, that I was crossing a terrible line, writing in the voice of a black person. I was afraid I would fail to describe a relationship that was so intensely influential in my life, so loving, so grossly stereotyped in American history and literature." (Stockett 201) Again, my hypothesis is that her white sensibility will be unable to move beyond the stereotypical in *The Help*. After all, in her own words, "I don't think it [what it really felt like to be a black woman in Mississippi] is something any white woman on the other end of a black woman's paycheck could ever truly understand." (Ibid)

2. African-American literature through computer analysis

The aim of this section is to establish the most common features of African-American literature, both in older and in more contemporary works. Given that the research question of this paper is whether *The Help* can be considered an African-American novel, it is necessary to define what characterizes this type of literature, and what the works usually have in common. I hereby seek to propose a definition of African-American literature based on the data extracted from two different corpora of African-American texts, using computer technology. The programs used are Mallet and Antconc.

For this investigation, I have two corpora of texts, namely one corpus with some of the classics in African-American literature, and another, larger corpus of contemporary African-American fiction. In the first group with the classics, I have included various authors from different time periods, all of them writing in different genres. The focus is on the most noteworthy texts in African-American literature as far it has been possible to find the texts online. As a point of departure, I consulted James Marshall Crotty's list of the ten African-American authors that everyone should read written for the magazine Forbes, a site known for its rankings and statistical information.

The corpus of the classics includes all the authors that are mentioned in Forbes' ranking: Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Frederick Douglass, Alice Walker, W.E.B Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, August Wilson and James Baldwin. Apart from these authors, I have added Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde, Lorraine Hansberry, Jessie Redmond Fauset and Harriet Jacobs. The last ones were added to balance out the number of male and female authors. Octavia Butler was specifically added because she is a black female writer of science fiction, and thereby represents a less common genre within African-American literature. It is interesting to see whether or not her works present similar topics to the topics treated by more conventional African-American literature.

I knew that in looking for novels online, without wanting to pay for every single one of them, I would be restricted by copyright laws. Even if I was paying for the novels, I would have to break copyright laws and use complex programs to change a Kindle, epub,

or, at best, a PDF file to simple text format, or txt. Txt is the only format that the programs Mallet and Antconc are able to work. I was therefore glad to find twenty African-American classic novels online for free and in PDF format. The list includes *Invisible man*, *Notes of a Native Son*, *Native Son*, *Plumbun*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Souls of Black Folk*, *Their Eyes were Watching God*, *Beloved*, *I know why the caged bird sings*, *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*, *Zami Sister Outsider Undersong*, *The collected poetry of Langston Hughes*, *Song of Solomon*, *Sula*, *Bluest Eye*, *Fences*, *The Parable of the Sower*, *Bloodchild*, *Wild Seed*, and a recompilation of some of Maya Angelou's poems that were available online.

The second corpus consists of contemporary African-American literature, and therefore represents the newest trends in the black literary community. Contemporary here means works published at present, with the majority of the novels published as late as 2016, and the oldest ones dating back to 2010. Since I depended on the works I could find online, a database called Smashwords proved useful. From this website, I was able to collect as many as 91 novels from the category African-American literature. Examples of titles are *A True Mulatto Face*, *Amazed by her Grace*, *All is Fair in Love and Football and E'steem: The Beast from the Bowels*. The same novels can also be found on Amazon, although most of them are only sold as Kindle editions. It should be noted that these novels are rather lightweight, and the authors are mostly unknown, at least outside the African-American target group, which I assume to be young adults and possibly black women. These novels are easy-to-read texts that serve the purpose of entertainment. Yet, all novels, as well as films, have a message, and I find it interesting to look at what contemporary black writers, however commercial, want to communicate with their stories. For instance is it interesting to look at how they describe their black characters, how they depict black identity and what topics they choose. It will be important to note whether their take on black identity differs from that of Kathryn Stockett, for even though Stockett has written a historical novel, she has done so in recent times. Should her treatment of black identity differ too much from how black people describe themselves in mainstream literature at present, there is a great chance that the black community will reject her novel.

As for the genres within the contemporary corpus, most of the novels are romance/erotica or urban novels. The urban novels and the African-American romances are similar genres. Both focus on romance, relationships and sex, but the urban novels also center on city life, brutalities or vulgarities, and the writers frequently use slang and bad language. Urban is a genre highly dominated by African-American writers. Other than romance/erotica and urban, the contemporary corpus includes some crime novels and a few historical novels, as well.

This is of course not the first time someone has used computer technology, nor Mallet, for literary investigation. Mallet is a tool for something called topic modeling. What a topic model does is that it identifies “broad themes in literature”. (Jockers 767) One of the reasons for its rising popularity is that it saves you a lot of time, as well as enabling you to analyze a much bigger corpus of texts. Now, neither time nor human resources limit the reach of your investigation. Another advantage is that the method avoids biases. (Jocker 751) The results obtained from the analyses have gone through an objective process where related words are grouped, and from these groups of related words, we can extract the themes, or topics, in the works. Each group sums up one topic, but it is up to the literary scholar to decide which topic that is. Thus, we see that the fear many academics harbor, namely that the literary analysis will suffer under the use of technology, is ungrounded. There is still both room and need for analysis of the data obtained, and only someone who knows the corpus will be able to understand the complex data output. It is not easy to establish the topics based on the words that Mallet groups together from novels, much less if you are not a literature student.

In reality, the program called Mallet is able to treat thousands of texts, so the possibilities are endless. What Mallet does is to provide you with what Jockers calls a “satellite view” of the texts. (Jockers 768) Obviously, if one were to carry out an investigation of that scale, the whole master thesis would have to be dedicated only to literary analysis by computer technology. It would also be an advantage to be quite skilled in computer programming to perform such an extensive analysis. The computer analysis presented in this section can only show the tip of the iceberg, as one would have to analyze a much larger corpus in order to conclude that the data represents the full

range of African-American literature. However, I believe that the inclusion of two corpora of texts, one with the classics and one with the present-day novels, gives us two interesting perspectives on African-American literature. Moreover, I intend that the next two chapters further explore the data obtained in this section, but then through close reading and more traditional literary analysis.

With Mallet, there are many ways in which to improve the quality of the output. Mallet works on commands, and in order to operate the software, it is therefore necessary that you know something about programming. The course named *Computer resources for literary research* forms part of this Master Degree and has given me the opportunity to carry out this analysis. The classes give you an insight into programming, but do not pretend to make you into an ICT student. The commands I have used in Mallet are the ones taught in class. I have added a list of stopwords to the commandos, which excludes words with no lexical meaning (example “he”, “she”, “did” etc.) However, I can see from the results that this stoplist is somewhat incomplete. Still, I find the results obtained both interesting and relevant.

Mallet makes numbered groups, and you chose how many groups you want the output to consist of. I have chosen that it provide me with twenty, and Mallet starts counting from zero to nineteen. Even though some would say that twenty are too few groups, I found that if you asked for more, the topics seemed very similar and only served to confuse me, and probably would confuse the reader. Each group consists of words that appear together in the same context, and are therefore assumed to be related to the same topic. Mallet therefore helps us find the most common topics in a corpus of texts. After typing the commandos and running the program, I obtained the following results for the first corpus with the twenty classics of African-American literature:

```
0      2,5    master slave children slaves mr grandmother slavery man time told flint
free god heart knew house made mistress child
1      2,5    don shug sofia mr children ast harpo celie god bout page git love nettie
good big miss home dear
2      2,5    eyes eye sula blue black looked women nel bed knew miss legs colored
door head years town fingers eva
```

- 3 2,5 love night black back woman hands day white dead face place life hard
home light young heart make sun
- 4 2,5 mama walter ruth beneatha ain don travis man asagai lorraine george
hansberry act money sun raisinin son lindner johnson
- 5 2,5 white time called voice men stood feeling sat remember door words
started coming work find hand lay hear part
- 6 2,5 ah de tuh uh janie dat tea cake ain yuh mah hurston wid yo god eyes don
lak zora
- 7 2,5 back don people thought time man didn things put good wanted long left
looked told thing make house head
- 8 2,5 negro black men south land world negroes half man social life work
thousand white war great john hundred schools
- 9 2,5 angela roger ll coloured jinny ve anthony miss virginia don life street girl
long people angele thought martha powell
- 10 2,5 man brother ll don eyes looked sir jack suddenly ve mr street black head
felt clifton crowd thought norton
- 11 2,5 black women mother muriel street audre work people ing spelling zami
ginger power gennie lorde children york anger knew
- 12 2,5 life day years home good thought young father make town work live felt
brought times face passed hard money
- 13 2,5 ain troy rose don gonna man ll cory de bono song good blues white boy
house time harlem ma
- 14 2,5 sethe denver baby paul beloved suggs didn sweet mother halle ma garner
feet made girl children woman knew house
- 15 2,5 dark world freedom dream long free ve men great music high god today
river deep race gold feet sweet
- 16 2,5 doro anyanwu isaac people children body man amber lit www http
generated html abclit processtext converter abc woman child
- 17 2,5 mother woman room felt school house eyes children made girl father child
bed sister read mrs open met friends
- 18 2,5 milkman guitar pilate macon don father man didn hagar cholly pecola
dead ain ruth mama knew reba bluest baby
- 19 2,5 people didn dad ve harry ll god bailey don zahra cory fire momma bankole

money wasn't couldn't gun father

I shall now comment on the most relevant topics. The first topic, or group zero, centers on slavery. It connects words like “master”, “slave” and “children”, the latter suggesting both that the black children are slaves, but also possibly that many slave-owners impregnated their black female slaves. The word “mistress” most likely refers to a female slave owner in this context, but it is also possible that it supports the argument of extramarital affairs with black slaves and their white masters. We also see that “God” appears with the other words related to slavery, and that is not so strange, since faith was a necessary ingredient in a slave’s life. Religion is a central topic in many African-American novels and also often a way to freedom and redemption. In any case, the topic of group zero is slavery.

Group eight has the same topic, with words like “negro”, “south”, “land” and “work”. This gives somewhat more context to slavery, as we see it is linked to the South, and that the slaves worked the land.

Group eleven has words like “black women”, “mother”, “work” and “children”. We therefore understand that it centers on the role of the black female characters. It is therefore interesting that these words appear in the same context as “power” and “anger”. The first link between women, children and mother is more obvious, but “power” and “anger” suggest that the black female characters are not merely victims, but also strong, powerful individuals that use their built-up anger to finally break free from oppression. Group fourteen, with “baby”, “mother”, “children” and “house” once again underlines the role of African-American women in the novels, yet this time without the revolutionary element. The same is true for group seventeen.

The twelfth group has the black family as its topic. It is about the “life”, “years” and “day” at “home” where it is “hard” because of a lack of “money” and where “work” is an issue.

For group thirteen, one could establish either African-American culture or freedom as a topic. We see that “music”, “blues” and “song” are mentioned, together with “Harlem”, which is where African-American cultural life first blossomed, when the slaves fled the

South to live freely in the Big Apple. These elements do not only refer to culture, but also to a movement towards freedom and the end of racial prejudice and segregation. In any case, we see that freedom is undoubtedly the topic in group fifteen. Here we find the word “freedom” clearly stated, as well as supporting words like “dream”, “music” “God” and “race”. Once again, we see a link between music and freedom, as well as God and freedom. These therefore seem to be two paths towards freedom for the black characters.

All in all, Mallet establishes slavery, maternity, black feminism and freedom as the main topics in the classics of African-American literature, with important elements in these categories being religion, music, anger and power.

