Universidad Zaragoza
1542

Trabajo Fin de Máster

"Crossing a Terrible Line": Cross-racial Ventriloquism and the Liberation of White and Black Women in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*

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2015

Abstract

This Master Thesis analyzes Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009) from the perspective of neo-segregation narratives in order to explore the possibilities of this literary tradition. Firstly, this analysis focuses on the controversy about Stockett's ventriloquism, the risks for a white author when writing in a voice from a different race and the liberating potential of the novel's cross-racial representations to deconstruct racial frontiers. Secondly, a close analysis of the novel reveals the liberation of white and black women in the text centering the attention on the feminist awakenings of Aibileen, Minny and Skeeter, who liberate themselves from dominant stereotypes commonly reproduced in the American literary tradition such as the Mammy, the Sapphire, and the Southern Belle respectively. Thirdly, the analysis of the sorority between races, together with the awareness process of the white protagonist, reflects the possibility of liberation from social conservative standards that this sisterhood offers to both white and black characters, and it simultaneously calls readers' attention to the still present gender and racial discrimination in the 21st century society. Thus, this thesis will try to demonstrate that neo-segregation narratives such as *The Help*, which attempt to know the other by transgressing racial frontiers, contribute to spread the message of racial understanding and can help to change the sexist and racist society in which we currently live.

Key words

Neo-segregation narratives; cross-racial representations; African Americans; mammy; sapphire; southern belle; feminism; gender discrimination; racial frontiers; racism.

Resumen

En este trabajo se analiza la novela *The Help* (2009) de Kathryn Stockett desde el punto de vista del género de las nuevas narrativas de segregación, con el fin de explorar las posibilidades de dicha tradición literaria. En primer lugar, el análisis se centra en la polémica provocada por el uso de ventriloquía por parte de la autora, en los riesgos que conlleva escribir en la voz de una persona de diferente raza para una escritora blanca, y en el carácter liberador de estos cambios de raza que permiten deconstruir fronteras raciales. En segundo lugar, un análisis más profundo de la novela muestra la liberación de las mujeres blancas y negras centrándose en el despertar feminista de Aibileen, Minny y Skeeter, quienes de esta manera, consiguen liberarse de los estereotipos más frecuentes en la tradición literaria norteamericana como son la 'Mammy' y la 'Sapphire' para las mujeres afroamericanas o la 'Southern Belle' para las mujeres blancas de clase media-alta. En tercer lugar, el análisis de la sororidad entre mujeres de diferentes razas, junto con el despertar a la realidad racista de la protagonista blanca de la novela, reflejan cómo en esta amistad, tanto blancas como negras encuentran la posibilidad de liberarse de las normas sociales más conservadoras. De la misma manera, esta colaboración entre razas recuerda a los lectores que, en pleno siglo XXI, sigue existiendo discriminación racial y discriminación de género en las sociedades de todo el mundo. Por consiguiente, este trabajo intentará demostrar que novelas pertenecientes al género de 'neo-segregation narratives' como *The Help*, las cuales traspasan fronteras raciales para entender al 'otro', contribuyen a difundir el mensaje de entendimiento entre razas y también pueden ayudar a cambiar la sociedad sexista y racista en la que vivimos hoy en día.

Palabras clave

Nuevas narrativas de segregación; representaciones a través de razas; afroamericanos/as; 'mammy'; 'sapphire'; 'southern belle'; feminismo; discriminación de género; fronteras raciales; racismo.

Contents

1. Introduction

Kathryn Stockett's debut novel *The Help* was released in 2009 and became a bestseller instantly, spending later on, more than 100 weeks in The New York Time Bestseller List. Looking back at the 16 years she spent in Mississippi, Stockett presents a story about cross-racial cooperation and friendship set in the segregated South of the U.S during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, which has been frequently used as a background by Southern writers. Actually, taking into account that Stockett's narrative approaches the topic of enslaved African Americans in the Jim Crow Era, it is easy to relate this novel to previous historical fiction narratives which examined the same issue, such as William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) or Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1960). Although these works have been criticized because of their presumed patronizing depictions of African American people, all of them have been nationally and internationally praised too, and are considered masterpieces of the American literary tradition. Among these works, *Gone with the Wind* is the one that has more things in common with *The Help* because both of them describe the positive side of cross-racial relationships, in particular the interaction of African American maids and their white female employers, which scholars have regarded as romanticized in both novels.

Nonetheless, this modern classic *The Help*, differentiates itself from those early narratives in many aspects, starting with the fact that it not only looks back at the horrors of the Jim Crow Era but it also makes the audience aware of the lasting effects of slavery in the American population. Due to the novel's aim we can locate this story in the tradition of neo-segregation narrative, which includes those fictional accounts written by post-civil right writers that return to the Jim Crow Era, the time of compulsory race segregation (Norman 3). According to Norman, these writers, who contrarily to their characters live in a multicultural society, go back to the time of Jim Crow "to tell us as much about our present as our past" (2). In fact, this is the biggest difference with earlier slave and segregation narratives, these works address contemporary concerns about racial injustice and its history (3). Moreover, Norman explains that neo-segregation narratives insist on the fact that the skin color is still relevant in the America's post-Jim Crow era (13). This ultimate goal is something that these novels share with neo-slave narratives, which Norman refers to as their "fraternal

twin" (5). Those works belonging to the neo-slave narrative tradition go back to Jim Crow as well, centering their attention on slavery, and likewise, they raise awareness about the wounds that slavery left behind, claiming that they are still open in the 21st century. Due to the increased educational access and freedom of expression for non-white people, there are many writers of African descent that have decided to write in these traditions (Eaton 1). Together with African Americans, South African or Caribbean writers (to mention some) go back to the early African Diasporic experience in their writings. As an example, we find the world-wide famous African American writer Toni Morrison, who recently published another neo-slave narrative entitled *God Help the Child* (2015). However, there are also white writers who feel the need to rewrite American racist history and contribute to this fight against racial discrimination like Sue Monk Kidd with her novel *The Life of Bees* (2002) or *The Help*'s author Kathryn Stockett.

Moreover, since the *The Help* was published, there have been many artistic manifestations that depicted the racist American past history and addressed this issue of racial inequality. As an example, we find the release of *12 Years a Slave* in 2013, a film adaptation of the 1853 slave narrative memoir of Solomon Northup, a New York State-born free African-American man who was kidnapped and sold into slavery. The protagonist is freed at the end of the film, but what about the rest of enslaved African Americans? What about Solomon's trauma? Is he going to be scared for the rest of his life? This film brings the past to the present in order to tell the world what neo-segregation and neo-slave narratives were already claiming, that some contemporary anxieties are a result of the traumatic past and that the fight for racial equality is not over yet. Likewise, this problem of racial discrimination was addressed by Barack Obama in the 50th Anniversary of Selma's March in March 2015, after seven years in the presidency as the first elected African American president. In an emotional speech, he expressed his concern about the changes in attitude towards racial discrimination. According to Obama, the country's racial history still casts its shadow upon American society, which is not "yet finished" (The Daily Conversation). He wanted to transmit the idea that, although racism is no longer institutionalized by Law, it is still present nowadays.

We can affirm therefore that Kathryn Stockett's novel approaches these literary traditions to confirm the national concern that the American racist past still haunts the present. In order to do that, Stockett takes a further step and presents this story about racial segregation in the South narrated by three voices, two of whom are African American women. In spite of the success of the novel and the subsequent film adaptation, Stockett's work has not been especially praised by scholars, who consider that these cross-racial representations perpetuate old African American stereotypes. In this view, the white author does not accomplish the neo segregation narratives' goal of giving voice to the silenced to tell their stories, but she is accused of appropriating their voices and narratives instead. In spite of such criticism, it is my contention that the uniqueness of this novel lies in the fact that Stockett presents the liberation process of the three protagonists, Aibileen, Minny and Skeeter, whose complex identities allow them to free themselves from dominant racial and gender stereotypes. Likewise, thanks to the cross-racial relationship established between them, they break away with the patriarchal ideology of the Jim Crow Era, in such a way that the revisionist purpose of the text is aimed at both racial and gender discrimination.

In order to contest the aforementioned criticism and demonstrate the liberating potential of this neo-segregation narrative, I am going to discuss *The Help* in four sections in which I will analyze different issues related to the creation of identities and voices and the liberating characterization in the text. The first section of my analysis, "Cross-Racial Ventriloquism," includes a discussion of the divided reception of *The Help* and the controversy after the publication of the book, which concentrates on Stockett's cross-racial representations. I will resort to real testimonies and critical responses, Susan Gubar and other scholars' ideas about the liberating potential of trans-racial transgressions, and an ethical reading of the text in order to demonstrate the value of the author's cross-racial portrayals and their previously unappreciated potential to deconstruct racial frontiers. In the second section, devoted to the character of Skeeter Pelham, I will comment on the liberation of the white protagonist of the novel, starting from the belle stereotype and the conventionalisms and beauty standards of womanhood in the 1960s, as well as her approach to second-wave feminism that leads her to achieve her independence. Similarly, the third section, devoted to the main two African American protagonists of the story, analyzes the struggles for freedom of Aibileen and Minny. By analyzing their evolution throughout the narrative, I want to demonstrate

that these characters depart from the known and constantly reproduced stereotypes of the Mammy and the Sapphire in order to recover their voices and claim their identity. Finally, in the fourth section, entitled “Cross-racial sorority,” I will explore the whites’ awareness process focusing on Skeeter’s evolution, to demonstrate that her collaboration and friendship with the maids succeed at opening white women’s eyes to the nature of white supremacy and to the unfairness of generalized abuse towards black people. Likewise, I will comment on the fact that the sorority between blacks and whites is Stockett’s wake up call for the audience to realize that racial discrimination is still present in American society. In this way, I intend to prove the potential of this neo-segregation narrative and its relevance in the American literature tradition, which, through the use of cross-racial representations, advances in the process of getting to know the other, goes over established stereotypes and transgresses and deconstructs racial frontiers; something that scholars are sometimes reluctant to see.

2. Cross-racial Ventriloquism: the Problems of Constructing Identities and Giving Voice to Black Characters in *The Help*

> 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 460)

Stockett's words in *The Help*'s afterword point to the controversy that originated after the publication of the novel, which revolves around the reliability of the African-Americans' situation, the relationship with their white employers and the question of creating a personality and giving voice to characters of a different race in literature. From Stockett's words, we can affirm that for a white person to write in the voice of a black woman is still something risky nowadays. As she said in an interview, American people are "afraid of saying the wrong thing and being typecast as racist" (Day). Likewise, due to the fact that she was fictionalizing her childhood memories and therefore writing from a nostalgic perspective, she was afraid of portraying romanticized relationships between white and black women. In order to account for the various ways in which critics and readers reacted to these issues, in this section I will discuss the historical veracity of Stockett maids' fictional portrayals and the presumed idealization of their relationships with the white ladies who hired them. Secondly, I will comment on the contemporary controversy of cross-racial ventriloquism in relation to the ethical issues at stake when giving voice to someone from a different race. Finally, I will introduce the concepts of ethical representation and ethical reading to contest the criticism that Stockett received for her construction of black identities.

As I have just mentioned, one of the reasons why Kathryn Stockett's novel has been negatively criticized is because of its assumed historical inaccuracy. Many scholars and readers complained about Stockett's supposed lack of knowledge about the black community in Mississippi at that time. According to Dragulescu, writing across race is a necessary step to get to know the other but it requires extensive and rigorous research, and in her view, Stockett's representation of black life and history is perfunctory (18). Similarly, Lumumba discredits Stockett's supposed realistic portrayals of black life by comparing her with the Southerner writer Eudora Welty, who, in the same way Stockett did, got to know the black community through her interactions with

domestic workers. Nevertheless, it is Eudora Welty's thoughtful contemplation and "depth of affection" that Stockett's novel lacks in this view (Prenshaw, in Lumumba 33).

There is enough evidence to contradict this criticism. Firstly, we cannot forget that Stockett was also part of a white community in Mississippi, she was really close to her family's maid Demetrie and she also knew others such as her brother's maid Ablene Cooper. Secondly, we know that Stockett did research and looked into real testimonies of African American women who worked as maids in the 1960s in order to write a fair representation of these women. In fact, in her afterword she thanks Susan Tucker, author of the book *Telling Memories Among Southern Women* (1988), and declares that the oral accounts of African American women who worked as domestics and the white employers who hired black maids "took me back to a time and place that is long gone" (Stockett 455). We may assume from her words that it was an essential source of inspiration for her fiction.

However, the greatest evidence for the consideration of her portrayal of black maids as realistic is a series of responses to the book and film on the part of both white and African American readers that lived in Southern States in the 1960s. As an example, we find N. Gargano's response, in which he tells us that he lived in one of the white neighborhoods who hired black domestics, and that his maid was his caretaker but also his friend. He declares that the maid stayed to take care of him and his brothers when his parents got divorced, and since then, "she was my rock" (in Jones 29). Janita, an African American woman from Atlanta posted the following response: "To the critics who say the book tells lies about how blacks were treated during this era and to my brothers and sisters who think it's racist for a white Southern woman to tell this story, I can tell you, first hand, the words on these pages are very, very real" (31). In this reader's opinion, Stockett has been able to represent her family's experience in the segregate South. On account of this, *The Help* fulfills its aim of depicting the situation of domestic workers in the South of U.S in the Jim Crow Era. Similarly, another reader asked her mother-in-law about her life in Jackson and she said that Stockett was "right on about everything" (31). We can assume that this person's mother-in-law recognized herself in the maids' stories told in the novel. Moreover, this reader adds that "it was nice to read about what might have happened versus what's in the history books" (31).