I carried out the same analysis also for the contemporary corpus, consisting of ninety-one novels in all. The results are the following:

0 2,5 shae larry mother nyla toby don dana angelique vertigo page queen ya
chase ma project didn mama ass ll

1 2,5 tracy grace girl madge miz woman girls aunt diane looked darrel pat coach
wanda smiled beck sullivan team school

2 2,5 jayson jenessa stone dani rebecca becca colby renee don connie
dominique church man leslie victor charles mother jennifer client

3 2,5 didn back asked looked page face knew door felt made walked turned
wanted wasn room couldn sat woman pulled

4 2,5 ramona chicago jay cabbie dante page sunshine baby love darnell mother
robert kari man peace daughter shit deborah kids

5 2,5 allen tim tamiko alana god todd jim davis don didn mother simone work
couldn preston callie time people asked

6 2,5 alice carson suda baba mia justin walyam lutalo mama bus keen began
looked girl tricia hut matika blue colonel

7 2,5 page roman lelia symphony jessica olivia amber patrick don quincy mister
lawrence back willow hard didn fitting fox heaven

8 2,5 back kalil sherelle don doesn ll lennie page mak mom stop ve asks door kj
hands didn tells love

9 2,5 eyes man hand men small moment long head hands viktor dark feet wife
side children water ground left light

10 2,5 shit nikki chance fucking fuck donald iesha don money char love candice
muhfucka girl gert ass gonna ain vic

11 2,5 page ve people life black day years things time year work white job room ll
past story book made

12 2,5 marcus chris brent earl lil steve ain big shit car wit spoonie block shawn
money smitty jerome street asked

13 2,5 church mother ain world yegor people house god don lord mama father
wasn big pastor back nikki kids mark

14 2,5 damn mia ass shit terrence quinton hell page roderick ain dana man nigga
terri dick girl fuck years tamera

15 2,5 cami mother didn kaci leena marissa baby eyes began donnie daniel
school knew river girl page kelly pregnant mom

16 2,5 john latoya ronald dex page naomi isis ll miss marcia lucia back bill gonna
steem alma shawn johnny smile

17 2,5 kelly theo chris sein church mother pastor baby ashlynn erica looked love
mallory eyes book nodded martine family children

18 2,5 felix body eyes ebony lips mark heart back amber man hand michael head
voice hadn smile woman kasie night

19 2,5 time don good make back thought ll give long eyes thing feel night phone
mind talk call hand wouldn

Firstly, I would like to comment on a recurrent topic in African-American literature that we see both in the classics as well as the contemporary novels, namely religion. In this corpus, religion manifests itself as a topic in as many as three groups; group two, group thirteen and group seventeen. Group two is perhaps not as illustrating as the two others, but still worth mentioning. Here, a problem arises that often happens in the Mallet analysis – it groups character names into topics. There are ways of excluding this through downloading external programs and applying these to Mallet, and that should perhaps be tried if one were to further develop this investigation, along with improving the stoplist. However, it is interesting that Mallet connects so many characters to church, because it shows the importance of going to church in the African-American community.

Furthermore, group thirteen has both “church”, “lord” and “pastor” in it, and is more obviously about religion. It knits the black family to church by including words like “mother”, “mama”, “father” and “kids”. In group seventeen, we see much of the same words grouped together, and can assume that the topic also here is religion.

As with the classics, maternity continues to be a topic in contemporary African-American literature. It is not so easy to decide what these novels’ take on black maternity is, as we find both the word “sunshine” and “shit” in the same category in group four. In group fifteen, it seems that teenage pregnancy could be a topic, as we find the words “mother”, “baby”, “school” and “pregnant” in the same group. Moreover, knowing that these novels are often teenage romances, that seems like a plausible explanation.

The characteristics of African-American romances and urban fiction become clear in the remaining groups I want to comment on. Group nine and ten seem to have love and sex as topics, again relating back to the romances/erotica. However, in group eleven we are rather dealing with urban fiction, which commonly has street life as a topic. We see that from the words “money”, “street”, and “car”.

Group one could also be briefly commented on, as it seems to introduce a new topic in African-American literature – sports. The words “coach”, “team” and “school” suggest that many of the young African-American characters play sports in school. This is something we can recognize from popular culture, where black characters in films, TV-series and music videos are mostly all very fit and active players of either basketball, American football or practice cheerleading. Being physically fit suggests that being strong, powerful and attractive now forms part of black identity.

Apart from the topic modeling tool Mallet, I also have the program Antconc at my disposal. What Antconc does is to provide you with word frequencies, and also with the context in which a given word appears. It is a program that is easy to use, and that gives you plenty of information about your corpus, creating a list of the most frequently used words in the corpus. It is through the function “concordance” that you can consult in

which work the words appear, and in what context. In order to make the wordlist relevant, that is, to include only words of lexical content, we have to add a list of stopwords also here.

With the corpus of the twenty classics, Antconc presented me with a list of 39909 words ordered by their frequency. The most frequent words were repeated in the corpus as many as 3097 times. Out of the most repeated words we find “black” and “white”. There is no surprise to this, as we know that African-American literature centers on the topic of race and skin color. Words that follow are mother, children, house, and similar words like child, baby and momma. This clearly shows that maternity is a central topic in African-American literature.

There also appeared many words related to body image, such as the word body itself, breasts, color, colored, brown, skin, race, pretty, beautiful and ugly. Moreover, other identity markers that appeared were words corresponding to origin, such as Africa and Africans.

Concerning anger, the word itself is repeated 307 times in the corpus. Heat is repeated 146 times. The rest are words more related to violence than anger itself, such as fighting, death and kill. As a counterpoint, we see that religion and faith become very important in such troubled times as the characters are living, with God mentioned as much as 1120 times, besides words like the Bible, church and hope.

The role of women is central to many of the works, especially those written by the black female authors. It is not surprising therefore that the word kitchen appears 305 times in the corpus, along with the word cooking, given that the black women in the novels basically spend their lives in the kitchen. Education is mentioned 111 times, and it is understandable, given that many of the black characters, especially the black girls, are denied an education and have to work at home. As will be discussed later in the paper, lesbianism is a revolutionary element in *The Color Purple*. The word lesbian is specifically mentioned in the corpus 67 times, but almost all the repetitions are from the novel *Zami: A new spelling of my name* by the author Audre Lorde. This is an example of the importance of the concordance tool; looking up in which works the word has been

used. Lesbianism seems not to be such a central element to African-American novels given that the repetitions come from one single novel. However, we know that *The Color Purple* treats lesbianism, even though Walker doesn't specifically use the word lesbianism/lesbian in her novel. This is a weakness of this kind of statistics; a phenomenon might be present although not specifically named.

3. Identity

3.1 Stereotypes

"We suffered contempt and pity because of the color of our skin" (Bell 75)

Given that Stockett is a white writer narrating the lives of black characters, the first thing we must ask ourselves is whether she understands black identity. How can she write from a perspective so different from her own? Not surprisingly, Kathryn Stockett has been criticized for stereotyping her black characters in *The Help*. Should this be true, her novel adds itself to a tradition of sentimental novels written by white authors on African-Americans. In evaluating whether *The Help* is stereotypical rather than authentic, I will compare the novel to two other classics written by white authors on African-Americans. As the black community has rejected all three novels, we must look at whether they really distort black identity, or whether the writers are rejected simply for being white intruders.

Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Becher Stowe (1852) and *To kill a mockingbird* (1960) by Harper Lee are two classics written by white female authors. Like *The Help*, the two aforementioned novels are both dearly loved and widely criticized. They are obligatory reading at most American High Schools, as well as subjects of study at many faculties of literature. Still, both are criticized for being sentimental novels in which the authors show little understanding of their black characters. Literary critic Richard Yarborough writes that "Although Stowe [author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*] unquestionably sympathized with the slaves, her commitment to challenging the claim of black inferiority was frequently undermined by her own endorsement of racial stereotypes" (Yarborough 47).

In some of the novels that white authors write about African-Americans, there is a tradition to portray the Negro as simple and childlike, but inherently good.

In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Tom is the moral center of the novel. He is a self-sacrificing individual that chooses to die instead of hurting a fellow slave, and this impeccable moral makes him somewhat inhuman. He makes no attempt to break free from slavery, and clings on to religion until the bitter end. Celie in *The Color Purple* also suffers and endures like Tom, but she is not morally incorrupt like him. Whereas Celie is losing faith and towards the end redefines her perception of God, Tom never questions God or his faith. However, Becher Stowe's characterization of Uncle Tom must necessarily exaggerate his kindness and piety, the same way that Harper Lee exaggerates the kindness of her black character, also named Tom. Only that way did they manage to create sympathy for the black man amongst their contemporaries, when a more common stereotype for the black man at the time was that he was violent and beastly.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the black man Tom Robinson is falsely convicted for having raped a white girl. What seems a bit strange to the reader is that Tom doesn't show any anger at being wrongly accused. Throughout the court case he seems almost too kind, even feeling sorry for the girl who framed him. The dialogues serve to demonstrate Tom's kindness, with him steadily repeating that "I didn't wanta be ugly[...]". (Haper Lee 64)

Although recurring to stereotypes of the docile and inherently good Negro, both Stowe and Harper Lee at least changed negative stereotypes for more positive ones. Stuart Hall discusses the phenomenon of the inherently good black character. He relates how black people were usually represented, but also represented themselves, in different forms of art up to the 90s. In search for black power, black artists and writers depicted the black character as inherently good. This led to a "fetishized nature of images of blacks". (Hall 224) Thus, although the white writers are being criticized for the way they depict their black characters, we see that also black writers have had a tendency to make the black subject inherently good. As such, the criticism of the white authors seems somewhat unfair, especially when we keep in mind that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* dates as far back as to 1852.

However, today we must realize that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is dated. Three out of five African-Americans have even come to consider it an Anti-Negro text. (Yarborough 67) The fact that so many in the black community reject the novel and think it is anti-Negro shows that the black community does not want sympathy, but equality. What we must ask ourselves then is whether white authors should keep on writing sentimental novels about African-Americans, when the sympathy is both ill directed and ill received. Society has progressed, and Kathryn Stockett, a writer of our times, should be able to add more depth to her black characters. A general trend according to Stuart Hall is that the black subject is undergoing a series of changes, and that films and novels are starting to depict black characters in a less stereotypical way. However, we still find many stereotypes in *The Help*.

Like Uncle Tom, the maid Aibileen from *The Help* is docile and relatively simple minded. She clings on to faith and is not revolutionary in spirit. She counts on prayer to solve all her problems, and would not have been able to break free from oppression had it not been for the white character Skeeter, who starts writing a book about all of the black maids' lives. In the three novels mentioned written by white authors on African-Americans, the intellectual is always white, and it is he or she who paves the way for the black characters to freedom. Whereas Uncle Tom, a full-blooded Negro, is kind and naïve, George is the intelligent character in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This becomes a problem in light of George's race. The author writes that "George was, from his father's side, of white decent. (...) From his mother he had received only a slight mulatto tinge (...)". (Stowe 112) The emphasis on George being mostly white, together with his superior intellect, is an offense when you look at the characterization of the black characters. Yarborough remarks how George is the only one who is not superstitious or celebrating a savage African religion. He also has more depth to his character than Tom, as he bursts out in anger and shows inner conflict. It therefore becomes clear that the author has a higher opinion of the mulatto than she has of the Negro. (Yarborough 52)

Just like George undermines the character of Tom with his superior intellect, so does Skeeter compared to the maids in *The Help*. The real emphasis is not on the maids, but on the white girl that helps the help. She is the one who takes the initiative to tell their

stories, and although she has more freedom to act than them, Stockett shows us that Skeeter, too, is risking a lot in doing so. She is risking her good name and reputation, but uses her intellect to fight for what is right, as opposed to the black characters. There are many situations in the novel where we see that Skeeter jeopardizes her status for the project. One such example is talking to Aibileen about the book project in her friend Elizabeth's home:

"Please, Miss Skeeter. Miss Leefolt have a fit if she find you giving me cash," Aibileen whispers. "She doesn't have to know." Aibileen looks up at me. The whites of her eyes are yellowed, tired. I know what she's thinking. "I already told you, I'm sorry, I can't help you with that book, Miss Skeeter." [...]But I don't know any others well enough." I am tempted to bring up the word friends, but I'm not that naïve. I know we're not friends. Hilly's head pops through the door. "Come on, Skeeter, I'm fixing to deal," and she disappears. "I'm begging you," Aibileen says, "put that money away so Miss Leefolt don't see it." (Stockett 53)

Here, Skeeter is risking both Elizabeth's and Hilly's friendship, two of the most powerful women in Jackson. Should you fall out with one of them, particularly with Miss Hilly, there will be a personal vendetta against you with the whole town participating. In the case of Miss Celia, Jackson's ladies shun her on orders from Miss Hilly. Even knowing this, Skeeter's sense of moral correctness makes her stand up against Miss Hilly, and when the latter gives her the Home Help Sanitation Initiative, Skeeter alters it for the newspaper, making people leave their old toilets at Miss Hilly's porch. She is now an official enemy of her former friend, a very powerful and frightening enemy to have. To sum up, Skeeter is the one who risks her reputation for the black maids, and she is the brain behind the book project, not the black characters themselves.

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the white lawyer Atticus is the brain behind Tom's rescue, the black man who is falsely accused of rape. Like Skeeter, Atticus is also risking his good reputation by defending Tom. His name indicates that he is a thinker and an intellectual, with "attic" referring to the uppermost room of the house, or the head/brain. His daughter is named Scout, which indicates that she is observant and inquiring. Her brother's name is Jem, alluding to the jemmstone and that he is of high value. The one who

should be the main character in the novel, Tom, is hardly characterized and rarely figures in the novel. In light of this, it becomes more a novel of moral correctness than it is a true insight into the life of an African-American man.

It is almost as though Atticus and Skeeter are extended versions of the authors of the two novels, Atticus an extended version of Harper Lee and Skeeter of Kathryn Stockett, and that they use these characters in order to express their own moral beliefs. Hence, giving these characters a heroic status is like complementing themselves for their own moral standards. So pleased are the authors with themselves that they forget they make victims of the black characters. Tom Robinson in *To kill a Mockingbird* is a victim in every way; unjustly accused, in need of someone to defend him and with a limp arm. The forceless arm is a sure sign that the author wants him to be a victim, but a victim is not what the African-American community wants. Likewise, all the black maids in *The Help* are victims in need of a white rescuer. They come to Skeeter with their stories after the maid Yule May is falsely arrested, but only after Skeeter already had announced her project, and only when they feel a great need for their stories to be told by someone other than themselves.

Although Abileen is crafted on the stereotype of the kind and docile Negro, she is not as unquestioning and naïve as Uncle Tom. Participating in Skeeter's novel is an act of resistance in itself, and distances her from Uncle Tom, who dies at the hands of his cruel employer. Still, she is very kind and docile considering her circumstances. She never breaks out in anger, and Stockett often describes how Abileen holds back her anger so that her employer doesn't notice. At one time, she is "so mad I'm stomping. Baby Girl been in that bed since eight o'clock last night, a course she need changing! Miss Leefolt try to sit in twelve hours worth a bathroom mess without getting up! I lay Baby Girl on the changing table, try to keep my mad inside". (Stockett 12) Throughout the novel, Abileen repeats the phrase "keep my mad inside", which goes to show that she is angrier than Uncle Tom and Tom Robinson, but that she still would not put up any resistance had it not been for Skeeter.

The tendency to portray the African-American characters as victims has a long tradition in the United States, also within the film industry. The phenomenon is called the white savior complex. Common for such films, and novels in this case, is that they give the white character the role of a Messiah, who rescues his black “followers” from their tragic fate. Throughout the process, the white rescuer experiences a *Bildung* where his/her eyes are opened and he/she learns something about himself/herself and life (Hughey 252). Films of this category are often labeled narcissistic and grandiose, as the white savior forms the center of the story and is given heroic status. (Vera & Gordon 33)

Sociology professor Matthew Hughey also points out that the white savior stories are “often based on some supposedly true story”. This is also the case for *The Help*, where Stockett claims that her own maid Demetri was the one who inspired her to write the novel. Hughey also makes another important point in highlighting the white character’s role as either a “teacher, mentor, lawyer, military hero, aspiring writer, or wannabe Native American warrior”. In *The Help*, we find the aspiring writer Skeeter as the white savior, in *To kill a mockingbird*, the lawyer, Atticus, is the savior. Furthermore, Hughey specifically mentions the film version of *The Help* as belonging to the white savior film category. (Hughey 2015)

The professor goes on to imply that the white savior stories serve as a form of escapism for white Americans from the problems in society. By pretending to build bridges between the black and white community through sentimental stories, the real-life problems can be somewhat forgotten. (Hughey 252) As we all know, the United States is still struggling with racial issues, which is why we find new movements like Black Lives Matter troubling life in America. When reading *The Help*, one also gets the feeling of sentimental escapism. The scenes between the black maids and the white children are meant as a form of reconciliation between black and white, but since the perspective is so white, it once again victimizes the black characters. An example is when Mae Mobley gets a new teacher, Miss Taylor, who transmits many racist views to the children in class. Aibileen tries to talk to the little girl afterwards, telling her that the teacher is not right in everything, and trying to win back the little girl’s trust and empathy. She tells her that “Miss Taylor ain’t right all the time”, and Mae Mobley answers faithfully “You’re righter than Miss Taylor”, throwing her arms around Aibileen’s neck and hugging her,

expressing a love she does not feel towards her own mother nor Miss Taylor. Aibileen goes on to confide that “I tear up then. My cup is spilling over. Those is new words to me” (Stockett 176) The fact that Aibileen needs the approval of a little white child in order to feel valuable, sends the wrong message. It makes Aibileen very small and vulnerable, with her language in the sentence “Those is new words to me” further underlining her inferiority and victimization.

Yet, is said of anger that it marks the first step towards liberation. (Grasso 3) As such, feminists have associated anger with courage. They also associate it with sisterhood. (Ibid.) This is true for *The Help*, where the built up anger that all the black maids feel leads them to gather and to cooperate on Skeeter’s project. Seen in that light, the maids do free themselves, and are not only victims. Furthermore, Linda M. Grasso has compared the similarities of ways to express anger in black and white women’s literature in North America. In terms of metaphors, the most commonly used metaphor for anger is heat, a metaphor that we see used in *The Help* on various occasions.

The setting in *The Help* opens up for several references to heat, as it is set in Jackson, Mississippi, and the action takes place under the merciless sun of the South. The word “heat” is repeated over 40 times in the novel, and this is without mentioning related words, such as warmth, sun, heated and so on. One could falsely assume that it is just for atmosphere, to describe a warm summer in the South, had it not been for one detail; a heat wave hits Jackson in December. Stockett therefore makes it perfectly clear that the heat has another function than just providing atmosphere. “For no reason but to irritate me, we get a heat wave in December”, says the maid Minny. (Stockett 62) Not only do they experience a heat wave, but they also hit a record: “It must be record heat”, says Aibileen. (Ibid 174) We get a feeling that this heat has to do with more than temperature when Aibileen remarks that “The heat done seeped into everything.” (Ibid 174) The black characters are burning with heat, or with built-up anger. Minny talks about a “heat that has been burning me up all my life”, that only can be cooled by telling the truth about their lives to Skeeter. (Ibid 62) Skeeter feels the anger of the black community directed towards her as a representative of the white community. This is especially true after Yule May has been imprisoned and she is the only white person who has gathered with

the black community to talk about what has happened. Skeeter then feels “the heat of dislike and guilt”. (Ibid 115)

We therefore see that Abileen and Minny are stereotypical, but with a twist to their characters that distances them from Uncle Tom and Tom Robinson, as they put up more resistance and are angrier than the aforementioned characters. However, they are crafted on another stereotype, which is that of the Big Mama, or the Mammy figure. Big Mama is not any kind of woman. She is, as the name indicates, big and bountiful. She stands in stark contrast to the skinny ideals of western culture. Aibileen in *The Help* criticizes western women when she says:

“Here’s something about Miss Leefolt: she not just frowning all the time, she skinny. Her legs is so spindly, she look like she done growed em last week. Twenty-three years old and she lanky as a fourteen-year-old boy. Even her hair is thin, brown, see-through. She try to tease it up, but it only make it look thinner. Her face be the same shape as that red devil on the redhot candy box, pointy chin and all. Fact, her whole body be so full a sharp knobs and corners, it’s no wonder she can’t soothe that baby. Babies like fat. Like to bury they face up in you armpit and go to sleep. They like big fat legs too. That I know.” (Stockett 6)

The “that I know” refers back to Aibileen and underlines that she is, as opposed to Miss Leefolt, a Big Mama. Miss Leefolt’s thinness is exaggerated and ridiculed, comparing her face to that of a cartoon devil and her body to that of a fourteen-year-old boy. She sounds altogether unpleasant and weak, with sharp edges and thin legs. Aibileen must therefore be all that her employer isn’t; curvy with a little extra fat and with a round face, as well as having thick and curly hair and being good at taking care of babies. Miss Leefolt’s incapacity to take care of her own child can be traced, according to the maid, right back to her physical appearance.

Likewise, Harriet Becher Stowe endorses the same stereotype with her character Eliza. The African-American woman was seen as a Mammy figure, whose only goal in life was her own and the white family’s children. Literary critic Richard Yarborough complains that Eliza is a flat character whose search for freedom is only grounded in the search for

her children. Whereas this is true, through reinforcing the stereotypes of the Mammy figure with Eliza and the peaceful, childlike Negro with Tom, Stowe manages to put the more negative stereotypes in the background and create sympathy. A stereotype that existed at the time of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1852, and before that time, was that African-Americans did not possess any human emotion. Upon that excuse, the slave owners could split up families and take the children away from their slave mothers without feeling any sense of guilt.

However, Big Mama is not a stereotype that the white writers have invented, but rather, it is an archetype from African society. There are several explanations to the existence of this archetype. Its roots date back to religions from the African continent that all had female deities, whose utmost function was to protect the African family. (Holston 12) The strong mother has therefore always been highly valued in African society. Apart from that, Big Mama has also represented the vindication of African motherhood. Given that that the children were taken away from the slaves, motherhood became a blessing when enslavement was finally put to an end in the United States. Since then, motherhood has become sacred also in African-American culture, in addition to, as mentioned, always having formed an essential part of African culture and religion. (Holston 13) Therefore, it is perhaps not so strange that African-American writers themselves recur to this stereotype, with Sofia in *The Color Purple* being a clear example of this.

Kathryn Stockett can hardly be blamed for stereotyping Aibileen and Minny when many black writers do the same. In *The Color Purple*, Sofia is the strong mother who will do anything to protect her children. She leaves her violent husband so that the children will be safe. Sofia is very similar to Minny from *The Help*, as they are both very dark-skinned, strong and tempered. Both are they emancipated out of a need to protect their children. Minny, like Sofia, also leaves her abusive husband so that her children will not suffer. In any case, Stockett making Aibileen and Minny into Big Mamas, however stereotypical, places her characters within the context of African-American literature.

Therefore, although we see that the black characters are at large stereotypical in *The Help*, it seems that Alice Walker makes many of the same mistakes in crafting her black characters. Whereas many would see the character Shug as a revolutionary element in *The Color Purple*, she could also be seen as a very stereotypical character. What is revolutionary about her is that despite her being black and female, she is powerful, and the men, especially Celie's husband, admire her. Shug is also a bisexual, which implies that she is in control of her own sexuality, in contrast to the other black women in the novel. However, she also fits the description of a jezebel, another common stereotype for black women. The name Jezebel stems from Queen Jezebel in the Bible, who was dark-skinned and foreign of Phoenician descent. She used her sexuality to manipulate men, and was seen as an evil creature. (Mance 474) This has then become the name of the stereotype many had and have of African-American women, even today. The stereotype was established before the slaves were brought to America, and is described in travel literature by Europeans who visited the African continent. In Africa, the Europeans found the black women to be lascivious by nature, and completely driven by their sexuality. (White 29) Once the slaves had come to America, people continued to perceive many black women as jezebels. It also came in handy, as the stereotype served to excuse the exploitation of the black female slaves and the frequent rapes they suffered at the hands of white men. (Mance 474) Shug is a jezebel because she has an uncontrollable sexual appetite, and has even fallen ill due to her sexual promiscuity. When Celie first sees a picture of Shug, her description is the following:

"Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me. I see her there in furs. Her face rouge. Her hair like somethin tail. She grinning with her foot up on somebody motocar. Her eyes serious tho. Sad some. I ast her to give me the picture. An all night long I stare at it. An now when I dream, I dream of Shug Avery. She be dress to kill, whirling and laughing." (Walker 13)

From this description, we see that Shug is promiscuous by wearing furs and a lot of makeup, and she also seems to be someone who seduces and manipulates men, as she stands with her foot "on somebody motorcar". When Shug finally comes to town to hold a concert, there is a poster that announces her arrival:

“Shug Avery standing upside a piano, elbow crook, hand on her hip. She wearing a hat like Indian Chiefs. Her mouth open showing all her teef and don’t nothing seem to be troubling her mind. Come one, come all, it say. The Queen Honeybee is back in town.” (Walker 23)

This again underlines that Shug is a jezebel by nature. She poses promiscuously for what is mainly a male audience, with her hand on her hip and a sensual, open mouth. Her nickname indicates that she is a queen bee, the one that gets all the men and all the offspring, and also that she is an attractive “honey”.

Yet, for as much as Walker uses both the Mammy and the Jezebel stereotype, one could claim that she breaks with both stereotypes towards the end. This could also be said about *The Help*. In *The Color Purple*, Shug is cured of her sexually transmittable disease, which might symbolize that she is cured of all stereotypes. After she is cured, Shug changes her personality from that of a Jezebel to a good Samaritan who teaches Celie to love herself. Even though their relationship is a bisexual one that once again could lead us to think of Shug as a promiscuous woman, their relationship is founded on real love. Besides, through being bisexual, Shug rejects men’s definition of her and is finally in control of her own sexuality. The same is true for Celie, who is no longer a Big Mama, but rather in control of her own life and sexuality.