No history book talks about the stories of these maids, so this reader loves the idea of learning those personal stories, although they are presented in a fictional narrative.

The testimonies of some African American scholars such as Shana Russell are also noteworthy. Russell's article explains the way in which *The Help* allowed her mother and other African American women to reflect on their experience as black domestics. In her mother and the rest of the women's view, "the voices of Minny and Aibileen […] are authentic, or at the very least empathetic representations of black women of the era, making Stockett's role as author (and perhaps race) irrelevant to her ability to present the 'truth' about black women's lives" (Russell 75). These women do believe that *The Help* is representing what happened to domestic workers at that time. But they are not looking for historical accuracy and they don't care about who is writing about it; they are looking for the representation of their labor and the kind of stories that happened in their workplace. This is what they find so interesting in the book and its film adaptation, the portrayal of the maids' work in white families and the representation of the "mundane spaces" where, according to Russell, the stories of these African American women are really given life (81).

Another significant example is the testimony of Mary Yelling, who worked with Susan Tucker in *Telling Memories*. When Tucker asked her opinion about *The Help*, Yelling replied: "I am glad she used what the women told us and made smoothing different from it. She made people listen. I know it is fiction and I know not everyone liked it, but she made people not forget. What more can you want?" (Tucker "Not Forgotten" 124-25). Yelling does not discuss the accuracy of Stockett's story, because as she says, it is fiction. She admires Stockett's novel because it makes people not to forget about the situation and stories of those maids in the 1960s. Likewise, it reminds people that racial discrimination is still present in many ways in our contemporary society.

In any case, the realism in Stockett's black characters is still a polemical topic for critics, who insist on the superficial depiction of African American people in the story. Why do critics consider those characters as unlikely representations of real people while African Americans who worked for white families in the 1960s see themselves in those stories? The general critical answer is that Stockett manipulates readers by showing a nostalgic perspective which limits the readers' ability to see beyond the

sugar-coated story about black domestic and white employers that she presents. Nonetheless, people who went through similar experiences support the depiction of the stories told in the novel. It is therefore surprising that scholars cling to this idea and compare Stockett's work with patronizing slave narratives when we find all those testimonies that laud this novel. In my view, this has to do with the fact that Stockett is a white woman who would have enjoyed white privileges in Mississippi in the 1960s, so critics assume it is impossible to depict an accurate account of what was happening to African American people when you belong to the white society which exercised its authority over those people. But the truth is that white writers cannot escape those traditional and cultural privileges that make it possible for them to write and publish their writings, but the fact that they want to use these privileges to seek a faithful representation of the other should be positively valued too.

Regarding the reliability of black characterization, Stockett has also been criticized for her representation of colored people's dialect. One of the major negative remarks addressed at her has been the Association of Black Women Historians' response to the speech used by black characters, in particular, the maids' language: "Set in the South, the appropriate regional accent gives way to a child-like, over-exaggerated '*black*' dialect. In the film, for example, the primary character, Aibileen, reassures a young white child that, 'You is smat, you is kind, you is important.' In the book, black women refer to the Lord as the 'Law,' an irreverent depiction of black vernacular" (Association of Black Women Historians). To the criticism of the low and child-like black dialect, Stockett declared in an interview that most people do not take into account the socioeconomic situation of African Americans. Moreover, she pointed out that her characters did not go past eighth grade and they were not scholars (Ward). Likewise, in the same interview, Stockett declared that she is not worried about her use of this dialect, because she reproduced it in the way she remembered it: "it was just like a tape recorder in my head, and I played it back" (Ward). In her afterword, Stockett reveals to the reader that she was born in Mississippi and lived there for sixteen years. She also explains that her family belonged to a community where white families had black people working for them, so she had contact with African American people. In particular, she talks about her maid Demetrie, who worked for her family for sixteen years. Mirroring the novel, Stockett explains that they were really close and that Demetrie was always there to comfort her. Some of the things Demetrie said to her

resemble the expressions used by some characters in the novel: “You are beautiful. You a beautiful girl” (Stockett 458), or “This where you belong. Here with me” (459). The language Stockett reproduces in the story is quite similar to the one used by her maid at that time, therefore, it can be considered realistic too.

Furthermore, there are some scholars who laud her account of this dialect too, especially, Gaston Hall, who admires the evocation of Jackson and the quality of the language employed by black characters: “for me Stockett renders the individual narrators and participants in dialogue is about as good as anything but phonetic symbols. Bravo!” (498-99). Shortly after this declaration, he provides the reader with three random Aibileen’ sentences to affirm the following: “when I hear lines such as these, they sound to me like home in Jackson” (498-99). In Hall’s opinion, the language depicted by Stockett does evoke the vernacular used by African-American people in Jackson at that time. Likewise, some readers support Stockett and defend the realism of the depicted regional dialect. In an exhaustive post, an African American reader says that, although Stockett sometimes exaggerates the dialect, “she got the vernacular of black people right” (Jones 31). In addition, she writes further that some of her husband’s friends and relatives, who are Mississippian, speak in that way nowadays (31).

Finally, Stockett has also been criticized for *The Help*’s lack of realism and omission of what was happening in the segregated South in the Jim Crow Era. The Association of Black Women Historians also discussed this issue in the open letter to *The Help*’s fans:

> the film is woefully silent on the rich and vibrant history of black Civil Rights activists in Mississippi […]. Portraying the most dangerous racists in 1960s Mississippi as a group of attractive, well dressed, society women, while ignoring the reign of terror perpetuated by the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council, limits racial injustice to individual acts of meanness. (Association of Black Women Historians)

Although at this point in the letter they only refer to the film adaptation of the novel, we can observe that the main concern of these women is the omission of whites’ cruelty towards colored people. In my opinion, this is not the case of either the novel or the film. Firstly, Stockett introduces some of the major events that happened during that era. She constantly mentions the figure of Martin Luther King and the upcoming march

in Washington; she refers to President Kennedy welcoming the first African American, James Meredith, to the University of Mississippi; and she recalls Medgar Evers' cruel assassination. In fact, the ABWH recognizes the attention given to this latter event. Secondly, *The Help* is not a historical novel. Stockett's main aim is not to represent white organizations that spread terror on black people or to teach readers and viewers about activists in the 1960s, but to show domestic spaces which were shared by both colored and white people. Actually, the whites' houses were practically the only places in which cross-racial relationships occurred in the segregated and conservative South. Stockett's main goal therefore is to explore the complexity of those relationships. In this way, she wants to honor those black women who worked for white families in the Jim Crow Era.

Most of the controversy centers nevertheless on the issue I already advanced in the introduction of this essay, which is the fact that Stockett, a white woman, writes two-thirds of the story in the voice of two African American women. Questions such as: Is she "crossing a terrible line"? or Should a white woman ever write about black people's experience? are part of the current debate on cross-racial ventriloquism and the transgression of racial frontiers in white-authored novels. There are different opinions with respect to this crossing of racial boundaries but, this time, the critical response to Stockett's cross-racial portrayals is almost unanimous: she should not have crossed the racial line.

Before offering my own critical opinion on the issue, I would like to introduce the term of cross-racial ventriloquism, which the scholar Susan Gubar refers to as "racechange." According to this critic, racechanging suggests "the traversing of race boundaries, racial imitation or impersonation, cross-racial mimicry or mutability, white posing as black or black passing as white, pan-racial mutuality" (5). Although it can occur either way, the works in which whites pose as blacks are more frequently found. In fact, critics and scholars are concerned about the attention given to those white-authored stories of black life in relation to the minimum attention paid to the words of black people (Garcia, Young, Pimentel 3). This anxiety over cross-racial ventriloquism can be explained by the fact that whites have been representing African American subjectivity through the 19th and 20th centuries (Gubar 14), while black people were not often given the chance to describe what it means to be black by themselves. Moreover,

Gubar explains that modernist writers used black vernacular as linguistic experimentation (135), and later on, in the second half of the 20th century, authors used black talk to show white sympathy for black oppression (160). According to many critics, books such as *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), *Gone with the Wind* (1936), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), or *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) are the result of their authors' expression of white guilt or sympathy for black oppression.

It is precisely this latter idea what many scholars criticize in contemporary white-authored novels. They think white writers portray black characters moved by guilt and that the result is a shallow and patronizing representation of African American people. Likewise, critics consider that a consequence of these superficial portrayals is that, instead of giving voice to the oppressed black population, authors appropriate their stories. Moreover, it is believed that contemporary white-authored narratives of black life still perpetuate racial power relations (Garcia, Young, Pimentel 3). Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* has been analyzed in that light because of her use of the two different black voices. However, it is my contention that cross-racial ventriloquism can also be read as liberating in the novel, insofar as it contributes to the transgression and destruction of gender and racial frontiers.

On the one hand, racial ventriloquism contributes to the novel's purpose of liberation of the black woman. The fact that two-thirds of the novel are written in Aibileen and Minny's voice is tremendously significant. In my view, Stockett is giving voice to those African-American women who worked as maids and were completely speechless under the supremacy and abuse of whites. This is precisely the project of her main white character in the novel: Skeeter gives voice to Aibileen, Minny and the rest of the maids to tell their stories. Many people have seen in Skeeter's mission the appropriation of the maids' voices, but I agree with Faiqa Khan's view of the process of giving voice as something reciprocal. In her response to a reader's comment on her blog, she states: "I feel like the women who were cleaning the house gave her the courage to find her own voice and in return she gave them a voice. I very much understand this idea of not wanting to be saved by a 'Great White Hope,' but do you think that we (humankind) can get there (tolerance, acceptance) without accepting help from people?" (Khan). In my view, Skeeter is the one who is saved in the novel, saved from the conservative, racist and superficial society in which she lives. As I will discuss

later on, all maids, and especially Aibileen, make her realize the wrongs in the narrowed-minded society where they live, and it is thanks to them that she finally finds her own voice and leaves Jackson. In return, Skeeter uses her white privileges to give them a voice, to tell their stories and denounce the situation in the segregated South of the U.S. This reflects what happened to Stockett, whose memories of her childhood maid Demetrie and feeling of loss after 9/11 gave her the courage to write this novel (Day). Writing most of the book in two black voices is her way of honoring Demetrie and all African-American women who did not have the choice to voice their situation and inner life in the 1960s. To emphasize the true focus of her novel, Stockett decided to make it a circular one, for the first and last chapter of the novel are written in Aibileen's voice.

It is true that the liberation of the black woman comes largely through a white woman—Skeeter in the story and Stockett as the author of the novel—which can lead to the misinterpretation that African Americans are not able to find their voice by themselves. But, in my view, most critics did not consider the other side of the coin. Following Faiqa's suggestion, I would like to note that we should not focus on the fact that the author is white, because the true purpose of cross-racial representations in the text is racial understanding and reconciliation. This is something that Stockett has pointed out in some interviews: "I don't presume to know what it must have really felt like to be black. But as a writer, it's something I think we have to explore" (Ward). From Stockett's words, we can assume that she would agree with Susan Gubar about the potential of racial ventriloquism to enact post-racist ways of being and perceiving (241). Dragulescu, in her analysis of *The Help*, recognizes that the worth in the novel lies in the depiction of race relations, which suggests a move towards racial reconciliation (22). In fact, this is what the three voices and the intense relationship of the three characters in the story stand for: a utopian post-racial society.

Likewise, we can affirm that Stockett believes in the necessity for writers to deal with cross-racial representations. This is necessary for American society because, as Gubar discussed in *Racechanges*, racial ventriloquism is a taboo in American culture (xvii). If we do not accept cross-racial representations "and representations of borders for that matter," we are claiming that "women (and only women) are supposed to write feminist criticism, while blacks (and only blacks) are supposed to produce works in

African-American studies and only lesbians or gay men are supposed to publish in queer theory" (xvii-xviii). This is a very limited and narrow-minded perspective, and if we take it to the extreme, we could say that writers can only write about themselves and the situation in which they are living, because this is the only thing they are able to comprehend and faithfully represent; but if they write about someone else's individuality and way of life they are going to misrepresent him or her because of their assumed lack of knowledge. Fortunately, scholars such as Dragulescu recognize the value of cross-racial penning, which "suggests a desire to get to know the Other" (15), which is precisely what Stockett proposes to do. She plans to use racial ventriloquism in order to understand other cultures and races, because, in her opinion, America has not got any better at talking about race (Day), not enough has been written about other races to as to wipe out racial frontiers and move towards a post-racist society.