In *The Help*, Abileen also rejects the stereotype of the Big Mama when she leaves her job as a housemaid and no longer has to take care of white children. The same is true for Minny, who continues in her role as a mother, but now a single mother in control of her own life.

In sum, the characters from *The Help* are not more stereotypical than the characters in *The Color Purple*, but there is one important difference. What is stereotypical about *The Help* is that all the black characters are victims, and that there is no real black heroine of the story. Whereas the women stand together in order to free themselves in *The Color Purple*, the black maids in *The Help* need Skeeter, the white writer, to initiate the process of emancipation. Abileen is the most heroic of the black characters, but is only turned

into a heroine because of Skeeter. Thus, Miss Skeeter is the real heroine of the story, whereas the previous victim Celie turns into a heroine at the end of *The Color Purple*.

3.2 Blackness

What the black female writers know better than their white female colleagues is how it *feels* to be black in the United States. Franz Fanon, in "The fact of blackness", explores the condition of being black. According to him, it is indeed a condition when you live in the States. This is because the body becomes "an object of consciousness". (Fanon 326) Fanon writes that the black subject sees his/her body through the white man's eyes. He or she then begins a process of rejecting himself/herself, just like he/she has been rejected by white society: "I sit down at the fire and I become aware of my uniform (his blackness). I had not seen it. It is indeed ugly. I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is?" (Ibid)

The concepts of beauty and blackness are central in African-American literature. It is hard to imagine how a Caucasian writer, although being female, knows what it is like to have your blackness working against you on an everyday basis. Fanon provides a heartbreaking insight into what this can feel like when he recalls a little white girl's reaction to him:

"Look, a Negro!" It was true. It amused me. "Look, a Negro!" The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement. "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible... My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly, (...)"(Fanon 323-324)

This quote expresses some of the key ideas in African-American literature, namely the feeling many of the black characters have of being uglier and dumber than a white person, ideas that the black authors dispute through their novels.

However, in *The Help*, Kathryn Stockett tries to unite two worlds when she makes some of the novel's white girls struggle with people calling them ugly. The baby girl Mae Mobley and the writer Skeeter both need their black maids as support when white society rejects them for their looks. Constantine, the family's black maid, gives Skeeter some advice taken from her own experience:

"The first time I was ever called ugly, I was thirteen. It was a rich friend of my brother Carlton's, over to shoot guns in the field. "Why you crying, girl?" Constantine asked me in the kitchen. I told her what the boy had called me, tears streaming down my face. "Well? Is you?" I blinked, paused my crying. "Is I what?" "Now you look a here, Eugenia(...)" "Ugly live up on the inside. Ugly be a hurtful, mean person. Is you one a them peoples?" "I don't know. I don't think so," I sobbed." "Ever morning, until you dead in the ground, you gone have to make this decision." Constantine was so close, I could see the blackness of her gums. "You gone have to ask yourself, Am I gone believe what them fools say about me today?" (Stockett 32)

As we see, Constantine's advice is clearly based on her own experiences. She has had to ignore what white people think about her in order to maintain her self-worth. She passes on the message to Skeeter, and we see the two united as women despite their different social positions. The same is true for Miss Celia and her maid Minny. Miss Celia is pretty, but she is not classy. The League members use this as an excuse to freeze her out, even though the real reason behind her exclusion is jealousy. Minny is the one to reveal the truth to Celia, thereby making the latter feel better about herself.

It is therefore the black maids who help the white women feel better about themselves in *The Help*, and not a novel about how they themselves feel about being black, although we get a glimpse of that feeling indirectly. We can see from the advice that they give that they know what it is like to feel ugly and rejected. Stockett herself makes the parallel clear when she focuses on "the blackness of her gums" when Constantine is giving Skeeter advice. It is clear that Constantine's advice to Skeeter comes from her own experience of being black and being called ugly.

In *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye*, another exemplary work in African-American literature, the concept of self-image and blackness is central to the story. They both offer a very intimate account on how it feels to be a black woman in the United States. I mention *The Bluest Eye* because it is such a pivotal text in order to understand the concept of blackness. The very title indicates that something is wrong in the characters' conception of beauty. This is especially true for Pecola, the little black girl who wishes to have the bluest eyes. The pain that she goes through is a much more stinging pain than we ever feel through the reading of *The Help*. In the same novel we also meet Claudia, who mutilates her white doll out of anger towards society, which calls her ugly for being black. Celie's pain is present throughout *The Color Purple*, as she is rejected by everyone for being black and supposedly ugly – with Shug's affirmation that "You sho' is ugly!" (Walker 34) In *The Help*, we never get a personal account from one of the black maids on their self-image.

Stockett's still addresses the issue, and her message is that white and black are only skin colors. Yet, she falls through in her attempt at times. Examples of less fortunate descriptions are her descriptions of Minny, who is the blackest of all the maids. Skeeter describes Minny's skin as "blacker than Aibileen's by ten shades", which is a lot considering that Aibileen is "dark brown and shiny[...]". (Stockett 77, 39) Highlighting Minny's blackness is somewhat unfortunate in light of her characterization. She is strong and tempered, childlike and animalistic, acting only on instinct. Making her cruel employer Miss Hilly eat her excrement in the form of a chocolate cake is surely a good example of this. Hence, the author establishes the link between savage and black, and also what we so often see when white writers write about African-Americans; the Negro is dumber than white people. The blacker the skin, the more are these characteristics enhanced.

Another time Stockett falls victim to recurring stereotypes is in her description of doctor Tate, seen through the eyes of Minny. "He has real white skin and this long, narrow face that shows no feelings at all". (Stockett 108) The doctor's whiteness and Caucasian features are mentioned as a measure for meanness. The whiter the meaner, it seems. Here, Stockett once again uses the common stereotype of the inherently good black

character and the mean white character.

Even so, Stockett does not intend to broaden the differences between black and white, although she falls victim to her own prejudices at times. Overall, we see that she seeks to unite the black and the white community rather than to split them. Aibileen's special story that she tells to Mae Mobley sums up what Stockett wants the reader to learn from her novel:

"Once upon a time they was two little girls," I say. "One girl had black skin, one girl had white." Mae Mobley look up at me. She listening. Little colored girl say to the little white girl, 'How come your skin be so pale?' White girl say, 'I don't know. How come your skin be so black? What you think that mean?' But neither one a them little girls knew. So little white girl say, 'Well, let's see. You got hair, I got hair.' " I gives Mae Mobley a little tousle on her head. Little colored girl say 'I got a nose, you got a nose.' " I gives her little snout a tweak. She got to reach up and do the same to me. Little white girl say, 'I got toes, you got toes.' And I do the little thing with her toes, but she can't get to mine cause I got my white work shoes on. So we's the same. Just a different color,' say that little colored girl. The little white girl she agreed and they was friends. The End." (Stockett 92)

This simple story actually sums up the whole novel. Skeeter befriends Aibileen and the other maids, understanding that black is just a skin color. Mae Mobley is just a little girl, and therefore does not judge Aibileen by her skin color, but rather by the way she treats her. Since Aibileen looks after her and loves her better than her own mother, the girl's loyalty lies with her maid. The same is true for Skeeter, who values her maid Constantine both as a friend and as a mother. Miss Celia accepts Minny as her friend without even questioning it, and despite how dumb everybody thinks Celia is, in this aspect she is a smart woman. To Miss Celia, a friend is a friend, regardless of their skin color. This is why, again without questioning, she offers Minny to sit down at the same table as her for her first job interview.

Also, the power of friendship makes the white women in the novel open their eyes. The way Skeeter describes Constantine is very symbolic:

“In fact, the shades of brown on Constantine were endless. Her elbows were absolutely black, with a dry white dust on them in the winter. The skin on her arms and neck and face was a dark ebony. The palms of her hands were orangey-tan and that made me wonder if the soles of her feet were too[...].” (Stockett 33)

Skeeter does not see Constantine as just black, like most white people would, but sees that she has different tones to her skin. This is because their friendship enables her to see Constantine’s true colors, and symbolically that means she sees what Constantine is really worth. Other than showing the reader that life is not only black and white, Stockett also manages to laugh about it all. That way, she takes away the seriousness from the issue. Skeeter says of her own white color that it isn’t so beautiful as people would think, for “while some call this creamy, it can look downright deathly when I’m serious, which is all the time.” (Stockett 29)

In African-American novels, blackness is a central topic. Rather than uniting black and white women, and stressing that black is only a skin color, the black writers dig deep into what it feels like to be black. Their black identity is complex; there is not just black, but shades of black and mulattoes. We therefore cannot talk of a single African-American identity, but of several identities. Blacks, influenced by white society, have established a hierarchy where it is better to be a mulatto, or light-skinned, than it is to be as black as night. Through pointing a finger at the blackest one amongst them, and especially at the black women, all the others feel better about themselves.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie starts out very aware of all the categories of black, and thinking, like most, that the brighter skin, the better. Harpo, her husband’s son, thinks just like her, and when he first falls in love with Sofia, his description of her is the following: “She pretty, he tell me. Bright.” When Celie goes on to ask him whether he means that she is smart, he corrects her: “Bright skin.” The irony is that Sofia isn’t really bright skinned, only compared to Harpo’s own skin tone. Rather than bright, Celie

describes Sofia's skin as "Clear medium brown". (Walker 26) This comment shows us how categorizing and hierarchical Celie starts out being, and that she classifies and values people according to the blackness of their skin, just like other people judge her. This is about to change with the arrival of Shug and the readings of the letters from her sister Nettie. Both women serve to broaden Celie's horizons and change the way she looks at herself and the people around her. Shug is "black as tar", but she is still the most beautiful woman Celie has ever seen, and all the black men desire Shug despite of her skin color. (Walker 39) It is however commented by them that she is a little too black. Though, Shug celebrates her own blackness through showing a lot of skin in promiscuous dresses, "wearing a skintight red dress look like the straps made out of two pieces of thread." (Walker 47) From Shug, Celie learns that black is beautiful.

Her sister Nettie also helps to reeducate her concept of blackness. In the letters Nettie sends her from Africa, she describes the Africans' skin to have "[...] something magical about it. Because the black is so black the eye is simply dazzled, and then there is the shining that seems to come, really, from moonlight, it is so luminous, but their skin glows even in the sun." (Walker 77) What Nettie's letters do is to offer Celie an alternative perception of blackness according to an African mindset, showing her that being black is only considered a bad thing in America, but not in the country she is originally from. In Africa, people are proud to be black. The cultural differences are shown when Celie's son Adam proposes to the African girl Tashi, and the latter refuses. Nettie explains that:

"She [Tashi] had seen the magazines we receive from home and that it was very clear to her that black people did not truly admire blackskinned black people like herself, and especially did not admire blackskinned blackwomen. They bleach their faces, she said. They fry their hair. They try to look naked." (Walker 128)

Celie understands that Americans have established black as bad, and that blackness as something ugly is a cultural concept that does not define her unless she lets it. However, Celie never truly sees herself as physically beautiful. At the end, when Shug falls in love with Grady, Celie wonders if Shug ever loved her at all:

“What would she love? [...] My hair is short and kinky because I don’t straighten it anymore. Once Shug say she love it no need to. My skin dark. My nose just a nose. My lips just lips. My body just any woman’s body going through the changes of age. Nothing special here for nobody to love. No honey colored curly hair, no cuteness.” (Walker 122)

It is clear that she still, despite reading Nettie’s letters, and despite all that Shug has taught her, holds on to Caucasian standards on beauty, and not African ideals on beauty. Celie’s inability to love her physical appearance proves there is a real need to address the issue in African-American literature. Stockett either is not interested in, or does not dare to explore what blackness really feels like, but sees it only through the eyes of her white characters.

3.3 Religion

Religion has long been the foundation of community life for African-Americans and is therefore a part of their group identity. As such, it is natural that it is a central element also in African-American literature, as illustrated through the computer analysis in the first chapter. It is interesting to see if and how Kathryn Stockett portrays black Christianity, and compare it to Alice Walker’s take on religion in *The Color Purple*.

When the slaves were brought from Africa to the Americas, many were already baptized Christians. (Thornton 268) Thus, we understand the importance of faith to the slaves, especially in troubled times. Missionaries were the ones who stood for the Christianization of Africa, and the Congo is a good example of a country in which Christianity was already established before the slaves were taken to the New World. (Ibid)

However, African-American Christian spirituality differs somewhat from white Christian spirituality, regardless of the church community you are a part of. Afro-Christianity started out as a mixture of the slaves’ own religious practices, from different religions in Africa, and Christianity. Yet, certain practices were repressed, especially those that were linked to witchcraft. In this category we find nocturnal dances, sacrifices and, to us,

strange funeral celebrations. (Thornton 268) Yet, as Thornton points out, these practices were repressed also in Africa by African Christianity, and it was therefore not new to the slaves that these practices were frowned upon in Christianity. Neither did the majority have a problem leaving behind such traditions, as they were familiar with the term witchcraft and wanted to abolish it. (Ibid)

In older novels, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, we see the slaves still clinging on to pagan practices. However, both *The Color Purple* and *The Help* are historical novels set at a later time in history, from the nineteen-forties to the sixties, approximately, when the black community at large had left such practices behind. However, we see other characteristics of African-American spirituality reflected in both novels at hand.

In the African-American community, the black pastor has the role of a counselor and is highly involved in lives of the churchgoers. (Arnold 14) In *The Help*, this is illustrated through the deacon Thoroughgood, with a highly telling name. We learn that he is a good man who supports non-violence approaches to civil rights, but who is very active in the movement for civil rights. For instance, many of the church meetings center on the topic of civil rights. However, some of the churchgoers feel that his approach to civil rights is too passive, and would like more direct action. The following scene plays out at a church meeting after an innocent black man has been killed, and they have gathered at church to pray for him and his family:

“Deacon Thoroughgood,” a deep voice boom through stillness. I turn—everbody turn—and there’s Jessup, Plantain Fidelia’s grandson, standing in the doorway. He twenty-two, twenty-three. He got his hands in thick fists. “What I want to know is,” he say slow, angry, “what we plan to do about it.” Deacon got a stern look on his face like he done talked with Jessup before. “Tonight, we are going to lift our prayers to God. We will march peacefully down the streets of Jackson next Tuesday. And in August, I will see you in Washington to march with Doctor King” “That is not enough!” Jessup say, banging his fist on his hand. “They shot him in the back like a dog!” “Jessup.” Deacon raise his hand. “Tonight is for prayer. For the family. For the lawyers on the case. I understand your anger, but, son—” “Prayer? You mean y’all just gonna sit around and pray about it?” He look around at all a us in our chairs.

"Y'all think prayer's going to keep white people from killing us?" No one answer, not even the Deacon." (Stockett 96)

Thus, we see that religion does not provide relief for the angriest black characters in *The Help*, who tend to be the youngest ones. The deacon tries to calm their anger, but it isn't always possible, as his understanding of religion is to preach anti-violence to the community. In this case, the young man ends up leaving the church in anger, as he does not feel represented or aided by religion. Praying is not enough for him, what he wants to see is a religious community taking action against the injustice.

However, for the older black women in the novel, religion does provide some comfort and relief. Aibileen remarks that out of the fifty people gathered at a church meeting, most of them are women. (Stockett 96) Apart from this, the church meetings serve to gather the maids, and they all know each other from their church circle. The church is also the place that Aibileen chooses as a location to approach the other maids to talk about Skeeter's book, and to try to convince them to participate. She first tells Minny, her best friend of all the maids, of the project from where they are sitting in church "in our usual pew, left side, fourth from the front, right by the window fan. We're prime members and we deserve a prime spot". (Stockett 60) The two women have come early in order to talk to each other in privacy. Regarding the rest of the women, Aibileen also approaches them in church to ask for their participation on Skeeter's book. Church is a private, free space for the women, away from their white employers and their sometimes abusive husbands, and religion indirectly therefore becomes empowering, as it strengthens the black female community.

Another empowering function that religion has in *The Help*, is that it prompts education. When Aibileen quit school, her teacher told her she had to keep writing in order to maintain her intellectual capacity. The solution became to write her prayers down, and because of this habit, Aibileen is able to write her own story in *The Help*. Skeeter had originally planned to write Aibileen's part, but Aibileen wants her own voice to be heard in the novel. This helps to reduce her victimization, and we note that religion has given her a voice.

Moreover, the church is there as a support when the black maids are having a difficult time. Aibileen became a regular churchgoer from the moment her son Treelore died, and it became her only comfort. When Yule May is imprisoned, the Church circle gathers money so that her sons may go to college. Also, it is an important arena to discuss civil rights. It is not faith or religion in itself that lead to positive changes in the community, only indirectly, for it is rather the space that church provides that is of importance, as it helps the women form a strong sisterhood. We see that the whole church community is involved in the book project, and that they openly celebrate it when Skeeter's book is published. When Aibileen enters the church after the book's publication, she is heartily received by the community:

"Who we clapping for?" I ask Rachel Johnson. She the Reverend wife. She laugh and it get quiet. Rachel lean in to me. "Honey, we clapping for you." Then she reach down and pull a copy a the book out a her purse. I look around and now everbody got a copy in they hands. All the important officers and church deacons are there. Reverend Johnson come up to me then. "Aibileen, this is an important time for you and our church." "[...]"We want you to know, for your safety, this will be the only time the church recognizes you for your achievement. I know a lot of folks helped with this book, but I heard it couldn't have been done without you." (Stockett 178)

Also, Aibileen does have a close relationship to God, not only to the church community itself. The other black characters think she has "a power prayer", and by that they mean that she is someone God really listens to. Whoever goes on Aibileen's prayer list is likely to either have his/her life improved, or to pay for what he/she has done. Just like Celie in *The Color Purple*, Aibileen is writing to God in her narrative. Though, there is one big difference between how religion is portrayed in two novels. Aibileen does not change in the way she perceives God.

According to Patricia Andujo, the God in *The Color Purple* becomes a womanist God. As Christianity has a history of oppressing women, many black female authors have used their narratives to transform the image of God. (Andujo 88) Andujo mentions Walker's forerunners, other black women who, 150 years before Walker's novel, wrote their autobiographies where they sought to redefine God. Examples of such authors are

Jarene Lee, Julia Foote, Maria Stewart and Sojourner Truth. (Ibid 89) We also see in newer fiction that African-American women tend to transform the traditional image of God. One such example is the Earthseed series by Octavia Butler, where “God is change” becomes the novel’s mantra.

It is understandable that Celie has to transform her image of God in order to gain a sense of self-worth. Her God has only been repressive, starting from the moment Pa tells her that what she has just gone through, being raped by him, means that she has sinned, and that God is the only one that she can tell of her disgrace. (Andujo 92) God thus becomes linked to sin, oppression and injustice. Celie has to transform God in order to keep her faith, and a God that she can believe in must support women, cannot be an old white male, and must approve of sexual pleasure, like Shug teaches her. (Ibid)

For Aibileen, it is not so strange that we do not see a redefinition of her God. God is on Aibileen’s side from the beginning, as she has the power prayer that symbolizes their close bond. Whereas one could criticize Stockett for her rather traditional depiction of black Christianity, there is no need to transform God when the maids already feel that God is on their side. Moreover, church has helped them transform life in Jackson and their personal lives through providing them with a strong female community. As such, religion does have a certain transformative function, also in *The Help*.

3.4 Language

Margery Fee, in her article “Who can write as Other?”, discusses the validity of the discourse of the oppressed woman of the subculture. As she points out, many of the writers that attempt to vindicate their original culture can no longer claim to belong to this culture. Her example is that of aboriginal female writers who no longer speak the native language, Maori, but instead speak and write in English. (Fee 242) Their attempt is to represent their original culture – but is it not too late for that?

The same is true for African-American writers. They, too, speak and write in English, the language of the oppressor. However, there is one way the African-American writers can distinguish themselves, and that is by writing in African-American Vernacular English

(AAVE). Alice Walker uses African American Vernacular English throughout almost the whole of *The Color Purple*. By doing so, she applies the African-Americans' own dialect. Even so, we must ask ourselves whether AAVE is actually just English with a minor twist to it, in which case African-American writers have no real language of their own.

African-American Vernacular English evolved from a fusion of English and several African languages after the slaves had been brought to America. The slave traders made sure to break all family ties, and also to blend nationalities. That way, they minimized the risk of rebellions, as the slaves were not united any longer. Hence, many of the slaves were of different nationalities and had no other way of communicating with each other than speaking in English, although it was a broken and incorrect English. At the time, the new creole language was called Pidgin English.

British-American linguist Geoffrey Pullum discusses the traits of AAVE in the chapter with the telling title *African American Vernacular English is not Standard English with mistakes*. Pullum makes it perfectly clear that those who mistake African-American Vernacular English for slang and erroneous grammar know nothing about linguistics. AAVE has developed into a dialect over the years, and as such, a language that lives side by side with Standard English. Few speakers of Standard English are aware that AAVE has a whole set of fixed and rather complex rules to it. (Pullum 45)

The renowned linguist begins by explaining how the copula, that is the verb "to be", is used in AAVE. In this context, it is natural to look at the phrase Kathryn Stockett has been criticized for in *The Help*, namely Aibileen's wise words to Mae Mobley: "You is kind, you is smart, you is important". Pullum outlines when the copula can and cannot be omitted, and this phrase is a typical example of when it could have been omitted. We are not talking in first person, in which case the copula is used in AAVE. Furthermore, the copula is not stressed, in which case it also would have been preserved. Neither are we talking about habits, the copula is affirmative, and we are in the present tense. All these conditions should imply that the phrase, in correct AAVE, must be "You kind, you smart, you important".

Furthermore, in AAVE, “to be” is used in the infinitive when we are talking about habits, such as “She be dancing”, as in something she usually does. However, Stockett uses “be” also when not talking about habits: “She doing her figuring, like she be trying to count it all up”. (Stockett 128) In this case, it would sound more natural to a speaker of correct AAVE that the “be” would be omitted, hence “like she trying to count it all up”. Another time she blunders, is with the sentence: “She say she call you if she **be** needing help with the Benefit”(Stockett 16) We are not talking about habits here, and for a speaker of African-American Vernacular English, it would probably sound more natural to omit the “be”.

The negated copula “ain’t” is very common in AAVE, and you place “ain’t” as an auxiliary verb first in the sentence when the subject is indefinite. (Pullum 49) Both Alice Walker and Kathryn Stockett do this in their novels. For example, Stockett writes “Ain’t nothing to look at”. However, she also forms sentences like “Ain’t no game crossing miss Hilly”. In the first example, “nothing” is an indefinite pronoun, and Stockett quite correctly places it at the beginning of the sentence. However, in the second sentence, the subject is implicit: game. It would have been better to leave “ain’t” out and stick to “No game crossing Miss Hilly”. The same is true for similar sentences she makes, like “Aint no way I’m gonna do something as crazy as that”. (Stockett 62)

However, both Walker and Stockett make use of negative concord, another typical feature of AAVE. (Pullum 48) Stockett writes that “She don’t eat no eggs” and “She don’t make no fuss”. (Stockett 8) In the same way, Walker writes that “she don’t look no special way at all” and “she don’t know how to do nothing” just to give some examples. (Walker 19, 62)

To sum up, we see that Stockett is aware of the main traits of AAVE, even though she is mistaken in her choices at times. Apart from listening to her maid, she has probably not attended typical African-American female spaces where she would learn to speak the dialect correctly; no black Church meetings, no gatherings with black friends and family in the kitchen, nor in the beauty parlor. (Bell 79) Walker has more experience from the African-American community and more contexts to draw on. Yet, Pullum makes a very

interesting point that we should have in mind. Not all African-Americans speak correct AAVE. (Pullum 53) To what extent they follow its rules depends on their social status and upbringing, as they might speak Standard English more often than AAVE. Also, Pullum is aware that the AAVE he outlines is a very strict form of the dialect. There will be many African-Americans who speak it without being completely consistent. Even Walker, who grew up in Georgia in a large, black rural family, writes “Miss Celie, she say. You **is** a wonder to behold.” According to the rules, it would be more natural to cut the “is”, as it is not stressed and we are not talking in first person. Seen in this light, critics, rather than to look for mistakes in *The Help*, should instead notice how she applies all the typical traits of AAVE. And even though it has some mistakes at times, these are mistakes that even a black writer like Alice Walker could have made herself.

However, many in the African-American community see Stockett’s use of African-American Vernacular English as a way to ridicule the black characters. Although my personal belief is that she is only trying to make her characters believable, it is true that white writers before her have used their black characters for comic relief. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, this manifests itself through the slaves’ bad language and bad manners. The slaves Sam and Topsy provide most of the novel’s comic relief, where Topsy acts on impulse and does not respect the rules of white society. Both she and Sam employ a Pidgin English full of faults. (Yarborough 51) *The Help* is very similar in this aspect, as Aibileen and Minny both provide the novel with humor, especially Minny, as she also has a very childlike behavior.