The idea of breaking racial frontiers has already been discussed by renowned writers such as Franz Fanon, whose famous sociological study on racism *Black Skin, White Masks* concludes: "The Negro is not. Any more than the white man. Both must turn their backs on the inhuman voices which were those of their respective ancestors in order that authentic communication be possible […]. Superiority? Inferiority? Why not the quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself?" (231). In 1957, Fanon advocated for the destruction of frontiers between black and white people. He suggested letting the past go and erecting a better tomorrow based on communication and racial understanding. Stockett arrives to the same conclusion with her cross-racial representations in her novel. Actually, this is the message Aibileen transmits in the story: "Lines between black and white ain't there neither. Some folks just made those up, long time ago" (Stockett 319). Thus, we can affirm that race is a construction, something made up to establish and maintain a system of power (Martínez Falquina *Indias y Fronteras* 38). Moreover, as Martínez Falquina states, the frontier is a limit that implies the possibility of transgression (25), and this is precisely what Stockett explores in her novel and invites writers to do: she calls our attention both to the constructed borders between the races and to the possibility of subverting them. Through the creation of African American voices, Stockett proves what Gubar stated in *Racechanges*, that "race and color are not immutable categories but classifications with permeable boundaries" (247). By resorting to cross-racial representations, writers have

the possibility and responsibility to break racial frontiers and contribute to the creation of a post-racial society which does not exist yet.

Lastly, I would like to relate Stockett's cross-racial representations with two important ethical questions that most scholars and readers have overlooked but which are necessary in order to properly discuss the text: the ethics of representation and the ethics of reading. Regarding the ethics of representation, we can assert that writers have social responsibilities when creating characters, they must portray ethical representations which get close to real life and people, what Seymour Chatman calls "semblance of veracity" (in Cosgrove 136). In fact, the choices that authors make in creating characters and situations influence readers' responses to the point that the "sense of political/historical/social 'accuracy' translates emotionally" (137) and may lead to the reader's sense that the author's perspective is wrong (Keen, in Cosgrove 137). In the case of *The Help*, Stockett faces a further difficulty because she tells a story which is set in the segregated South of U.S., forty years before the time in which she wrote it, and mostly narrated by two African American women; which has resulted in many critiques about her historical and social inaccuracy. Nonetheless, as I mentioned before, people who had similar experiences saw themselves in the characters' stories and support these cross-racial representations and description of the conservative and racist South in the Jim Crow Era. Moreover, the fact that there are three different perspectives and not just one privileged view helps readers to recognize the values of each character's feelings and judgments (Phelan). In *The Help* this multiple point of view is even more important because we have three narrators from two different races, but Stockett does not give preference to the white perspective (as it could be expected); on the contrary, she lets us enter into the consciousness of the three characters and their judgments equally, which allows readers to emotionally connect with both the white and the black characters. Likewise, the fact that the three voices narrate in the first person predisposes readers to empathic experiences (Cosgrove 140), regardless of the narrator's race.

The way in which readers look at the text is as important as the author's ethical representations for a critical discussion of it. According to Phelan, any text implies a reciprocal relationship: "Authors give, among other things, guidance through ethical complexity and expect to receive in return their audiences' interest and attention" (303).

Nonetheless, this communication between author and reader is not possible if readers "bring limiting, self-centered and self-authorized presuppositions to the reading" (Martínez Falquina "Stories" 198). In my opinion, this is what happened to many readers and critics with *The Help*. Once they learned that the novel dealt with black maids and their racial understanding with white employers in the conservative South of the U.S in the 1960s and that it was written by a white woman, prejudices about white-authored novels talking about black people came to their minds. This is because, as Martínez Falquina explains, previous knowledge is activated when we start reading a new story ("Stories" 205), so we may assume that readers or scholars were predisposed to find in this novel certain stereotypes previously reproduced in early slave narratives, such as the mammy or sapphire for the African American women, or the figure of the savior for the outcast white character that saves the blacks. Actually, this is precisely what most critics have found so far because they did not get involved in the communication and ethical reading that Phelan talked about, they have not seen beyond those acknowledged simplifications. This is more evident in the case of scholars, who may not have found the way to set their theoretical and literary background aside and see the potential of this text, which makes something new out of the known neo-slave and neo-segregation narratives. Furthermore, we need to take into account that, similarly to borders and frontiers, knowledge is constructed, positioned and questionable too, and only with an open-eyed standpoint can we revisit and rebuild our knowledge and expand the possibilities of perception about a particular matter (Martínez Falquina "Stories" 205-206). This means that we cannot judge too soon when we face a new story which is familiar in topic like *The Help*; we will surely miss Stockett's message of racial understanding if we do not approach the text from this ethical perspective.

To sum up, we can say that *The Help* controversy centers on the author's treatment of race, and in particular, on her use of cross-racial ventriloquism, which is something that American society does not seem to be ready to talk about openly nowadays. We cannot forget that it is a difficult task for writers to tell the truth in a fictional narrative, but as testimonies of both African American people and white people who lived in the 1960s confirm, Stockett faithfully represents the complexity of cross-racial relationships in the segregated South. As explained in this section, it is the readers' responsibility to read the story with an open-minded perspective and not

through stereotypes that limit the possibilities of perception, in order to connect with the experiences that the author is seeking to transmit. Actually, it is only in this way that readers can see the true purpose of this novel, which is, as I will discuss in the following sections, the liberation of white and black women from gender and racial conventionalisms and the fight to reach the destruction of racial frontiers.

3. Skeeter: the Liberation of the White Woman from Patriarchal Roles and Stereotypes

Regardless of the position women occupy in society, traditional images of womanhood are always related to domesticity and sexuality (Stubbs ix), attributes that have shaped early stereotypes of white women. In the representation of the domestic role, we can find the "Angel in the House" figure, which was the popular Victorian image for the ideal woman or wife. This figure is characterized as pure, submissive, passive and devoted to her husband. Being a domestic creature, she is not allowed to enter the public sphere. Her endless tasks are taking care of the house and the children. A good example of this stereotype can be found in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852-1853) and her protagonist Esther Summerson. On the other hand, we find the fallen woman figure, which is related to sexuality. This image was the representation of Victorian society's fear of sexuality in women. Although she was sometimes presented as a victim of society, the fallen woman was used as a symbol of the fatal consequences for women that choose love and sex before marriage. One of the most famous examples of the fallen woman figure is Tess from Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891).

These two stereotypes have been constantly reproduced in literary works and sometimes they undergo slight modifications in order to serve the purpose of the different genres. One of the genres in which we can find these images is the historical fiction whose stories are set up in the 1960s and Civil Rights Movement. They present a very specific type of womanhood: the Southern Belle, which is an extension of the Victorian "Angel in the House" motif, but which served to represent upper class Southern women. It was precisely created in the Southern Antebellum period to preserve English moral standards in the U.S. South and assert the authority of these upper class Southern women (Oklopcic). The fallen woman image can also appear in the character of a woman who "simply" goes against the grain and opposes the patriarchal standards of the time. In my view, this is what we have in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*. On the one hand, we find the upper-class society ladies, such as Hilly Holbrook, Elizabeth Leefolt or the rest of the Jackson League members, who work hard to preserve the patriarchal conventions of womanhood which were starting to be questioned in the 1960s. Likewise, Missus Pelham, Skeeter's mother, is introduced as a representation of the Southern Belle ideology and the preserver of those traditional values of womanhood in the second half of the 20th century, a time of upcoming

changes for women. On the other hand, Stockett presents some characters such as Rachel Cooley, Celia Foote or Elaine Stein who challenge in one way or another the stereotype of the Southern Belle and break apart the standards of womanhood at that time. Moreover, a coming-of-age journey of the white protagonist, Skeeter Pelham, lets the readers see how she struggles with the repressive society for women in which she lives in order to gain her independence as a woman and succeed as a writer. The purpose of this section is therefore to discuss the stereotypes and attitudes Skeeter overcomes to symbolize the ultimate liberation of the white woman from dominant stereotypes and social expectations.

To begin with, I would like to analyze the character of Hilly Holbrook, who is presented as the stereotypical evil character and the villain of the story. In this case, she is the ultimate representation of conservative beauty standards, women's patriarchal role as devoted wife and mother and racist behavior. As an example, we can find Hilly in a very traditional dress for the Jackson Annual Ball: "Ruffles clutch at her throat, swathes of material hide her body. Tight-fitted sleeves run all the way down her arms. The only genuine parts of Hilly you can see are her fingers and her face" (Stockett 328). Her image is that of elegance but also purity, she does not show any skin because it was socially frowned upon for a fine lady to do so in public. Hilly's traditional values are also seen in her racial prejudices, which she expresses throughout the novel when discussing separate bathrooms for the colored help: "All these houses they're building without maid's quarters? It's just plain dangerous. Everybody knows they carry different kinds of diseases than we do" (9). Hilly's words reveal whites' condescending ideology, and their fear and ignorance about colored people, which made them believe that black people were dangerous, the source of diseases, so they must protect white families from them.

In spite of these facts, Hilly is the most powerful and popular woman in Jackson. Her power lies in the fact that she is an educated, intelligent and ambitious woman. She also comes from a wealthy family and her husband is a successful businessman who belongs to the senator's family and will run for the senator position too. It is precisely her privileges and her determined character that helped her to get so much power. Additionally, she is the president and leader of the Jackson Junior League, a women's association which manages social life in Jackson. Hilly holds regular meetings in which,

together with the rest of members, she discusses the social agenda, the community work that needs to be done and decides about the latest news that should be published in the weekly newsletter. Hilly has the last word, and no member would dare disagree with the ideas that she brings to the meetings. As evidence of Hilly's power, we find her successful fundraising. She plans to send the money collected from the Jackson Annual Ball and Benefit's auction to the "Poor Starving Children of Africa." In addition, Hilly has already asked the members of the League to gather at least three cans of food apiece for those children. When the ball starts, we are told that "the auction is expected to generate more than six thousand dollars" (Stockett 327), thanks to Hilly's initiative and leadership.

Nonetheless, although Hilly works hard on representing the image of perfection, purity and decorum, she does not fit with the passivity and weakness attributed to women at that time. Hilly is quite an active person, she is organizing her family and other people's lives all the time. Moreover, as I discussed above, she leads the Junior League and controls Jackson's social life. In this way, Hilly becomes a public figure, she participates in the public sphere like men do, and therefore, she is crossing the frontier of the female private sphere (home) to the male public and social one. However, she does not take advantage of her potential, which is clearly seen in the League meetings. They could have been the perfect time and space for Hilly and the rest of privileged women to create something new, to make some reflections about their monotonous life, their fixed roles, to try to change their situation. Instead, they only focus on social events and community work. In any case, despite her potential for women's empowerment, Hilly remains a symbol of patriarchy and traditional values of womanhood and perpetuates the Southern Belle's stereotype.

The rest of society ladies also follow women's way of thinking and lifestyle typical of the social standards of womanhood at that moment. Jackson is a family-centered society, in which women are expected to get married, have children and maintain an active social life. In fact, as Simone de Beauvoir explains in *The Second Sex*, the duties assigned to a wife were "'paying calls' and having 'at-homes'" (542). This is the way in which Skeeter's friends and the rest of white ladies from the residential area in Jackson spend their days, and they are really meticulous in doing so. As an example, we have one of the bridge club meetings that Skeeter and her friends

have “every fourth Wednesday a the month” (Stockett 3). Miss Leefolt is the hostess this time and she wants everything to be ready, “she already got the blue dress on” (3) and she has commanded her maid to “set out the good crystal, put the silver service out” (3). Regarding the preparation for these social duties that women need to attend, we can make two important observations. The first one is the social importance of the house. According to Simone de Beauvoir, the house was a symbol of social rank (542), the public image of each family, and women had the responsibility of maintaining that status. The second observation has to do with the way women had to show themselves. Miss Leefolt’s neat look has to do with the collective pressure of showing a perfect image of yourself when being in public.

Even the character of Celia Foote, which lives in the countryside far from the rest of Jackson’s women, spends her days taking care of her appearance. When Minny describes Miss Celia we can observe her look: “I stick my head in her bedroom that first morning and there she is, propped up on the covers with her makeup perfect and her tight Friday-night clothes on” (Stockett 41). Celia is in bed, it is very early in the morning but she has already dressed up and has put on her makeup. These are in fact, the first things women used to do in the morning, and it may be taken as another illustration of the social pressure for women to be always ready (and perfect) for showing themselves in public.

The last character which represents social conventions for women in the 1960s is Charlotte Pelham. She should be a role model for her daughter Skeeter but she denies the fact that her daughter is different and does not support Skeeter in her intellectual ambitions and true passion, which is not necessarily marrying and having children but writing. In the following quotation, we find Missus Pelham discrediting her daughter’s accomplishments:

> “Four years my daughter goes off to college and what does she come with?” she asks.
> “A diploma?”
> “A pretty piece of paper,” Mother says.
> “I told you. I didn’t meet anybody I wanted to marry,” I say. (Stockett 56)

From her words, it seems that Charlotte doesn’t care about her daughter’s education, she had hoped her daughter would find someone to marry at the University because that is

the only future that she knows for a girl and the future that she wants for Skeeter. Missus Pelham's way of thinking coincides with the main beliefs about education in the 1960s, something considered inappropriate for women, as well as unnecessary and a waste of time. Besides, some people were afraid of women getting more education than men because they would be intellectually superior (Brownstein 22). This example is also interesting because it draws attention to the idea of Miss Pelham as the preserver of tradition and transmitter of patriarchal ideology. She is the example of devoted wife who follows the beauty standards and social conventions of womanhood in the 1960s, so she disapproves of her daughter's distance from the mainstream way of life and tries to dissuade her from her intellectual aspirations.