Stockett has taken great care to write in African American Vernacular English, but alternates between letting the maids tell their story and having Skeeter narrate her journey towards becoming a writer. The parts written in Standard English come whenever Skeeter is relating her take on events. This gives the reader a sensation that Stockett is addressing a white audience. She gives us breaks in between the parts of heavy dialect, so that we do not grow tired.

3.5 Split identity

As Henry Louis Gates points out in “Family matters”, slavery was an annihilative institution. Some 455 000 Africans were brought as slaves to the United States by the year of 1820. (Gates 6) These men and women were then separated by a complex and utterly destructive system. What slavery did was to make this group of people “fragmented and not whole” instead of “pieces of fabric stitched together in a grand pattern, like some living, breathing, mocha-colored quilt”. (Ibid) The quilt is an essential symbol in African-American female literature, precisely because the group tries to form a common identity and bonding. This is an identity that the slaves lost when losing their languages, their family, and even their surnames. (Ibid) As such, having lost track of their roots, one can question how African African-Americans really are. The very title of Gates’ article collection “In Search of Our Roots” indicates that these roots have been lost.

As a consequence, one might argue that Stockett can represent the black female characters in spite of being white. This can be claimed because the black writers, due to acculturation, are blacker in appearance than in their own background. At the end of the day, they are Americans. Though, what they experience is a split-identity, something the very term African-American indicates. On the one hand they are African, but on the other hand, they are Americans. Gates focuses on the interracial mixtures that took place once the slaves had come to the United States. This means that African-Americans also have European blood in them. Over half of African-Americans today have at least 12,5 percent European ancestry (Gates 21). Gates himself knows that he has white ancestors. (Ibid 5) As such, we see that the identity of the African-American is very complex. This is a subject that has lost track of his/her African roots, who still shares a bonding with other African-Americans in the United States, and who is, as a matter of fact, partly white; both in terms of genetics and culturally speaking.

Still, many African-American writers explore their African ancestry. Through their writing, they go on a search for their lost identity. This is completely missing in “The Help”. Although it can be argued that African-Americans are more American than African, they feel that something is missing, and they try to fill in the blanks. There is no

mention of any identity conflict in “The Help”, and neither is there any mention of Africa. Contrastingly, Nettie goes to Africa to experience their culture and traditions, takes Celie’s children with her, and writes to Celie about it all.

Gates talks about the Pan-African identity. (Gates 20) By this, he refers to the identity African-Americans have today. Today the group is seen as unison, but if we look at where their ancestors came from, we discover that the opposite is the case. The slaves that were brought to America were from different regions of the continent. In the case of those brought to the United States, the Africans were mainly from the Congo, Nigeria, Mozambique, Ghana, Benin and Upper Guinea. (Gates 19) In any case, we see that it was a heterogeneous, divided group that came to America. Still, over the time of several decades, the Pan-African identity has developed. This is why we can say that for instance Alice Walker and Toni Morrison share a common, Pan-African identity, despite probably being of somewhat different ethnicity.

Ethnicity is today a somewhat negatively loaded word. That is because it is mutually exclusive: we are of different ethnicities. Thus, by talking about ethnicities, the concept of the Other is established. (Sollors 219) Ethnic in a Christian context, for example, has come to refer to a non-Christian person. Furthermore, ethnocentrism implies the discrimination of minority cultures. (Ibid 220) Whether Alice Walker is of a different ethnicity than Kathryn Stockett depends on our interpretation of the word. On one hand, ethnicity refers to culture. (Ibid: 221) Both being American, they share a common culture. However, African-Americans also form a sub-culture, or a minority culture, in the US.

Ethnicity also refers to history. Both authors are American, which again places them in the same historical group. Yet, if we trace the ancestor lines of these authors, we will find that they probably come from very different backgrounds. The history of the slave trade lies as a shadow over the life of Walker and her fellow African-Americans. Moreover, race is a salient factor we associate with ethnicity. (Sollors 221) Some theoreticians, such as M. G Smith and Pierre van den Berghe, disagree with race being a component of someone’s ethnicity. Sollors argues, however, that excluding race as a factor would limit our understanding of the term. He makes special mention of African-

American writers, who are important figures of what we consider to be ethnic literature precisely because their race distinguishes them from other American writers.

As we see, the term ethnicity can be used by the majority culture to marginalize minority cultures. At the same time, it can be used to draw attention to a certain group, such as African-American writers. To me, Walker is not an ethnic writer. The reason behind my conclusion is the following. Both Walker and Stockett have been born and raised in America. They write about the African-American experience, but there is more American to that experience than there is African. African-Americans have, to a great extent, lost track with their African roots. Gates writes that African-Americans today do not know what languages their ancestors spoke, what religion they had, what their music was like nor their names. All they have left to trace these ancestors is their own DNA, which can be compared with groups of people in other parts of the world for similarities. (Gates, 2009: 10) But this is just genetics, not culture. African-Americans have been acculturated, as the African slaves saw themselves subject to a “brutal process of Americanization”. (Ibid: 9)

What Walker attempts to do is to rediscover her African roots through her writings, which is something Stockett is not interested in. However, she tries to understand the past, although not as far back as to the roots in Africa. Her interest in African-Americans starts from the time they became just that; African-Americans. Although Stockett is not African-American, their past in the United States is her past as well. Coming from the same nation, they share a common history.

It appears that both Stockett and Walker write from the same place, as fellow Americans trying to rediscover Americas' past and the black experience. However, regarding the latter, I have already made the hypothesis that black writers are better able to communicate how blackness feels to the reader, and that their split identity leads them on a search for their roots.

4. Gender studies in *The Help* and *The Color Purple*

4.1 The female Bildungsroman and sisterhood

Literary critics say *The Color Purple* responds to a societal need for a black female hero. As the African-American woman has traditionally been oppressed and victimized, literature was the only space in which an alternative discourse could develop. Several African-American female writers have felt the need to create a black heroine, and from this, a tradition has developed in which black women writers focus on the journey of the black protagonist towards authentic female selfhood. (Smith 3) They write what is called a Bildungsroman, and use the plot structure of myths in their stories. (Carey 2)

Thus, whereas white writers like Harriet Becher Stowe and Harper Lee victimize their black characters, the black female writers seek the opposite. Although their characters start out as victims, they go on a journey through which they obtain heroic status. The traditional Bildungsroman is that of the white male hero and his journey towards success and manhood. However, with the black heroines, the focus is no longer on the characters' education, marriage or material future. Rather, "the young black female protagonist is faced with choosing how she is going to survive the colonization of her body, mind, and soul". (Carey 2)

In *The Color Purple*, Celie goes through a process of awakening as we follow her journey from being an oppressed black girl to becoming an independent black woman. Some literary critics feel that her journey is unrealistic, given the drastic and therefore unrealistic change of her circumstances. Even so, Celie has good friends to help her. Throughout her journey, her sister Nettie, her friend Sofia and her lover Shug Avery all have important life lessons to teach her.

Just like Celie starts her journey from the moment she begins writing, so does Aibileen in *The Help*. Though, Aibileen is conscientious of the things that are wrong in society from the beginning of the novel, whereas Celie, only a child at the first time of writing, takes much longer to understand her surroundings. The novel begins with the famous lines: "Dear God. I am fourteen years old. I am I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can

give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.” (Walker 8) From the insecurity that Celie expresses, we can see that she is blaming herself and not society. After the abuses she has suffered, instead of looking outwards for an enemy, she is looking inwards. She thinks that she is no longer a good girl, and that the abuses were somehow her own fault.

It is different with Aibileen, who is an adult at the time of writing. Therefore, *The Help* can hardly be called a Bildungsroman, at least not a black female Bildungsroman. Even though Aibileen also goes through a transformation towards the end, *The Help* does not treat what it is like to grow up as a black girl in the United States. Neither does Stockett include childhood memories, family memoirs or anecdotes from the African-American community. As a consequence, we feel, although Aibileen and Minny are telling their own stories, that their experiences are seen somewhat from the outside. It is perhaps not so strange that Stockett avoids writing a black female Bildungsroman. It would be a risky endeavor to write a coming-of-age story from a black girl’s perspective. It is, however, problematic, as she therefore does not treat some important topics with the weight they deserve to be given. Some examples of this include body image, self-image and gender issues from a black perspective. Even so, as we shall see further on, Stockett does address gender issues, but rather from a white perspective than from a black woman’s point of view.

The Help should be called a white female Bildungsroman. Miss Skeeter is a twenty-three year old, upper class, white girl who is about to become a woman, but still lives at home in her childhood bedroom. In the process of her Bildung, Skeeter has to challenge gender roles, as she wants to become a writer and not a housewife. We see from early on in the novel that this is problematic. All of Skeeter’s friends are housewives, although bad ones as such, since they need the help of domestic workers to raise their own children. Skeeter’s mother is particularly wounded by her daughter’s progressiveness. For her, looking for a job is a waste of time when it really is “all about putting yourself in a man-meeting situation”. (Stockett 29) Mother and daughter engage in frequent discussions about Skeeter’s future, although the daughter wisely tries to avoid the topic. When her mom brings up the question of marriage, Skeeter cuts her off: “Mama,” I say, just wanting to end this conversation”. (Ibid) At one point, Skeeter cannot hold back her

thoughts any longer. She asks her mother straight out whether it “would [...] really be so terrible if I never met a husband?” (Ibid) But her mother keeps reminding her that “here you are twenty-three years old and I’d already had Carlton Jr. [her older brother] at your age ...” (Ibid 30)

As a matter of fact, Skeeter has been haunted by her mother’s expectations all her life. The goal in a woman’s life is to get married and have children with a man of the same, or preferably a higher, social rank. Skeeter’s description of her childhood bedroom is telling:

My childhood bedroom is the top floor of my parents’ house. It has white-frosting chair rails and pink cherubs in the molding. It’s papered in mint green rosebuds. It is actually the attic with long, sloping walls, and I cannot stand straight in many places. The box bay window makes the room look round. After Mother berates me about finding a husband every other day, I have to sleep in a wedding cake.
(Stockett 30)

Everything, down to her childhood bedroom, serves to reinforce gender roles and to remind Skeeter of her purpose in life. Already from she was little, Skeeter noticed how gender roles work and that she did not live up to her mother’s expectations. First of all, she was not pretty like her mom, and her nickname Skeeter serves to illustrate that:

“I was not a cute baby. When I was born, my older brother, Carlton, looked at me and declared to the hospital room, “It’s not a baby, it’s a skeeter!” and from there the name stuck. I was long and leggy and mosquito-thin, a record-breaking twenty-five inches at Baptist Hospital. The name grew even more accurate with my pointy, beak-like nose when I was a child. Mother’s spent my entire life trying to convince people to call me by my given name, Eugenia.” (Stockett 30)

The name stands in stark contrast to who Skeeter is, and sounds very formal, stiff and elegant. Her mother insists on calling her by her name, although none of her friends do. It forms part of her regime to educate her daughter and make a proper lady out of her:

"Eugenia, you know there is no chewing gum in this house."

"Eugenia, go put alcohol on that blemish."

"Eugenia, march upstairs and brush your hair down, what if we have an unexpected visitor?" (Stockett 32)

However, the daughter does not fit into the stereotypical gender roles that her mother is trying to teach her. "Sure, I [Skeeter] dreamed of having football dates, but my real dream was that one day I would write something that people would actually read." (Stockett 30) She is more independent and inquiring than most, and her biggest dream is to do something important, not to meet someone important. Since she has never dated anyone, her mother starts worrying whether she is "having unnatural thoughts about . . ." She shuts her eyes tight. "Girls or—or women?" (Stockett 37) Of course this is not true, but it tells us something about gender roles in the 60s, where women, instead of working or studying, should have a family by the time they reached twenty-three. All of Skeeter's friends have adapted to the gender roles, and are now married and with kids. Since Skeeter is the only one to lag behind, her mother and everybody else assume that it is because she is not good-looking or that she simply isn't interested in men. It has never occurred to them that Skeeter has other immediate dreams and plans for herself. Because of prejudice, Skeeter drops coming to her own graduation, given that "All my close friends had dropped out to get married and I didn't see the point in making Mama and Daddy drive three hours just to watch me walk across a stage, when what Mother really wanted was to watch me walk down the aisle". (Stockett 34)

Their black maid Constantine becomes Skeeter's accomplice. They are both picked on by Skeeter's mother, and are able to laugh about it when they are together: "Yes ma'am," Constantine and I would say at the same time and then pass each other a little smile." (Stockett 33) Perhaps the experience with being different and having to stand up for herself has made Skeeter more ready to sympathize with the black maids, who also have to fight prejudice. Just like the black maids feel alienated from white American society, Skeeter is alienated from her friends, family, and lastly also her boyfriend Stuart. What regards her friends, Skeeter is alienated from them already in the beginning, as they live the lives her mother so badly wants her to live, and which she doesn't really wish for herself. This alienation of course grows worse with Skeeter's awakened moral, finding it

harder and harder to accept the segregation in the South, and her friend Hilly being the town's biggest racist. That Hilly and Skeeter have fallen out is clear from the moment Skeeter refuses to publish Hilly's Home Help Sanitation Initiative in the newspaper, an initiative that proposes that black domestic workers get a separate toilet in the garden. When Hilly catches Skeeter with what she calls "Negro activist material", the estrangement is complete. Hilly quite rudely breaks the friendship with Skeeter saying "it's no wonder Stuart Withworth dropped you". (Stockett 127)

As a matter of fact, the break-up with Stuart is also due to Skeeter's take on segregation. He feels, since she has kept the book project a secret, that he doesn't really know her, and doesn't wish to get to know the real her either. Thus, we see that Skeeter is alienated from the whole community in Jackson, and the only possible friends left are the black maids. Because of this, she decides to leave Jackson for New York. Jackson symbolizes oppression, also for a rich white girl like herself, whereas New York means freedom and ridding herself of strict gender roles the immorality of the South at that time. Thus, through her Bildung, Skeeter understands that she has to stand up for other people, in this case for black women and herself, and that she has to fight prejudice. She does this even though it costs her a lot; both her friends, boyfriend and her parents' approval. Though, she knows that she made the right decision, for

"Sometimes, when I'm bored, I can't help but think what my life would be like if I hadn't written the book. Monday, I would've played bridge. And tomorrow night, I'd be going to the League meeting and turning in the newsletter. Then on Friday night, Stuart would take me to dinner and we'd stay out late and I'd be tired when I got up for my tennis game on Saturday. Tired and content and . . . frustrated." (Stockett 188)

It was impossible for Skeeter to find a serious job in Jackson. The first day she applies for a job, she is met by prejudice. Her employer's first reaction when she comes for a job interview is "I assume you know how to clean . . ." Skeeter admits that "I feel so stupid that I thought I could just walk in and get a job as a journalist." (Stockett 36) She is, however, given a job of writing a column, but the column is Miss Myrna – a section on

household advice for women. When Skeeter asks about the pay, her employer answers rudely that “Jesus, woman, go clean your husband’s toilet for free”. (Ibid)

A Bildungsroman is based on the plot structure of a myth, and has three parts: the call to adventure, the journey and the return. The return is a crucial moment in the plot in both *The Help* and *The Color Purple*. During the return, the female hero must confront death and come out stronger in the end. (Smith 13) Celie confronts death when she learns that her sister Nettie has died on the boat from Africa. She also confronts a symbolical death through the death of her and Shug’s relationship, when the latter falls in love with a younger male musician. Even though *The Help* is not treating the Bildung of the black maids Aibileen and Minny, and it is rather Skeeter that evolves during the novel, the black maids experience a transformation, too. Minny faces death through her violent husband who would have killed her had she not decided to leave him, and Aibileen, when dismissed by her employer, sees the death of her old self and of her relationship with the little girl Mae Mobely. In losing her job, Aibileen has to redefine herself and leave the stereotype of the Big Mama, who’s only task is to take care of children, behind. At the end of the journey, Celie overcomes a psychological death by redefining herself in terms of her new religion. Aibileen also redefines herself as more than a maid. Both have come to see themselves in a different light due to the influence from the women in their lives.

It is of course the Bildung of a black girl that Alice Walker is interested in, and not in any upper class white girl from Mississippi. For this purpose she has created the character of Celie, who has a lot to learn throughout the novel. Celie’s learning process starts already with her sister Nettie, who serves as a teacher and as emotional support. (Smith 8) She acts as a buffer for the negative comments Celie gets from black men, and whereas they try to destroy her, Nettie builds her sister up. Whereas Pa says “you too dumb to keep going to school”, Nettie “say [Celie] ain’t dumb”. (Walker 15) She also teaches her sister all that she has learnt in school when Celie is forced to quit.

Nettie also broadens Celie’s horizons by telling her about Africa in her letters, after she has left. She tells her of her newfound knowledge, namely that there “were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago”, “that the

Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored”, “that Egypt is in Africa” and “that the Ethiopia we read about in the Bible meant all of Africa”.

(Walker 74) When her sister confides in the letter that “I hadn’t realized I was so ignorant”, Celie understands how little she, too, knows about the world. Her worldview is limited to her house in Georgia. She remarks that “I don’t know where England at. Don’t know where Africa at either”. (Walker 68) Her abusive husband has made sure of keeping her uneducated and inside the house, as a way of controlling her and limiting her possibilities to escape from him. Through hiding Nettie’s letters, he drastically slows down Celie’s Bildung, and it is therefore it takes her so long to break free.

Nettie also makes Celie see religion in a different light, which is crucial in order to understand her transformation towards the end. Nettie tells her “Jesus Christ had hair like lamb’s wool. Lamb’s wool is not straight, Celie. It isn’t even curly.” (Walker 75) Thus, Celie understands that she has been tricked by the western world in order to see herself as inferior, and that God does not have to be the old, white man she imagined. Nettie’s descriptions of black women and how they live are also essential for Celie’s Bildung. She hears about black men exploiting black women also in Africa, with the chief “talking and drinking palm wine with the healer” all day, whereas the women “work like donkeys”. (Walker 83) She understands that the oppression of women is a global problem within the black community. Once again, it is Nettie who formulates what will be Celie’s new belief system, as she writes to Celie after arguing with a man from the Olinka tribe: “The world is changing. [...] It is no longer a world just for boys and men”. (Walker 85)

Apart from Nettie there is Sofia, central to Celie’s Bildung as she the one who awakens her to active resistance. (Smith 9) Celie says, in her famous words to Sofia, that “You do what I can’t. [...] Fight”. (Walker 31) In theory she could have learnt that lesson already from Nettie, who fought the men and ran away. She always told her that “You got to fight”. (Walker 19) What hindered Celie from taking this lesson from her sister is the misunderstanding around Nettie’s escape. Because she thinks Nettie died, she concludes that fighting is not the way to stay alive.

However, Sofia is a woman she admires and therefore wants to be like. After telling Harpo, Sofia's husband, to beat her out of jealousy that she dares to stand up to him, Sofia is bold enough to look Celie "straight in the eye". (Walker 31) Celie has a lot of respect towards both her and Shug. The latter is a sexy blues singer whom all the men want, and all the women want to be like. She is lodged in Albert and Celie's house from the time she falls ill, and Celie is the one to nurse her back to health. As a way of thanking her, Shug gives Celie the most important message of all; to love and respect herself. With the life lessons these three women provide, Celie's consciousness is awakened and she finds the situation she is in unacceptable. The black female Bildung is complete, and she will no longer accept the colonization of her body.

As we have seen, Celie's Bildung lies in the power of black sisterhood. Her Bildung would never have taken place had it not been for the female friendships she establishes. *The Help* also focuses on women bonding. Yet, the most touching element of the novel is the bond between the black domestic workers and the white children, and not the bond between the black maids, although it helps to free them. What really interests Stockett, and therefore the reader, is the bond between Aibileen and Mae Mobley and between Constantine and Miss Skeeter. Moreover, Constantine's story is always at the back of reader's mind, as she is made mention of from early on. The bond between Skeeter and her maid is what has driven her to write the black maids' stories. Constantine was like a mother to Skeeter and suddenly disappeared from the household, and what really happened to Constantine forms a parallel story to the main plot. The two intertwine when Skeeter asks her mom what happened that made Constantine leave, and is deeply wounded when she realizes she was dismissed by her mother. Thus, we see that the bond between Constantine and Skeeter, a black and a white woman, is at the center of the novel. This impression is further strengthened when we look at Stockett's own motivation for writing *The Help*, as she was inspired by her own maid. We understand that Skeeter is a version of herself, and that Constantine a version of her own maid, Demetrie.

For the maid Aibileen, the bond she develops with Miss Skeeter is life changing, as the latter makes her realize that she could become more than a maid. Skeeter gets Aibileen to write down her experiences as a black maid, and writing is an act of resistance and a

process of education. With her newfound voice, at the end of the novel Abileen considers that “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”. (Stockett 199) Skeeter is the one to incentivize Abileen’s independence.

The bond between Skeeter and Minny is not as obvious, as the two usually end up fighting. To Minny, Skeeter starts out being just someone who uses them in order to publish a novel – much the same critique as Katheryn Stockett has received from the black community on behalf of her novel. Yet, Minny’s need for change is greater than her distrust for Skeeter, and she ends up benefitting from Skeeter’s help. One even wonders whether the title of the novel has a double meaning. Not simply referring to the maids, *The Help* could also refer to Skeeter who helps the help, or the women in general helping each other.

The bond between Minny and Miss Celia is also elaborated in the novel. Minny becomes Miss Celia’s maid, and although the latter does not have any children, this is what brings the two women together. Celia needs support during a difficult time, and Minny is a friend and is there for her, although tempered as usual, through the spontaneous abortions and Celia’s troubles in housekeeping. From Miss Celia, Minny learns that a white woman can and should treat a black woman as an equal, as Miss Celie has her sitting at the same table when eating lunch and never treats her like just a maid. Moreover, since Miss Celia is a terrible chef, Minny understands that the knowledge she has about cooking is valuable. From Minny, Miss Celia learns to be strong, to confront bullies and to not care so much about what other people think of her.

Thus, what we find in both novels is a universe of women. Oppressed as they are by white elite and black patriarchy, they still manage to stick together, and that is also the final message. Celie could not have freed herself were it not for the support of Shug, Sofia and her sister. They all depend on one another, like a tightly knit quilt – a frequently used symbol in African-American literature. We see it as a symbol of the bond between women when Sofia and Celie make a quilt together as a way of reconciliation. For as much as many feel the novel’s depiction of black men is exaggerated, the men also

form part of the quilt's patchwork. We see that at the end, where even Mr. ____ and Celie are reconciled.

Still, *The Color Purple* is marked by a womanist doctrine. Here is how the womanist doctrine is described in "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens":

"Integral to Walker's creation of myth is her womanist ideology, a visionary and archetypal doctrine of African-American feminism that privileges the following: sororal bonds; the possibility of sexual intimacy between women and the acceptance of sexual and non-sexual love for men; the preference for women's culture; the acknowledgement and affirmation of women's strength; a commitment to the survival and wholeness of black people, male and female; and a woman's love of the Spirit, love, the Folk and herself, regardless of the forces that seek to distort or destroy that love" (In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens xi-xii).

The Help also proposes womanism as the solution against oppression. However, the difference lies in the range of the term womanism. In Walker's novel, womanism is restricted to bonding between black women. In Stockett's novel, on the other hand, womanism means not only bonding between black women, but also between black and white women.

At no time is there any mention of a quilt in *The Help* as a symbol of unity in the black community. This is a feature of African-American literature that Stockett most probably is familiar with, but has left out. It might not come natural to her to use this symbol. Also, she might be careful in imitating too many features from African-American literature in fear of accusations of plagiarism or of trying too hard to be a black writer. Still, there could be another explanation. Not only is the quilt lacking, but the reader also wonders whether it really is the black community that Stockett seeks to unite.

The women form the center of *The Color Purple*, and we enter into a female universe once we open the novel. The woman's sphere is the home, which is why much of the action takes place inside and between family members. This is also true for *The Help*. The maids, apart from having the kitchen as their workplace, meet with Skeeter in the kitchen or the church to share their stories. After Yule May is imprisoned, all the black

maids in the neighborhood come together in the kitchen to tell their story. All the important and secret conversations about the book project also take place either in church or in the kitchen. The kitchen is the setting during Skeeter and Aibileen's first real conversation. Aibileen relates "I go in the kitchen, Miss Skeeter in there. She leaning against the counter, got a serious look on her face, even more serious than usual." (Stockett 9)

Apart from focusing on the bond only between black women, and not women in general, Alice Walker has also included lesbianism as an element in *The Color Purple*. In fact, the novel has been ridiculed by literary critics for its, to some, obsessive focus on lesbianism. However, Uplabdi Sangwan begs for a revision of the way lesbianism has been interpreted in the novel. According to the critic, the interpretation has focused solely on the sexual phenomena, thereby excluding the emotional bond between two female partners. It seems that some of the literary critics have forgotten that lesbians actually fall in love, and don't only stay together for sexual pleasure. Although it is true that it is Shug who teaches Celie about sexuality and that they explore it together, their relationship is founded on more than just sex.