Although the great majority of characters in *The Help* symbolize old traditional and patriarchal values of the South of the U.S, we also find some others which challenge the white authoritarian system. One of them is Rachel Cole, who has found an alternative to the women's patriarchal role, but unfortunately, she is barely mentioned in the novel. The character of Skeeter introduces Rachel Cole, a woman who hardly attends the League meetings. She is married and has three kids, but the interesting thing about her is that she is doing a Master's Degree in English. This is something new, for it announces the possibility to combine a personal passion with dedication to the family and community. However, due to the fact that higher education was not considered acceptable for women, we can assume that Rachel has few or no facilities to continue with her studies and taking care of her family at the same time, therefore, she has little social life and hardly appears in the text.

Another character who departs from social standards for women in the 1960s is Celia Foote. As I discussed before, she cares about her appearance, she tries to show a perfect image of herself even when she stays at home, which links her with conventional roles for women. Likewise, she is looking forward to getting pregnant because she thinks her husband will leave her if she cannot have babies. But, these are the only features that link Celia with traditional womanhood, she differentiates herself from the rest of society ladies in the fact that, as Minny says, "[s]he just don't see em. The *lines*. Not between her and me, not between her and Hilly" (Stockett 318). According to her black maid, Celia does not see the "lines" of class and race, for she acts as if they did not exist. On the one hand, the fact that she comes from Sugar Ditch,

a poor area in the South of Mississippi, does not dissuade Celia from trying to join the society ladies in Jackson, she does not see her origins as an obstacle for her friendship with the rest of ladies in town. However, Hilly and the rest consider Celia a vulgar and ordinary woman because of her origins and her suggestive clothes which make a contrast with the traditional and conservative society ladies in Jackson, so they do not allow her to join them.

On the other hand, we see from the very beginning that Celia is different in the sense that she does not share whites' prejudices against colored people, she is really nice to her maid Minny and considers her a true friend. As we can observe from Minny's words, Celia does not seem to see the lines separating both of them—technically, the borders constructed between races—but the truth is that she does not even think about that, she is just kind to Minny, her only female company. As an example we find Celia asking Minny if she is happy and Minny herself tells us about Celia's feelings towards her: "But Miss Celia, the way she stares at me with those big eyes like I'm the best thing since hairspray in the can, I almost rather she'd order me around like she's supposed to" (50). We can see that Celia is not like the rest of white employers, she is not bossy and she is really grateful to have Minny by her side. To sum up, the fact that she does not care about class and race lines, and that she does not fit in the traditional society of Jackson makes her depart from the social standards for women in the 1960s.

Elaine Stein is another character who transgresses the conventional roles attributed to women in the 1960s. Working as an editor in an important publishing house, she is the ultimate representation of woman's freedom, independence and power. Moreover, she is a Jewish woman, so we can assume that religious and gender discrimination were difficult to overcome before getting there. Actually, when writing to Skeeter, she declares that she helps Skeeter because she reminds her of her youth years when she was an "ambitious young lady" (Stockett 73) and someone gave her an opportunity to prove her worth in a public world ruled by men. Later on, we find out that she lived in the southern state of Atlanta for six years. Elaine knows what it is like to live in a placed ruled by social conventions, and according to her, those years in Atlanta were "enough to get [her] out of there" (109). We do not know if New York was her next destination but it is the place in which she currently lives and works. Skeeter

refers to New York as the city where "writers are supposed to live" (423). A possible explanation is that New York has always been considered the city of opportunities par excellence. Moreover, it is in the North of U.S, where women enjoyed much freedom and had more opportunities to join the job market than in the South.

The liberal style of the city suits Elaine Stein, who is an open-minded and independent woman. Apart from the fact that she holds an important position in publishing in New York City, we discover that she is also quite liberal in personal relationships for the 1960s. She tells Skeeter that she lived in Atlanta with her first husband. We imagine she separated from her first husband, and from her words, she could have married again. We get the impression that at the moment, she is single because she does not mention a second husband, or the company of any other man, but the truth is that she does not specify her current personal situation, neither does she talk about kids. In any case, we can state that she is not the traditional wife and motherly type of woman. The fact that she does not mention a husband or kids could be related to Woolf's feminist idea that the production of culture and the reproduction of children are incompatible (Marcus 61). Likewise, it draws us back to 19th century works where the husband or the suitor was the major problem for a women's artistic career (DuPlessis 91). The character of Missus Stein seems to confirm both statements, she is a successful woman because she does not have a man or children by her side. Stein's situation reminds us of Skeeter's because the latter does not get married at the end and she does not mention the idea of having kids at any moment in the story. We can conclude, therefore, that Skeeter will follow Stein's path and will probably turn into a successful and independent woman too.

Elaine is also an intelligent woman. She controls the situation of the book business and she knows it needs a change. Stein decides to give an opportunity to Skeeter's book of interviews, which completely departs from the most celebrated genre and saleable in history, the novel, because in her words, "the book business could use some rattling" (Stockett 110). Missus Stein seems to be up to date in what is happening with the Civil Rights Movement too. This is why she encourages Skeeter to write the book before the upcoming Martin Luther King's march on Washington. Any issue connected with colored people's experiences was a hot topic in the 1960s and Missus Stein thinks the book can attract people's attention. In short, Elaine Stein breaks away

with women's conventionalisms and traditional roles. She is a strong, independent and liberal woman who challenges male intellectual superiority and supremacy in the public sphere. She is, therefore, the image of what the character of Skeeter could become and accomplish once she liberates herself from the Southern patriarchal and racist system.

Finally, we can find a departure from traditional values and conservative roles for women in the maturity process of the white protagonist of the story, Skeeter Pelham. The first noticeable attribute in which Skeeter differs from other women in Jackson is her physical appearance. Although Aibileen's description of Skeeter's peculiarity in stature, skinniness and hair style is the first picture we have of this character, Skeeter herself tells the reader about her physical appearance later on:

> To say I have frizzy hair is an understatement. It is kinky, more pubic than cranial, and whitish blond, breaking off easily, like hay. My skin is fair and while some call this creamy, it can look downright deathly when I'm serious, which is all the time. Also, there's a slight bump of cartilage along the top of my nose. (Stockett 57)

Later on, she reminds us that since she was sixteen, she is "painfully tall" (58), something her mother is truly ashamed of and tries to compensate with makeup, clothes and lessons in good posture. In sum, Skeeter's physique has nothing to do with the Southern Belle image, she is too tall and not pretty enough to fit in the social standards of beauty at that time. She refuses likewise to share some women's interests, such as going shopping, wearing bright colorful clothes, putting on makeup and wearing high heels. And so she argues: "I go to Kennington's and buy the flattest shoes I can find and a slim black crepe dress. I hate shopping" (115). This rejection of beauty standards is even more evident at the end of the story, when she does not give too much thought to other people's opinions and comments about her look. We learn that she has long hair, she does not dry it and she wears new clothes bought in a shop called "MODERN WOMEN'S WEAR" (386). We can say that this fight towards established beauty standards results in Skeeter's liberation from those conservative social norms for women's looks.

Another interesting thing that we soon learn about Skeeter is that she is an educated woman. She went to the University for four years and she finally graduated.

When introducing one of her friends she explains: "At Ole Miss, Hilly and I roomed together for two years before she left to get married and I stayed on to graduate" (Stockett 55). We can observe that, while some of her friends left the college to get married, she decided to continue her education and now she has a double major, English and Journalism. The years at the University have helped her to find her true passion, and she comes back to Jackson with a clear idea of what she wants to do in the future, which she reveals in the following paragraph:

> No one could argue that I hadn't worked hard at Ole Miss. While my friends were out drinking rum and Cokes at Phi Delta Theta parties and pinning on mum corsages, I sat in the study parlor and wrote for hours—mostly term papers but also short stories, bad poetry, episodes of Dr. Kildare, Pall Mall jingles, letters of complaint, ransom notes, love letters to boys I'd seen in class but hadn't had the nerve to speak to, all of which I never mailed. Sure, I dreamed of having football dates, but my real dream was that one day I would write something that people would actually read. (60)

Not only does Skeeter have a double major, we see that she has worked really hard in her writing skills during her University years. All the books she has read and the working time in the library prevent her mother's contradictory messages from leaving too strong a mark on her and allow her to find out her true passion in life. Actually, she wants to create a valuable piece of writing that people can enjoy, something far away from her mother's idea of women's future. She does not even think about that, she thinks about her own future, her development as a strong and independent woman and her passion, that is, writing, a means to express her ideas and look for change in the world too. Skeeter states these thoughts explicitly when she answers Stuart's question about what she wants in life: "I took a deep breath, knowing what Mother would advice me to say: fine strong kids, a husband to take care of, shiny new appliances to cook tasty yet healthful meals in it. 'I want to be a writer,' I say. 'A journalist. Maybe a novelist. Maybe both'" (174). Moreover, we cannot leave out the fact that Skeeter gets a job in the Jackson Journal. She is in charge of *Miss Myrna*'s weekly cleaning column, which is ironic because she still lives in her parents' house and has no experience in cleaning. However, it is an entry-level job for her and it is probably the only job women could be offered to do in a local journal at that time. And of course, it is something that her friends would never think of doing.

Skeeter's challenge to women's conventional life can be justified by the fact that she has not met a husband yet, one more thing that separates her from her friends. At one point in the novel, Skeeter starts dating Stuart, the cousin of Hilly's husband. This is a new experience for her and she expresses her feelings thus: "every single thing in my body—my skin, my collarbone, the hollow backs of my knees, everything inside of me filled up with light" (Stockett 174). Even in her relationship with Stuart, Skeeter differs from the other girls. She reveals she considers sleeping with him:

> I laugh and it feels good after all the worrying I've done these past weeks. "You mean, at the Edgewater . . . together? In the same room?"
>
> He nods. "Think you can get away?"
>
> Elizabeth would be mortified by the thought of sharing a room with a man before she was married, Hilly would tell me I was stupid to even consider it. They'd held on to their virginity with the fierceness of children refusing to share their toys. And yet, I consider it. (245)

Skeeter knows that sleeping with a man before marriage is socially unacceptable and that her friends, the ultimate representations of Southern belles, would never have thought of doing this; but she considers it anyway. This can be analyzed as a preview of the breaking of sexual taboos in women and the myth surrounding the fallen woman. Likewise, Skeeter separates herself from the "The Angel in the House" stereotype and the established notion of purity.

Skeeter's love relationship continues and finally Stuart proposes to her. Skeeter feels the need to tell Stuart that she is writing a book about colored people working for white families, even if she knows there is a risk in doing so. This is the outcome of her revelation:

> After a minute, he says, "I just . . . I don't understand why you would do this. Why do you even . . . care about this, Skeeter?"
>
> I bristle, look down at the ring, so sharp and shiny.
>
> "I didn't . . . mean it like that," he starts again. "What I mean is, things are fine around here. Why would you want to go stirring up trouble?"
>
> I can tell, in his voice, he sincerely wants an answer from me. But how to explain it? He is a good man, Stuart. As much as I know that what I've done is right, I can still understand his confusion and doubt.
>
> "I'm not making trouble, Stuart. The trouble is already here."

> But clearly, this isn't the answer he is looking for. "I don't know you."
> I look down, remembering that I'd thought this same thing only moments ago. "I guess we'll have the rest of our lives to fix that," I say, trying to smile.
> "I don't . . . think I can marry somebody I don't know."
> I suck in a breath. My mouth opens but I can't say anything for a little while.
> "I had to tell you," I say, more to myself than him. "You needed to know." (Stockett 389)

As we can observe, Skeeter really wants to marry Stuart, who, at this moment, is the only thing that attaches her to her old comfortable, safe and unadventurous way of life. However, Stuart is unable to accept what she has done; he is not the tolerant man he seemed to be. Although it is Stuart who leaves, by telling him her secret Skeeter is choosing her career, the thing in which she believes and the opportunity to change the society, over her relationship with Stuart. She could have lied to him or hidden the book from him, but she decides she has done something important, so Stuarts deserves to know, whatever the outcome of this revelation is. It is a sacrifice for Skeeter indeed, who chooses her intellectual ambition and career over marriage and family, the future expected for a young lady. In addition, as in the situation of the successful editor Elaine Stein, education and married life are presented as incompatible in this context. In any case, Skeeter goes away from the wife and mother's role, which means she liberates herself from the social norms of womanhood in the 1960s.

This quotation is also interesting because Skeeter reveals the real focus of her writings. Skeeter had lied to her mother and Stuart and told them she was writing about Jesus, a topic that was considered acceptable for women to write about because they have been traditionally related to purity, spirituality and religion. For Christians, man is master by divine right, so the authority he exercises over women is acceptable (de Beauvoir 632). In the same way, the passivity and obedience enforced upon woman is sanctified (633-34). Then, devotion to God and religion, and therefore, writing about it was socially permitted and well-regarded. However, a topic such as race or politics, which is Skeeter's aim, was not considered desirable at all, and it was something that women must not care about at all. This is therefore, another way in which Skeeter challenges womanhood in the 1960s.