Besides, as Sangwan points out, Walker's focus on lesbianism has a purpose, and is not there only to shock the readers. Lesbianism becomes a way of empowering women. The men in *The Color Purple* exploit the women sexually and have made sex a means of control. Only through taking back her own sexuality, and enjoying it with women that will not use sex to oppress her, can Celie embark upon the path towards true selfhood. Lesbianism breaks the patterns of control the black men have established.

Concerning the emotional aspect of lesbianism, the love that two women share becomes symbolic of bonds between women, a concept Walker introduces in her novel. (Sangwan 202) Sisterhood leads to a reformulation of the power structures between men and women, where the women stand together and become stronger as a group. Sangwan reflects that female bonding helps the women break free from the stereotypes that the black men and the white society use to label them. Two such stereotypes are the mule and the jezebel. According to scholar Rupe Simms' definition, mules are "insensible brutes and sub-human beasts who were only to be valued for their labor". (Simms 879)

As Sangwan notes, Celie is trapped in the stereotype of a mule in the first part of the novel, working like a mule first in her stepfather's home, and then her husband's home. The only way to escape this stereotype and make the men respect her is to unite with other women – which she does.

Another stereotype she frees herself of, is that of the jezebel. A jezebel is a provocative woman with an uncontrollable sexual appetite. The men in the novel accuse Celie of being such a woman, when in reality they are the ones to sexually exploit her. To free herself from being treated as a mule and a jezebel, Celie needs to stand up for herself and take control of her own sexuality. She goes on a journey in which her awareness of the situation awakens through learning from other women.

To sum up, there are both similarities and differences between *The Help* and *The Color Purple* regarding the female universe the authors have created. Both novels introduce us to a womanist doctrine where women love each other, stand together and help each other. However, whereas Stockett seeks to unite black and white women, Alice Walker focuses solely on black sisterhood. Another difference is the degree of love the women share, as the love the women feel is so strong that it translates to lesbianism in *The Color Purple*. Another difference lies in the protagonist and what kind of Bildungsroman we are dealing with. In my opinion, *The Help* can also be called a Bildungsroman, but we are talking about the Bildung of the white female protagonist, and not of any of the black characters.

4.2 Double oppression

The Color Purple clearly shows the double oppression black women are subject to. Celie is not only oppressed because she is black, but also because she is a woman. The mistreatment starts already when she is a child, as her stepfather systematically rapes her. Her husband tells her how dumb, useless and ugly she is. "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all." (Walker 102) This message is repeated to her by society, who also labels her as dumb, useless and ugly for being a black woman.

Kathryn Stockett is also aware of the double oppression of black women, which is reflected by her novel. The reader sees it in the case of Minny, who is beaten by her husband on various occasions. Minny knows it is wrong to accept the mistreatment, but is so afraid that Leroy will leave her and the kids that she puts up with it. She does however think about how her life could be without her white employers and her husband oppressing her, and wonders “Who *knows* what I could become, if Leroy would stop goddamn hitting me”. (Stockett 185) With this, Stockett transmits the idea that white people aren’t the only ones who have held African-American women back, but also their black men.

In fact, Minny is more afraid of her husband Leroy than she is of her white employers. When Skeeter proposes to include also Leroy’s thoughts on segregation into her novel, Minny panics and tries to escape her compromise. She knows that telling Leroy will get her in trouble, for her husband will surely disapprove of the book project. Besides Minny, the other black women in *The Help* are also subject to a double oppression. Even without the domestic violence, their role is inferior to that of their husbands. The men expect them to take care of their family, in the same way that white people expect them to take care of their families.

Despite being oppressed by all parts of society, several black feminists describe the black woman as irrepressible. “She is insulted, she holds up her head, she is scorned, but she proudly demands respect” (Collins 92) In *The Color Purple*, Shug is the personification of the black irrepressible woman. She does not let white people nor black men oppress her. Sofia is another seemingly irrepressible woman, described by Celie as “Solid. Like if she sit down on something, it be mash.” (Walker 28) She fights back when her husband beats her and has the strength to leave him when she sees that it is necessary for her and the children. However, she breaks under the long-term abuse from the white mayor and his wife.

Minny is *The Help*’s irrepressible woman. She also leaves her husband for beating her, and she dares to join the book-project even though she knows both her husband and society will kill her should they find out. She also shows that the black woman “is

scorned, but she proudly demands respect". This we clearly see from the episode where Minny bakes a chocolate pie for her ex-employer after being fired; a cake made out of her own excrement. It is an act of revenge for not being respected.

What then about the black women with a submissive character, women like Celie and Aibileen? Black feminists are aware that "far too many black women remain motionless on the outside... but inside?" (Collins 99) Seen in this light, there is hope also for the Celie's and the Aibileen's of the world. On the surface it seems that they have accepted their fate, but the feminists urge us to dig deeper. Beneath the surface is where we find the resistance. They talk of "behavioral conformity along with hidden resistance" (Collins 97) *The Help* is a demonstration of this. The maids go on with their daily chores in the white households while at the same time contributing to Skeeter's novel. They keep quiet in public, but fight against the oppression in secret. The black maids in *The Help* thus personify black feminist thought of silent resistance.

The Help and *The Color Purple* show us the inner thoughts of the characters through the diaries of the women. The act of writing is in itself subversive and an act of rebellion, which is something almost all of the literary scholars agree on. (Smith 8) Celie might seem like a nobody who makes no resistance. However, as she matures through her observations, she becomes aware of all the things that are wrong in society. The women have not mentally succumbed to society's definition of them. This is what black feminists call "the power of self-definition". (Collins 97)

Aibileen's comforting words to Mae Mobley is both a message of love and an act of resistance. She says to the little girl that "You is kind. You is smart. You is important", something her mother never tells her. (Stockett 198) It is a message of love, but at the same time she is resisting white society's standard on beauty. Mae Mobley's mother does not pay much attention to her daughter because she did not turn out the way she had hoped. She is never going to be a beauty queen like her mom. Her mother rejects her daughter for being fat, messy and imperfect. This white perfectionism is what Aibileen rejects when she emphasizes other values, like being smart and kind. She also rejects the role of women, who strive to become beauty queens instead of smart people. As she repeats this message to the girl, it becomes a soothing mantra for herself as well and

a way to resist oppression, and to reject other people's definition of her. Aibileen is also smart, kind and important, no matter what society says.

To what extent is this double oppression true? *The Color Purple* has been criticized for portraying a "monstrous black masculinity" that is blown out of proportions. (LaGrone 14) However, although a much milder case, we see that Stockett picks up the topic with Minny and her abusive husband. In fact, the violent black man is a common stereotype in American culture and entertainment. (LaGrone 17) Is Stockett simply using a stereotype for her novel, whereas the violent men in *The Color Purple* are based on Walker's own, possibly exaggerated experiences?

The black feminist struggle has been even more challenging than the white feminist struggle. This is because the black feminists have had to struggle both for the rights of blacks and for the rights of black women at the same time, while also paradoxically attacking black men. Those who criticized black men have often been silenced within the black community. It was seen as unworthy to attack "the black family" (Collins 13). However, it was a fight the black feminists had to take in order to truly free themselves. It is therefore appropriate that Stockett addresses the issue, although the message is perhaps less authentic coming from a white woman. Still, Stockett is from the South of the United States where black and white people live side by side. She might be basing her description of Minny's husband on real experiences, either seen or lived at some point during her life. Another point to have in mind before accusing her of reproducing stereotypes, is her love of reading. Kathryn Stockett has been an avid reader since childhood, and surely has read the most important African-American works before beginning to write her own novel. A lot of the elements she reproduces could therefore have been taken out of the body of texts that African-American literature provides, works that in some cases provide her with second-hand experience.

In sum, both *The Color Purple* and *The Help* deal with the double oppression of black women. The characters in both novels fit the description that black feminists give of inner and secret resistance, and both authors have included examples of the black irrepressible woman. When it comes to the depiction of black men, the men in *The Color Purple* are much more vilified. First of all, all of them are violent without exception, and

secondly, Celie is a lot more oppressed and abused than Minny. Leroy's treatment of Minny brings no new insight into black domestic violence, but rather seems to replicate the stereotypes and prejudices towards black men. Yet, double oppression is an important topic in the black feminist struggle, and it is therefore appropriate for Stockett to address the problem.

We find a message of vindication and a call for action at the end of each novel. The maids' freedom is a result of their book-project and hence, of their own actions. Secretly they must have wished the change to come, since they were willing to risk it all for the novel about their lives to be published. Minny escapes from her violent husband, as he threatens to kill her after being fired because of Minnie's contribution in the book. Aibileen is fired for false accusations of theft, because Miss Hilly knows about the book. Both women are free, and they themselves use the word "free" to describe their new circumstances.

To underline that *The Help* is not only a novel about the oppression of African-Americans, but also about the oppression of women, the white character Skeeter is also freed though the process of writing her novel. She is liberated from the narrow mindset of the South as she moves to cosmopolitan New York. She no longer has to pretend to be one of Jackson's ladies, and can dedicate herself to more important projects than being a hostess.

5. Conclusion

The Help has many elements from African-American literature, but does not treat black identity with the weight it deserves to be given. Whenever questions of self-worth or body image are brought up, we only see this from Miss Skeeter's perspective, the white protagonist. Skeeter is given the role of a heroine, and it is her Bildung that the novel follows. The black characters are only there for us and for her to feel sorry for, as Stockett pretends to teach white people about the evils of segregation and the importance of moral standards. The black characters become victims instead of strong female heroines in what should have been their own story. As such, we notice that the writer is white, and that she therefore has not been able to create a black heroine.

Neither do the black characters in *The Help* have a split identity, a feeling that other African-American female writers most often include in their novels. There is no search for one's roots in Africa, and in general no interest in the African part of being an African-American, like we find in for instance *The Color Purple*. Stockett is, however, familiar with many elements that characterize the African-American community, for example their dialect and the important role of religion. Therefore, she writes in African-American Vernacular English in the sections dedicated to the black maids, and she highlights the importance of religion in the characters' lives. The church helps the maids unite and this is what ultimately leads them to freedom. However, they would never have embarked upon the road towards freedom had it not been for the white rescuer, Skeeter, who initiates the process.

In both *The Color Purple* and *The Help*, the sisterhood between the women is what ultimately frees them. Yet, the sisterhood in *The Help* includes both white and black women. This is radically different from *The Color Purple* and the majority of African-American female literature, where sisterhood is between black women only.

In sum, *The Help* offers a very white perspective on what it was like to be a black maid during the 60s in the United States. Thus, I agree with Bess Montgomery who was cited in the introduction, on her statement that white writers writing about black characters will always write from a white sensibility. Professor Vinyard thought that significant experience from the black community could make a white writer able to write about the black experience. As shown in this paper, a white writer tends to victimize the black characters and create white heroes or heroines. Vineyard is right in that the white writers can pick up imagery, style, characterizations and contexts from either reading African-American novels or otherwise immersing themselves in African-American culture. Stockett does this when she imitates African-American vernacular English, when she bases her characters on many of the same stereotypes that Walker uses in *The Color Purple*, and when she picks church and the kitchen as common settings in the novel. Yet, however much she imitates the style, Kathryn Stockett will always write from a white sensibility. Thus, it is impossible to classify *The Help* as African-American

literature, and it would be wisest to just consider it a historical novel – a sentimental one as such.

With that being said, although Stockett can be criticized for indulging in sentimental escapism, the bond between the black maids and the white children is truly touching in the story. Yet, a touching novel with white characters feeling sorry for oppressed black maids, written by a white author, is not what the African-American community wants, especially not in the twenty-first century. African-American literature is now at a different stage, with for instance urban, romance and science fiction novels with strong and independent black characters, and the same is true for popular culture. The message we receive from the music industry is clear: African-Americans are the new rulers of the world, and they will frown upon any novel pitying either them or their past. As for what common black people think, the numbers from the survey on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* speak for themselves. Not only do black people frown upon the novel today, but as many as three out of five black Americans even consider it an Anti-Negro text. Should any other white writer wish to write a book about African-American characters, he or she should be very careful not to write yet another sentimental novel filled with black victims. It would be much more interesting to see a white author write a novel with a strong black heroine. This would do more to strengthen black and white sisterhood than depicting black and white friendships only based on white supremacy.

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