The character of Skeeter also differs from the rest of women in her desire of independence in many respects. On the one hand, we find out very early in the story that

she has always loved the strategic location of her room in her parents' house: "My childhood bedroom is the top floor of my parents' house. […] And yet, it is my sanctuary. The heat swells and gathers like a hot-air balloon up here, not exactly welcoming others. The stairs are narrow and difficult for parents to climb" (Stockett 59). Skeeter enjoys a private space, and it is difficult to reach, which allows her to isolate herself and write comfortably and peacefully. Nevertheless, this does not happen all the time, she is frequently interrupted by her mom. Moreover, once Skeeter is back from University she feels her room is not enough for her, she needs a place of her own. This is precisely what Missus Stein advices her to seek: "for God's sake, you're a twenty-four-year-old educated woman. Go get an apartment" (351). Before Stein's advice, Skeeter had already thought about leaving the family house. We see her stating the need for a place for herself: "What I needed to do was find an apartment in town, the kind of building where single, plain girls lived, spinsters, secretaries, teachers. But the one time I had mentioned using money from my trust fund, Mother had cried-real tears. 'That is not what the money's for, Eugenia'" (57). The problem of getting a place for herself is that she is not allowed to use the money from her fund and thus she has no money at all. We can assume, therefore, that another reason to take Miss Myrna's job is to earn enough money to leave her house and find a place to stay.

Skeeter's ideas of economic independence and the need to have a place of her own are undoubtedly connected with Virginia Woolf's thoughts in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). The English writer emphasized the idea that if a woman wants to write fiction, she needs privacy, a room in which she will not be disturbed, and also economic independence (2092). In the same line, Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* that through employment women achieve their liberty (689). This is precisely what Skeeter accomplishes at the end of the story. After getting experience and earning some money working for the Jackson Journal, and the following success in the publication of the book she wrote with the maids, she is offered a job as an editor's assistant for Harper's magazine in New York and decides to give her dreams a chance: "I lean against the shelves, close my eyes. I'm going. I am going to New York" (Stockett 433). She is going to leave her house and her comfortable life in order to find a place in New York, where she will be economically independent thanks to her new job. Significantly, Skeeter leaves the conservative South of the U.S to arrive in the much liberal North, and the city of New York, the city of opportunities. This is definitely another act of

liberation from the oppressive social standards for women, who lived imprisoned in a patriarchal system. In this light, we can connect Skeeter's breaking of chains and movement towards freedom with feminist groups and the women's liberation movement in the 1960s that fought for the release of women from their domestic and maternal role and the achievement of equality in the public sphere and job market.

To conclude, we can say that *The Help* shows readers the liberation of white women from patriarchal roles. It presents a society ruled by Southern Belles who only care about appearances, beauty standards and social status. However, later on, we find this is not exactly the case, for Stockett presents some women that transgress in one way or another the imposed limits for women at that time and break away from conventional stereotypes. Without any doubt, the clearest example is Skeeter, whose physique, education and intellectual ambitions differentiate her from the traditional standards of womanhood in the 1960s. Encouraged by Elaine Stein, she refuses the patriarchal women's role of wife and mother and leaves the traditional South to accomplish her dream of becoming a writer in the promising New York City.

4. Aibileen and Minny: towards the Liberation of the Black Woman from Dominant Stereotypes

Portraying realist black characters has always been problematic for white writers in the American literary tradition, whose early representations labeled blacks either as savages or naturals. The former depiction was the result of whites' ignorance and fear towards "the other." Once the original threat of Native Americans disappeared, blacks became the next danger for the white society. This is why in the beginning, blacks were considered inferior, less than humans and they were quickly related to evilness, brutality and primitivism (Cooley 27), and later considered sexual savages (74). Nevertheless, we can also find some pioneering portrayals of blacks as naturals or noble savages. In most cases, they were represented as servants, companions or entertainers (19), always faithful to their white masters. Sometimes, blacks were depicted as noble creatures closely connected with nature (97). Authors such as William Faulkner created this kind of character to highlight the contrast with the industrialized society of that time which was, in this author's view weakened by the loss of social values (97-98).

All these attributes were embodied in, more often than not, offensive character representations which changed depending on gender and social status. Regarding black women, who were doubly oppressed because of sex and colour (White, in Beachler), whites developed stereotypes such as the Jezebel, the Mammy, or the Sapphire (Beachler), images that have later been endlessly reproduced in American literature and popular culture. But, if we talk about those popular historical fictions which went back to Jim Crow, the mammy is precisely the most commonly portrayed stereotype for black women. According to Thompson, the origins of this image can be traced back to the plantation households of the Southern states, where "domestic female slaves performed the duties of maid, washerwoman, cook, caretaker, butler and nurse" (59). Bestseller works such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) or *Gone with the Wind* (1936) abused this caricature of the mammy to show a pious and faithful servant devoted to their white employers. By using the Mammy character, authors depicted slavery as an institution which benefited both whites and blacks.

Fortunately, the mammy has undergone some changes throughout the last two centuries, and contemporary portrayals such as Rose in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986) or Rosaleen Daise in Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) no

longer simplify her as a faithful slave. In the opinion of Robinson, these works, which belong to the aforementioned neo-slave narrative tradition, give black women in their role as mammies the opportunity to tell their own stories and to claim their identity as well. In my view, this is the case of *The Help* and its representation of black maids, in particular the characters of Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson. These two characters do share some features with the Mammy character but only to break the stereotype and assert their own identity as women, which likewise signifies a possibility of liberation for the black woman. The purpose of this section is therefore to analyze the ways in which Aibileen and Minny depart from the dominant stereotype of the mammy. Likewise, I will examine Minny's similarities and differences with the angry black woman typecast. Finally, I will discuss the characters' struggle towards their liberation, their transgression of frontiers and the final success in finding their voices and claiming their identities, which, as I will prove later on, is related to feminist notions. In doing so, I want to demonstrate the value of Stockett's representation of fully developed black characters which challenge classical depictions of African American people.

To begin with, I would like to discuss the character of Aibileen Clark, the domestic servant of Miss Leefolt. This character is introduced in the light of the mammy stereotype, but the reader quickly realizes that this is aimed at subverting it and asserting the individual's identity and freedom. Despite this fact, Aibileen presents herself to the reader in the following words: "Taking care of white babies, that's what I do, along with all the cooking and the cleaning. […] I know how to get them babies to sleep, stop crying, and go in the toilet bowl before they mamas even get out a bed in the morning" (Stockett 1). It is impossible not to agree with the scholars who said that these words bring to mind the mammy stereotype. Aibileen does the cooking and the cleaning of the house and she is also a really good caretaker and nurse of white children. But she not only takes care of Miss Leefolt's baby daughter, Aibileen loves Mae Mobley deeply. This is, in fact, one of the most recognizable attributes of the mammy: her endless love for white children (Watson 8-9). Aibileen's physique contributes to her role as natural nursemaid too (Thompson 62). In Aibileen's view, Miss Leefolt is too skinny and that is the reason why she cannot soothe Mae Mobley. According to Aibileen, she can comfort the baby because "Babies like fat. Like to bury they face up in you armpit and go to sleep. They like big fat legs too" (Stockett 2). Furthermore, the mammy has been traditionally characterized by her lack of beauty (Wallace-Sanders, in

Thompson 63). In Thompson's opinion this is what Stockett unconsciously reveals when Aibileen is compared to a cockroach (63): "He black. Blacker than me" (Stockett 193).

The aforementioned textual evidences link Aibileen to the mammy stereotype. Nonetheless, those are not the only characteristics that define her. Stockett creates a complex personality and identity for Aibileen, and through the decisions she makes, we can see how she breaks the Mammy image apart and finally liberates herself. The first way in which Aibileen departs from the mammy is her special relationship with Mae Mobley. When Aibileen is asked by Mae Mobley if she has some babies, her answer is: "I got seventeen of em" (Stockett 191), referring to the children of white families she has looked after. From the way she answers the question, we can observed that she loved each of those babies, but she soon tells Mae Mobley she is her "special baby" (2). The first thing we have to consider when talking about Aibileen's relationship with kids is that it is almost impossible to take care of a child without mutual affection emerging (Wallace-Sanders 96). However, after a close-reading of the novel, we realize that Aibileen's relationship with Mae Mobley is different, exceptional indeed. In my opinion, there are two main reasons for this strong bond between them. The first one is Aibileen's son's death. She tells the reader that the day in which Treelore died, her "whole world went black" (Stockett 3), which suggests that Aibileen is giving Mae Mobley all the love and affection she can no longer give to her own beloved son. The second explanation is that both Aibileen and Mae Mobley are marginalized characters in Jackson. Aibileen is marginalized because of the fact that she is a black woman and Mae Mobley is constantly rejected because of her physique, which differentiates her from the rest of society ladies' babies. As Aibileen reveals to the reader, Mae Mobley is chubby and has a good appetite, and that makes Miss Leefolt dislike her own baby.

Aibileen is conscious of the marginalization of women in Jackson. She suffers from marginalization because of her race, but she also sees how white women who do not follow social conventions are marginalized too. This is what Aibileen wants to avoid for Mae Mobley, so she teaches her to love herself. Mae Mobley is only two years old but she can already feel that her mother does not love her as much as she should. The following quotation, which is worth including in full, describes Mae Mobley's

confused feelings towards her mother's words and Aibileen's idea to help her "Baby girl":

> "I told you to eat in your high chair, Mae Mobley. How I ended up with you when all my friends have angels I just do not know…" But then the phone ring and I hear her stomping off to get it.
>
> I look down at Baby Girl, she how her forehead's all wrinkled up between the eyes. She studying hard on something.
>
> I touch her cheek. "You alright, baby?"
>
> She say, "Mae Mobley bad."
>
> The way she say it, like it's a fact, make my insides hurt.
>
> "Mae Mobley," I say cause I got a notion to try something.
>
> "You a smart girl?"
>
> She just look at me, like she don't know.
>
> "You a smart girl," I say again.
>
> She say, "Mae Mo smart."
>
> I say, "You a kind little girl?"
>
> She just look at me. She two years old. She don't know what she is yet.
>
> I say, "You a kind girl," and she nod, repeat it back to me. But before I can do another one, she get up and chase that poor dog around the yard and laugh and that's when I get to wondering, what would happen if I told her she something good, ever day? […]
>
> After a while, Mae Mobley come over and press her cheek up to mine and just hold it there, like she know I be hurting. I hold her tight, whisper, "You a smart girl. You a kind girl, Mae Mobley. You hear me?" And I keep saying it till she repeat it back to me. (Stockett 94)

Firstly, we notice Miss Leefolt's comparison of Mae Mobley to her friends' daughters, who are referred to as "angels." It is difficult not to find the connection with the Victorian image of the ideal of woman, "the Angel in the House." As I explained in the previous section, one of the main Victorian society's beliefs was that a woman must be pure, devoted and submissive to her husband. Despite the fact that in the 1960s many things were changing for women, the Southern states were still highly conservative in terms of womanhood. Miss Leefolt wishes Mae Mobley were an angel but she is not like the rest of white little girls, she is an active and curious baby girl, characteristics that oppose the passivity and submission of the "Angel in the House." Moreover, Mae

Mobley has a fatty physique which is contrasted to the standards of beauty for women in the 1960s, when it was essential to have a slim body in order to be considered attractive and find a good-looking husband.

Secondly, we can observe Aibileen's awakening and decision to help Mae Mobley, who is not loved, or at least not wholly accepted by her mom, and she will probably be rejected by the sexist society to which her white family belonged. In order to help her, Aibileen decides to tell Mae Mobley something good about her every day. Aibileen reminds Mae Mobley that she is a good and smart girl, and later on she will also tell her she is important. By doing so, Aibileen is teaching Mae Mobley some major values, such as self-love, self-respect and self-confidence. These values can be easily connected with the second-wave of feminism that started at 1960s, when women started to consider their individuality and value their abilities which were not necessarily connected with the assumed wife and mother's role. In this way, Aibileen is teaching Mae Mobley to love herself as a woman, to love her own identity and to have an independent mind rather than follow the ideal of womanhood of the period, which reduced women to objects of beauty and kept them at home (Rampton).

Nonetheless, Aibileen is going to do something more than make Mae Mobley feel loved. She wants to make something good out of Treelore's death, which was basically caused by whites. Aibileen reveals readers that Treelore died at work while he was carrying wood to trucks on a rainy day. He had slipped off and fell down the road when a tractor stepped over him without noticing he was unconscious on the floor. Later on, we find out that it was not a sudden death, Treelore was alive after the accident but whites just threw him on the back of a truck, then rolled him off the truck at the Negro hospital and drove away. Aibileen realizes that this would not have happened if blacks were not mistreated by whites, or if a black person could be treated in any hospital by white or black doctors. Her son's death shows her the hypocrisy and racism of white people. It is this anger that makes Aibileen decide that she is going to try her best to educate Mae Mobley in color-blindness, tolerance and friendship with black people. In order to accomplish her mission, Aibileen turns to the story-telling tradition.

The first story Aibileen tells Mae Mobley is not something prepared at all. As Aibileen explain, she was so sad because of Medgar Ever's assassination that "the words just come out" (Stockett 204):

> "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 you 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 agreed and they was friends. The End." (Stockett 204)

Aibileen is sick of the racist society in which she lives and the deaths that segregation is causing. Through this tale, Aibileen is revealing to Mae Mobley that black and white are just labels, "just a different color." Despite differences, whites and blacks are human beings, with the same body parts as the story says. This tale is, therefore, a lesson in tolerance and color-blindness. Furthermore, it also symbolizes hope for the breaking of frontiers between blacks and whites by the next generation of Americans, which Mae Mobley belongs to. All these ideas that Aibileen brings to the fore are likewise related to second-wave feminism. In this second phase of feminism, women of color sought sisterhood and solidarity to prove that race, class and gender oppression are all related (Rampton) because women, regardless of race, were still marginalized and considered the second sex.

In order to continue the mission of educating Mae Mobley in color-blindness, Aibileen will introduce real black activists of the civil right movement in her stories. Because of the risk she takes when telling this kind of stories, these tales have become secret stories, something between Aibileen and Mae Mobley, who understands that she cannot tell her parents about it. One of the stories is about the famous black activist Martin Luther King, although Aibileen disguises him as Marthian Luther King:

> "One day, a wise Marthian come down to Earth to teach us people a thing or two." I say.

"Marthian? How big?"

"Oh, he about six-two"

"What's his name?"

"Marthian Luther King." […]

"He was a real nice Marthian, Mister King. Looked just like us, nose, mouth, hair up on his head, but sometimes people looked at him funny and sometime, well, I guess sometime people was just downright mean."

I could get in a lot of trouble telling her these little stories, especially with Mister Leefolt. But Mae Mobley know these our "secret stories."

"Why Aibee? Why was they so mean to him?" she ask.

"Cause he was green." (Stockett 303)

Once again, Aibileen uses colors to teach Mae Mobley about bigotry in the Jim Crow era. In this very creative and clever way, Aibileen tries to raise Mae Mobley's awareness about acceptance and respect towards people that are different in skin color, which does not mean inferior at all; these were the ideas that Martin Luther King was publicly expressing at the Civil Rights Movement time. Unfortunately, we only get to know this story about Martin Luther King, but later on in the novel, we find Mae Mobley saying to his brother: "Now come on, we're playing Back-a-the-Bus and your name is Rosa Parks" (439). We can assume that, in the same undercover way she introduced Martin Luther King, Aibileen told Mae Mobley about Rosa Parks' 1955 quiet fight for blacks' rights in a Montgomery bus.

Aibileen succeeds in teaching Mae Mobley about civil rights and color-blindness to the point that she colors herself black at the Broadmoore Baptist Pre-School and lies to her father about who is teaching her those things about civil rights. And what is more, she realizes her teacher Miss Taylor is not right about colored people:

"How come you're colored, Aibileen?"

Now, I've gotten this question a few times from my other white kids. I used to just laugh, but I want to get this right with her. "Cause God made me colored," I say. "And there ain't another reason in the world."

"Miss Taylor says kids that are colored can't go to my school cause they're not smart enough."

I come round the counter then. Lift her chin up and smooth back her funny-looking hair. "You think I'm dumb?"

"No," she whispers hard, like she means it so much. She look sorry she said it.

> "What that tell you about Miss Taylor, then?"
> She blink, like she listening good.
> "Means Miss Taylor ain't right all the time," I say.
> She hug me around my neck, say, "You're righter than Miss Taylor. (Stockett 399)

This long quotation reveals two important facts. On the one hand, we have Aibileen's insistence on showing Mae Mobley that blacks and whites differ only in color and that blacks are not inferior, or less smart than whites. On the other hand, we find Aibileen's success in doing so, with Mae Mobley realizing blacks are not inferior to whites, they can be even "righter."

Aibileen's skills to educate Mae Mobley are not fully surprising. When talking about Treelore, Aibileen mentions that they used to play a game of intelligence in which Aibileen gave him a word he had to find a synonym or just a different way of expressing the same. Although Aibileen says his boy was very clever, she confesses she won the game: "I say house cat, he say domesticized feline, I say mixer and he say motorized rotunda. One day I say Crisco. He scratch his head. He just can't believe I done won the game with something simple as Crisco. Came to be our secret joke with us, meaning something you can't dress up no matter how you try" (Stockett 5). This is just evidence of Aibileen's cleverness and perspicacity. Later on in the novel, we find out the reason why Aibileen is that clever. Aibileen tells us that she had to leave school when she was in seventh grade because she had to help out her mother. She remembers her teacher was about to cry and told her: "You're the smartest one in the class, Aibileen. […] And the only way you're going to keep sharp is to read *and write* every day" (Stockett 22, original emphasis). Thus, we know that Aibileen received some education and she was a brilliant student, the smartest in her class. Moreover, in the next paragraph, we learn that Aibileen has followed Miss Ross's advice and she writes down her prayers for her friends of the black community in a notebook instead of saying them, so she keeps improving her writing skills. It is worth mentioning that she acts as a helper for the community with her prayers, which according to Minny get "better results that the regular variety" (23). Aibileen's "power prayer" (23) can be related to the silencing of subjugated cultures that use language and storytelling to give voice to the community. In this case, Aibileen is using her writing skills to help all members of the African American community in Jackson. According to her, the prayer is "like electricity, it keeps things going" (23), like a net which connects people, in this case, the

life and experiences of different members of the community. Nevertheless, reading is more difficult for her because blacks were not allowed to enter libraries, which could only be visited by whites during the Jim Crow Era. Blacks had their own colored library but, as discussed in the novel, it was pretty bad, they did not have many books and the resources were restricted. Even so, Aibileen declares she has been on the waiting list for *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) for about three months and asks Skeeter for some books she would like to read such as, *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), some poems by Emily Dickinson or a book written by Sigmund Freud. We can assume that Aibileen is an ambitious woman in the sense that she does not stop reading or writing just because her resources are limited. But she is also ambitious because she wants to educate herself by reading works of different fields such us poetry, prose or psychology, and what's more, she is interested in books that are written by both white and black authors. To sum up, we can affirm that Aibileen's writing skills and her interest in reading subvert stereotypical expectations about blacks and their lack of literacy and distance this character from the stereotypical mammy portrayals.

When Aibileen decides to help Skeeter with her book about maids' stories and the white families in which they have worked, we get to know that she is a talented woman too. At first, Aibileen cannot tell Skeeter about her stories in white families because she does not feel comfortable when speaking about that, so she makes the decision of writing down her stories and then read them aloud while Skeeter types. After editing Aibileen's section, Skeeter realizes that "it is beautifully written, simple" (Stockett 284). In addition, Missus Stein, the editor in chief of *Harper & Row* who wants to publish the manuscript, lauds Aibileen (called Sarah in the book) with these words: "The Sarah section is in the best shape" (393). It is in this moment that we see that Aibileen's school teacher was right about her potential, she knows how to write, to the point that an important editor recognizes her talent for writing over Skeeter's.

The ending of the book also points to Aibileen's potential for writing. Throughout the whole novel, Aibileen helps Skeeter with the *Miss Myrna* column, so when Skeeter quits the job, she tells her boss that it was Aibileen who gave the answers to all the letters. After thinking about it, the boss decides to hire Aibileen and pay her the same as he was paying Skeeter. But this is not the end of the story. When Aibileen is

fired by Miss Leefolt, she decides it is not too late to start over and that writing could be her new beginning. These are her words: “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 453). She is going to write for the paper and she is thinking about writing something else, something about herself. She has been praised for her work in the book so she is confident that she may have a new beginning as a writer.

After analyzing the character of Aibileen, we can affirm that there are many ways in which she departs from the mammy stereotype. The first thing is that she is an educated woman, she loves reading and she works on her writing skills every day. In fact, writing is what she plans to do for a living once she is fired by Miss Leefolt. Her teachings to Mae Mobley also separate Aibileen from the mammy caricature. She teaches Mae Mobley to love herself even if she is not accepted by the sexist and patriarchal society in which they both live. Finally, Aibileen’s quiet activism breaks the mammy stereotype once and for all. It was Treelore’s death what triggered it, “[b]ut it weren’t too long before I seen something in me had changed. A bitter seed was planted inside a me. And I just didn’t feel so accepting anymore” (Stockett 3). Aibileen fights whites’ cruelty in two different ways: teaching Mae Mobley not to judge by color and helping Skeeter with the book, which in turn implies vindicating a speaking voice for herself. All these features emphasize Aibileen’s own personality; she is so much more than a mere stereotype. And most importantly, they are the means to achieve her liberation as an individual and an African American woman. This is precisely what Aibileen says at the end of the story:

> I start down the driveway, crying too, knowing how much I’m on miss Mae Mobley, praying her mama can show her more love. But at the same time feeling, in a way, that I’m free, like Minny. Freer than Miss Leefolt, who so locked up in her own head she don’t even recognize herself when she read it. And freer than Miss Hilly. That woman gone spend the rest a her life trying to convince people she didn’t eat that pie. I think about Yule May setting in jail. Cause Miss Hilly, she in her own jail, but with a lifelong term. (452)

At the end, Aibileen claims she is free, and this is due to the fact that she is not so tied to white authority anymore. She has fought whites’ supremacy and knows the means to keep doing it. She is free to choose what to do next and she is positive about the change

in the situation of blacks in the South. Moreover, writing is going to be the key to her freedom.

To continue with the analysis of black stereotypes in *The Help*, I am going to examine the character of Minny Jackson. Like Aibileen, Minny presents some characteristics that remind us of a mammy. Apart from taking care of white children, mammies have been characterized by their cooking talent, and this is precisely one of the first things that Minny tells us about herself: "I'm a cooker and that's why people hire me" (Stockett 32). Minny has earned a reputation as a great cook in Jackson. In fact, Aibileen informs us that she is the best cook in the county, "maybe even all a Mississippi" (7). In addition, Minny's physical appearance emphasizes this role as mammy. She describes herself as "hundred-and sixty-five pound, five-foot-zero self" (36).

As I have discussed in Aibileen's analysis, mammies were also characterized by their devotion to white children. Some critics agree that mammies demonstrated a preference for the white kids they took care of, over their own children (Wallace-Sanders 84). When we read the book, we realize this is the first thing which separates Minny from the mammy stereotype, starting with the fact that she does not want to serve white ladies with children. Nonetheless, critics such as Wallace-Sanders consider that Minny approaches the mammy stereotype because she is not a maternal or affectionate mother and that her children are quite invisible in the story (92). In my opinion, that is not an accurate statement. It is true that we do not know much about Minny's kids, but this is because she has to work all day which leaves her no free time to spend with them. She is clearly not as motherly as Aibileen, but we also find her calling Benny her sweet boy (Stockett 224), saying Felicia is a good girl who always takes the blame for her brothers and sisters (225), or desiring to have more time to help out Sugar, something her mother never did with her (138-39). Furthermore, when Minny starts working for Miss Celia, she says she is happy because due to her working hours, she gets to see her kids going to school in the morning. It is clear that Minny loves her children and, as she tells the reader on some occasions, she is really proud of them. In fact, her major concern is seeing her kids in the same enslaved situation she finds herself right now. This is one of the reasons why she finally decides to help Skeeter with the stories, she wants "things to be better for the kids" (222).

To make it clear that Minny is not a mammy, we find our character stating what she thinks about the maid that appears in the film *Gone With the Wind*:

> A Dreft commercial comes on and Miss Celia stares out the back window at the colored man raking up the leaves. She's got so many azalea bushes, her yard's going to look like *Gone With the Wind* come spring. I don't like azaleas and I sure didn't like that movie, the way they made slavery look like a big happy tea party. If I'd played Mammy, I'd of told Scarlett to stick those green draperies up her white little pooper. Make her own damn man-catching dress. (Stockett 51)

After reading Minny's opinion about the film, we can say that the mammy's acceptance of blacks' enslaved situation or her submission to the white lady are attributes which we cannot relate to Minny Jackson.

The quotation above is also a good occasion to talk about Minny's strong temperament. She is known for being a sassy maid. When she left school to start working, her mother already advised her "no sass-mouthing" (Stockett 40) in white ladies' houses, but she cannot help to backtalk, which makes her lose some jobs. In fact, Minny has to remind herself to "look like a maid who does what she's told" (31) when she is looking for a new job. Minny's strong and sassy nature has led some scholars to analyze this character in the light of another stereotype: the Sapphire, the angry black woman caricature. The Sapphire is an emotional woman, easily provoked to hostility (Jordan-Zachery 86). It is true that Minny seems grumpy all the time and she is bad-tempered, but this is in part because of her personal situation. She has her five kids whom she can barely feed and a never-ending threat: a drunken husband who abuses her. In my view, this is the main reason why Minny is angry most of the time. Her husband beats her and she is so afraid that she never does or says anything to escape from that situation, therefore, she is angry with herself. The following lines are evidence of this last point:

> They think big strong Minny, she sure can stand up for herself. But they don't know what a pathetic mess I turn into when Leroy's beating on me. I'm afraid to hit back. I'm afraid he'll leave me if I do. I know it makes no sense and I get so mad at myself for being so weak! How can I love a man who beats me raw? Why do I love a fool drinker? One time I asked him, "Why? Why are you hitting me?" He leaned down and looked me right in the face.
>
> "If I didn't hit you, Minny, who knows what you become."

> I was trapped in the corner of the bedroom like a dog. He was beating me with his belt. It was the first time I'd ever really thought about it.
>
> Who knows what I could become, if Leroy would stop goddamn hitting me. (Stockett 420)

This is Minny's confession of her feelings as an abused woman. She is regarded as a strong woman by everyone, and even their children see her mother as a really tough woman. However, when it comes to fight her husband's abuses, she is just "a mess," "weak," and she suffers from the frustration of being capable of doing nothing because she fears the consequences that her anger might provoke. In addition, these are interesting lines because it is the first time that Minny thinks about her potential to be something more than what she is, were she not beaten by her husband. Leroy wants Minny to remain the same, a working maid and a full-time submissive working wife and mother, so he uses violence to frighten and limit her. Nevertheless, Minny starts thinking that everything could be different if she were not trapped, she would be a free woman at last.

Right at the end of the novel, Minny is able to break her chains. This happens when Leroy is fired and threatens her with death. She runs to the gas station and calls Aibileen, who reminds her that she can no longer be submissive with him, that she is a free woman. The following quotation illustrates Minny's awakening:

> She take a deep, shaky breath. She say, "I hear what you saying, Aibileen."
> "Let me come to the gas station and wait with you. I tell Miss Leefolt I be late."
> "No," she say. "My sister . . . be here soon. We gone stay with her tonight."
> "Minny, is it just for tonight or . . ."
>
> She let out a long breath into the phone. "No," she say. "I can't. I done took this long enough." And I start to hear Minny Jackson come back into her own self again. Her voice is shaking, I know she scared, but she say, "God help him, but Leroy don't know what Minny Jackson about to become." (Stockett 446-47)

An abusive husband and the fear to fight back were clipping Minny's wings, but she finally realizes that Aibileen is right and takes the chance to end this situation and be a free and strong woman who makes her own decisions. In this way, Minny breaks away from the stereotypes attributed to her character, she is no longer just a mammy or

simply an angry woman; Minny is a strong black woman claiming her identity and freedom.

Lastly, I would like to talk about the risk Minny takes for Aibileen and the whole community of blacks living in Jackson when she decides to include "The Terrible Awful" in the stories they are writing with Skeeter. By including this episode, Minny exposes herself to whites' rage, but the rest of the maids that participated in the book will remain anonymous and safe. This is because "The Terrible Awful" is not any trivial story, it is a story in which Minny wins the battle over Hilly Holbrook, the ultimate representation of white's authority, hypocrisy and contempt for black people. Hilly falsely told everyone in Jackson that Minny was a thief, and because of that lie, nobody wants to hire her. But Minny decides to take revenge by preparing a special chocolate pie for Hilly, who thinks the cake is a peace offering:

> "What do you put in here, Minny, that makes it taste so good?'
> "I say 'That good vanilla from Mexico' and then I go head. I tell her what else I put in that pie for her." […]
> "Miss Walters, her mouth fall open. Nobody in that kitchen said anything for so long, I could a made it out the door fore they knew I's gone. But then Miss Walters start laughing. Laugh so hard she almost fall out the chair. Say, 'Well, Hilly, that's what you get, I guess. And I wouldn't go tattling on Minny either, or you'll be known all over town as the lady who ate two slices of Minny's shit.'" (Stockett 346)

This is the story Minny decides to use as an "insurance" because she knows that Hilly will try to convince everyone that the book is not about Jackson and the maids who work for white families but about another Southern town. In doing so, all the women who participated in the book are safe. Likewise, Minny gives the entire community of black women the opportunity to voice their submissive condition as supposed mammies in white families. Thanks to her bravery and the publication of the book, there is a hint to a possible change for the better in the situation of maids who work for white people. Nonetheless, Minny is not only giving black women their freedom, she is also changing the established power positions, defying the whites' slavery system and supremacy. As Aibileen mentions, Hilly is going to be in her own jail all her life, she will have to keep that secret forever, which means Minny has some power over Hilly, whose authority is therefore challenged.

Lastly, Minny's decision to include "The Terrible Awful" can be related to post-colonial studies and the idea of "the empire writing back." This notion consists in the use of the Empire's language by silenced and subjugated cultures to subvert the Empire's authority. By including "The Terrible Awful" in the book of stories, Minny is writing back, changing the power positions and subverting white authority and subjugation once again. Although this idea is more explicit in Minny's resolution, the rest of the maids' stories and the entire book itself are a way of writing back too, the means to find their speechless voices, claim their identity and challenge white supremacy.

To put an end to the analysis of both characters, I would like to talk about their awakenings and what I see as quite romanticized endings. In my opinion, their stories reveal relevant notions of feminism, post-feminism and women's empowerment. Firstly, Aibileen and Minny's relationship and cooperation with Skeeter can be related with radical second-wave feminism and the Black power movement, movements which were precisely emerging in the Civil Rights Era. Both movements reacted against capitalism and imperialism and they focused on the interests of the oppressed and marginalized groups, which women and colored people belonged to (Kroløkke and Sørensen 8-9). Secondly, Minny's particular liberation from her submissive role can be related to discourses about women's social confinement in the role of wife and mother of second-wave feminists, such as Betty Friedan's (Engel). Finally, Aibileen's empowering final discourse can be linked, likewise, with the notion of women's empowerment. On the one hand, we can relate this discourse with radical second-wave feminism and the interest in searching for authenticity in diverse women's cultures and in understanding differences among women as fundamental in order to empower marginalized groups such as African American women (Kroløkke and Sørensen 13). Similarly, Aibileen's claims are related with the contemporary notion of women's empowerment and the idea of empowering women in the workplace, marketplace and community.

However, feminism had not yet made room for women of color in 1963 (Russell 76), so the feminist awakening of two maids who live in the conservative and segregated Southern State of Mississippi is rather difficult to believe for some scholars and readers. The cross-racial friendship and cooperation is also hard to accept as

realistic because colored people were more often than not punished when they mingled with white people. Due to what she perceives as inconsistencies, Russell concludes that *The Help* is only depicting a "racially optimistic future" (76). I agree with the idea that Stockett may be offering the reader a hopeful future based on racial equality; in fact, she clearly prioritizes cross-racial relationships in the story. But, in my view, the romanticized open endings of these characters' stories can also be analyzed as a critique of the contemporary situation. Stockett is bringing the past to the present to remind us that the fight for race and gender equality is not over, that the post-racial era is still not a reality. In any case, even if we think both characters are not totally realistic portrayals of maids at that time, we can affirm that Stockett gives Aibileen and Minny two single and complex identities. Both characters' transgression and their final assertion of their personality challenge the dominant view of African American women as submissive and loyal mammies. It is the characters' awakening, their defiance of white authority, the fact that they find their own voice and the chance of expressing their own stories, rather than the repetition of stereotypes made up by white cultural imagination, that make their affirmation as free women possible. We can contend therefore, that Stockett's black characters fulfill the aims of neo-segregation narratives, for they give voice to the previously silenced black population and symbolize the assertion of African American identities, as they call the readers' attention to the 21st century reality of racial discrimination.

5. Cross-racial Sorority: Skeeter's Liberating Awareness Process and Destruction of Racial Frontiers

One of the ways in which black and white women liberate themselves in the text is through the collaboration between races. Every character in the story which participates in this sorority departs from traditional values typical of the Jim Crow Era and assumes a liberal and tolerant attitude that brings down racial frontiers. Stockett chooses mainly white characters to show this process, pointing to the fact that it was white people who most needed (and still need) to free their minds from racial prejudices.

One of these characters is Celia Foote, a clear example of this cross-racial relationship and transgression of barriers. As I discussed before, Celia considers Minny a friend and that is what mainly separates Celia from the conventionalisms and social standards in the 1960s. Celia proves the value and liberating potential of sorority between races when she defends Minny from a naked white man. Before this episode occurs, we see Celia finding out that Minny has a cut in her eyebrow which is bleeding. Suspecting Minny has been hit by her husband, Celia tells her to take the day off and prepares her a coffee. She even says: "You can talk to me about anything, Minny" (Stockett 312). Later on, when the white man is beating Minny, Celia saves her by hitting the man with a fire poker. This can be analyzed as symbolic protection, for Celia shows Minny how to face up to abuse at the same time as she tells her that she can count on her help to fight it. The final message from Celia is simply that: any woman should be able to gather strength to say no to abuse.

In any case, a white person defending a colored one from another white person was both risky and difficult to find in the conservative state of Mississippi. Celia is treating Minny as her equal, a friend who needs help, and this friendship liberates her from the chains of social conventionalism. The respect, preoccupation and intimate relationship between maid and white lady were unusual at that time, so this cross-racial relationship guides us to the notion of sorority between women from different races, it challenges racial frontiers and gives us some hope for a post-racial era which is yet to come.

Nonetheless, Stockett focuses on the white protagonist Skeeter, who is more familiar regarding life experiences, to show the complexity of this awareness process.

We can affirm therefore that leaving the conservative South and achieving independence is just one way in which Skeeter liberates herself. The importance that Stockett gives to cross-racial relationships suggests that the liberation that Skeeter achieves through her awareness process in which she learns gender and racial frontiers which later on she will reject and transgress is even more important than her freeing herself from the standards of womanhood in the 1960s. The cross-racial relationship she has with Aibileen and the rest of the maids and colored people is without any doubt what triggers this understanding and really frees her mind. Actually, one of the first interesting things we know about Skeeter is that she speaks to the maids and is always polite to them. It is Aibileen who says that "she the kind that speak to the help" (Stockett 4). Everything started with Constantine, Skeeter's childhood maid. She really loved Constantine, she was her friend and she always saw the beauty and good things in Skeeter when no one else did. But the most important thing about Constantine is that she raised Skeeter's awareness about prejudices towards colored people at the same time as she taught her to be self-confident and to have an independent mind. This is precisely what we can observe when Skeeter recalls a conversation with Constantine:

> Constantine sat down next to me, at the kitchen table. I heard the cracking of her swollen joints. She pressed her thumb hard in the palm of my hand, something we both knew meant *Listen. Listen to me*.
>
> "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*?"
>
> She kept her thumb pressed hard in my hand. I nodded that I understood. I was just smart enough to realize she meant white people. And even though I still felt miserable, and knew that I was, most likely, ugly, it was the first time she ever talked to me like I was something besides my mother's white child. All my life I'd been told what to believe about politics, coloreds, being a girl. But with Constantine's thumb pressed in my hand, I realized I actually had a choice in what I could believe. (Stockett 64)

It was Constantine who gave Skeeter the necessary strength and courage to face people's prejudices. Likewise, she made Skeeter see that she needed to establish her own values and viewpoints regardless of the rest of women's beliefs, that she must have an independent mind. These are the same kinds of values that Aibileen is trying to transmit to Mae Mobley: being different is something good and it does not mean being

worse or inferior. We can conclude that the black maids were the ones who taught positive values such as self-respect and independence to the white girls, while their mothers and other women in the whites' society denied any potential for self-determination and educated them according to the patriarchal, oppressive and limiting values of womanhood in the 1960s.

Throughout the novel, Skeeter insists on the idea that she had a great relationship with Constantine. Skeeter explains that she used to go to her house every Friday when she was a child and they spent the evening together. Later on, when Skeeter left for University, they wrote to each other for four years. They were very close, which is why Skeeter feels so sad and desolate when she suddenly discovers that Constantine is no longer with her family. Moreover, once Constantine is mysteriously gone, Skeeter realizes that it was Constantine who really raised her and taught her "kindness and self-respect" (Stockett 84). Likewise, without Constantine's company, Skeeter spends more time in her friends' houses and she becomes aware of the fact that they are narrow-minded, as well as mean and patronizing with their maids. This is especially true of Hilly, who designs "the Home Help Sanitation Initiative," a disease-preventative measure which consists on building a separate bathroom for colored people in white families' houses. Skeeter does not agree with Hilly's racist project and so she expresses her disconformity: "Maybe we ought to just build you a bathroom outside, Hilly" (9).

Skeeter's relationship with Aibileen is also going to help her see the injustices of the white social system which she has always been encouraged to believe in. Skeeter starts talking to Aibileen in order to get some help for Miss Myrna's column, but they soon get along very well. In fact, Aibileen reveals her surprise about the relationship with Skeeter: "I find myself telling her how Treelore never made below a B+ or that the new church deacon get on my nerves cause he lisp. Little bits, but things I ordinarily wouldn't tell a white person" (Stockett 99). It is actually the nostalgia for her life with Constantine and the relationship with Aibileen what triggers Skeeter's idea of writing stories about maids working for white families. In the following quotation, we can see Skeeter telling Elaine Stein the purpose and reasons for her project:

> "Well," I took a deep breath, "I'd like to write this showing the point of view of the help. The colored women down here." I tried to picture Constantine's face, Aibileen's.

> "They raise a white child and then twenty years later the child becomes the employer. It's that irony, that we love them and they love us, yet . . ." I swallowed, my voice trembling. "We don't even allow them to use the toilet in the house." […] "And," I felt compelled to continue, "everyone knows how we white people feel, the glorified Mammy figure who dedicates her whole life to a white family. Margaret Mitchell covered that. But no one ever asked Mammy how she felt about it." (Stockett 108-109)

Skeeter wants to dignify the maids and express her gratitude for their infinite dedication to white families. In the 1960s, whites regarded the maid as a simple "glorified Mammy" who worked ceaselessly in their houses, but Skeeter believes that there are single identities behind that image and that they deserve to be respected and treated as equals. This is something that, according to Skeeter, the conservative South, and the U.S. in general, must still recognize and understand once and for all.

In order to carry out this project, Skeeter needs the collaboration of some maids. Aibileen is the first one she considers asking for help. Although she refuses to do it in the beginning, Aibileen finally helps Skeeter by reading her own stories. Skeeter realizes Aibileen' stories are not what she had imagined: "I'd expected the stories to be sweet, glossy. I realize I might be getting more than I'd bargained for" (Stockett 153). She is becoming aware of the abuse of authority and cruelty of white people. Later on, Minny joins them and we find Skeeter telling her that she hopes the project can change at least some attitudes in Jackson. Although Skeeter insists on the fact that it is just a writing project to show the perspective of maids about their works, we can observe how she feels the need to know more about segregation and racial laws in the South. While she is in the library, she takes a look to the *Compilation of the Jim Crow Laws of the South*. In the following lines, we can see her significant reaction:

> After several minutes, I make myself stop. I start to put the booklet back, telling myself I'm not writing a book about Southern legislation, this is a waste of my time. But then I realize, like a shell cracking open in my head, there's no difference between these government laws and Hilly building Aibileen a bathroom in the garage, except ten minutes' worth of signatures in the state capital.
>
> On the last page, I see the pica type that reads Property of Mississippi Law Library. The booklet was returned to the wrong building. I scratch my revelation on a piece of paper and tuck it inside the booklet: Jim Crow or Hilly's bathroom plan—what's the difference? I slip it in my bag. (Stockett 177)

In my view, this is the precise moment of Skeeter's awakening. On the one hand, she realizes that there is no difference between Hilly's initiative and the racial and segregationist Jim Crow Laws. Both things are oppressing and downgrading colored people. On the other hand, this revelation lets her see that her project is worth taking the risk it involves and that it can really help to change whites' racist attitudes as she told Minny.

As the story goes on, we find Aibileen, Minny and Skeeter working very closely together in the project. Both parts are liberating themselves because Skeeter is hearing testimonies and learning about the things that are wrong in Jackson, and Aibileen and Minny can finally tell the truth behind their job as maids. As an example, Minny declares: "I don't want anybody to know how much I need those Skeeter stories […]. And I am not saying the Miss Skeeter meetings are fun. Every time we meet, I complain. I moan. I get mad and throw a hot potato fit. But here's the thing: I like telling my stories. It feels like I'm doing something about it" (Stockett 223). Both the maids and Skeeter deny doing Civil Rights, which was a risky practice for both blacks and whites in the segregated South, for they are very aware that with this association they would end up being punished or marginalized respectively. However, the project of stories they carry out together contributes to some of the Civil Rights Movement's goals which are equal treatment for colored people and cross-racial relationships and cooperation.

Finally, thanks to Minny's help, twelve maids participate in Skeeter's project. The stories of these maids are going to open Skeeter's eyes to the authoritarian and racist white society definitely. As an example, these are Skeeter's words reacting to some of those stories:

> Angry stories come out, of white men who've tried to touch them. Winnie said she was forced over and over. Cleontine said she fought until his face bled and he never tried again. But the dichotomy of love and disdain living side-by-side is what surprises me. Most are invited to attend the white children's weddings, but only if they're in their uniforms. These things I know already, yet hearing them from colored mouths, it is as if I am hearing them for the first time. (Stockett 263-64)

Skeeter listens to stories which are full of love and kindness between white ladies and maids but also angry stories about sexual abuse. Although this is not openly explored in

the novel, sexual harassment on black women is related to slavery times and plantations where black women served as objects for the masters' pleasure. Likewise, it points to the continuous black women's double marginalization: they are subordinated to male authority because they are women and abused because of whites' supremacy over a race which is regarded as weak and inferior. Furthermore, this quotation also reflects Skeeter's process of becoming aware of the hypocrisy of white people, who accept the company of blacks only in certain contexts and under their endless authority and rules. These words are also important because in them we can observe how Skeeter realizes that she was aware of how cruel whites were being to the maids, but she never thought too much about it. In fact, it is when hearing these things from the maid's perspective that Skeeter's eyes finally open to that previously denied reality, the abuse her society imposed and is still imposing on colored people.

Once she starts interviewing the rest of maids, we see that Skeeter identifies with their stories and experiences:

> I submerge myself in the interviews […] I am in the old Jackson kitchens with the maids, hot and sticky in their white uniforms. I feel the gentle bodies of white babies breathing against me. I feel what Constantine felt when Mother brought me home from the hospital and handed me over to her. I let their colored memories draw me out of my own miserable life. (Stockett 282)

We can see that Skeeter is able to put herself in the maids' shoes, she identifies with them to the point that she can feel what they feel when taking care of a white family. Due to this identification, we can affirm that Skeeter is crossing the racial line, bringing down the frontier that separates blacks and whites. Moreover, she is using this identification to forget her white identity and enjoy the experiences and feelings of black people. This proves the permeability of this border, which in this case, can be transgressed and enjoyed by Skeeter because she has learned to understand and respect black people's culture and experience.

Listening to those stories also helps Skeeter to become conscious of the hypocrisy in the Jackson Junior League meetings. The next paragraph is an example of white women's hypocrisy:

> "Hilly." I just need to hear her say it. "Just *who* is all that pound cake money being raised for, anyway?"

She rolls her eyes. “The Poor Starving Children of Africa?”

I wait for her to catch the irony of this, that she’ll send money to colored people overseas, but not across town. But I get a better idea. “I’m going to call up Genevieve right now. I’m going to tell her what a hypocrite you are.” (Stockett 287)

Hilly suggested raising money for children of Africa. Her argument is that they are starving and they are in need of basic things. She is right about it, and all women, even Skeeter, agree with Hilly’s idea. But, now that Skeeter has undergone the aforementioned awareness process and is acquainted with the situation of the maids in Jackson who are disrespected and poorly paid, she can see the hypocrisy implied in this fundraising. Hilly wants to send money for African kids who live in poverty instead of helping the African American community in Jackson who live in similar precarious and impoverished conditions.

Although the maids’ stories open Skeeter’s eyes, they involve a risk too and she admits that she doesn’t feel protected anymore because she is white. Her independence, her transgression of frontiers and the fact that she has been working with colored people turn Skeeter into a threat for white supremacy. In fact, those women who rejected standards of womanhood such as marriage, family or submission to male authority were a threat to the entire white system, and this is what our character symbolizes: a breach in the patriarchal and authoritarian white ideology. Although Skeeter embraces her new independence and liberated mind, she is also aware of the sacrifice she does by working with the maids; she will no longer enjoy certain white privileges. In the following quotation, we can observe Skeeter’s thoughts about the book and all the things she has had to give up to accomplish the project:

“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*.

Because Hilly would’ve called her maid a thief that afternoon, and I would’ve just sat there and listened to it. And Elizabeth would’ve grabbed her child’s arm too hard and I would’ve looked away, like I didn’t see it. And I’d be engaged to Stuart and I wouldn’t wear short dresses, only short hair, or consider doing anything risky like write a book about colored housekeepers, too afraid he’d disapprove. And while I’d

> never lie and tell myself I actually changed the minds of people like Hilly and Elizabeth, at least I don't have to pretend I agree with them anymore." (Stockett 427)

In this long quotation, Skeeter thinks about everything she would have if she had not written the book. She declares she would have a social life, friends and a husband. Although she is nostalgic about her past life, she admits that she would be frustrated. In my opinion, the second paragraph is an assertion of the independent woman she has become. She declares she does not have to pretend not to see all wrong things that happened in her friends' houses anymore, which is what happens in all families in Jackson. She also mentions her freedom to write, express and denounce the colored people's situation. In this way, Skeeter claims her identity as an independent woman.

Furthermore, Skeeter is also worried about Aibileen, Minny and the rest of the maids. She declares: "I'm not so afraid for myself, but for what I've done to Aibileen, to Minny. To Louvenia and Faye Belle and eight other women. The book is sitting there on the table. I want to put it in my satchel and hide it" (Stockett 373). Skeeter knows that getting the book published entails a risk for them too, that they are exposed to reprisal on the part of the whites, and more than once does she wonder if the work is even worth it. In addition, once these silenced stories come to light, the outcome is unpredictable and unstoppable. Fortunately, we can later observe some positive reactions of people who read the book and want to thank Skeeter for it. On the one hand, we find Reverend Johnson giving Aibileen a copy of the book signed by people from the religious community. The Reverend's words are: "This one, this is for the white lady. You tell her we love her, like she's our own family" (405). From his words, we can affirm that the cooperation between the maids and Skeeter has created a bond of friendship and respect which goes beyond all racial prejudices. On the other hand, we see some white people recognizing Skeeter and the maids' work too. As an example, we find Lou Anne confessing her relationship with her maid Louvenia: "Even with all her own troubles, she sits down and talks to me. She helps me get through my days. When I read what she wrote about me, about helping her with her grandson, I've never been so grateful in my life" (425). This is the way Lou Anne thanks Skeeter, revealing the good relationship she keeps with her maid, and the fact that they help each other when in need.

Skeeter's last thoughts about herself and the consequences of her collaboration with the maids are also a good summary of her coming-of-age in which she has broken with the stereotypes and attitudes of that time. Firstly, as discussed in the second section of this thesis, Skeeter refuses the conservative wife and mother's role, refusing in this way the conventionalisms and beauty standards of the patriarchal system of Southern belles that deny women the freedom to be different from the established way of life. Secondly, she breaks away from the racial white society of the conservative Southern state of Mississippi at the time of the Civil Rights Movement, when colored people were still brutally punished if they expressed their opinion or they interacted with white people without white permission. Despite the risk, Skeeter decides to use her privileges as a white woman, to give colored people a chance to tell their stories and denounce whites' abuses. Although she has turned into a fallen woman in the eyes of the white society in Jackson, she is a helping hand for a community which has been forced to be voiceless for too many years.

Once again, we can relate Skeeter's ending with feminist ideas. Firstly, Skeeter reminds us of second-wave feminists who fought for alternatives to the conservative roles of women as wife and mothers, and for equality for women in the job market. Likewise, Skeeter's fight for tolerance and respect for black people can be linked with some ideas of the radical second-wave feminism, where feminists advocated for multiculturalism and dealt with issues such as anti-racism. However, as I mentioned in the previous section, the collaboration between races at that time in the South of U.S. sounds almost like fiction in the present context. It was of course very unlikely that a majority of whites would use their privileges to help colored people, because they did not want to lose their power position.

In any case, Celia, Skeeter and any white woman's collaboration and sisterhood with the maids is another reminder of the need for integration, tolerance and cross-racial cooperation nowadays. In the 21th century, the concept of racism is seen by many people as something that belongs to the past and which ended with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, but the reality is that we still see racist actions in the news almost every day (Abukhdair), as proved by Obama's speech in Selma mentioned above. This is what Stockett tries to transmit to us, that racism is not over, and that we, people from all races, still need to get together to fight it. By emphasizing sorority between races,

The Help is therefore serving one of the goals of neo-segregation narratives, which entails opening the audience's eyes to the nowadays reality of racial discrimination and the essential need to fight it. Similarly, this sisterhood stands for the idea of women's empowerment and criticizes the fact that contemporary women still deal with gender discrimination in our time. According to Burwell, there is a wage gap in our 21th century society, which is attributed to the fact that women are paid less than their male colleagues, to policies in companies that are not flexible with those women who have family and child rearing responsibilities, and to fewer professional development opportunities and limited promotion potential for them. Some of these topics were already discussed by feminist groups in the 1960s, and Skeeter in particular symbolizes these ideas. But, unfortunately, the situation for women has not changed as much as necessary to achieve equality these days. Stockett's message is, therefore, that we need to work together to change the sexist and racist society in which we currently live.

6. Conclusion

After analyzing the most controversial issues in *The Help*, we can say that Kathryn Stockett's novel fulfills the main goals of neo-segregation narratives. Firstly, it rewrites the story of the segregated South in the 1960s privileging the experiences of subordinated African Americans living there, in particular the African American women's experiences when working for white families. The fact that Stockett focuses on the stories that took place in white's houses, a small domestic space, creates an intimacy with the audience, who can easily connect with the characters and see themselves in those stories and quotidian situations. It is a new perspective on the racial segregation in the 1960s, which far from concealing the cruelty of the white system towards black people, centers the attention on the everyday life of maids and their white employers. Actually, the whites' houses were the places where maids spent most of their days, so they can obviously be connected with their life experiences there.

Moreover, the fact that two of the maids narrate most of the story allows readers to see what was happening in the segregated South from their perspectives; this may then be considered a realistic fictionalization of that time. The first person narration is essential in the novel because, as discussed in the second section of this thesis, it helps the audience to see that Aibileen and Minny are not flat characters, but that they have a complex identity which they develop throughout the story. Together with the fact that they subvert the submissiveness and passivity attributed to black women and that challenge white supremacy, this means that both maids finally break away from the traditional stereotypes for black women constantly reproduced in the American literary tradition: the Mammy and the Sapphire. In the case of Aibileen, she appropriates one of the most powerful whites' weapons, which is education, as made manifest in her writing. On the other hand, Minny goes a step further and challenges power positions, proving herself that she is strong enough to undermine masculine dominance. By resisting stereotypes, these women are not only giving voice to the silenced; they are also claiming their individuality, which can ultimately free African American identities.

Similarly, the character of Skeeter breaks away from stereotypes of white womanhood in the 1960s. She departs from the Southern Belle stereotype because she rejects the established roles of woman as mother and wife and gives her dream of being a writer a chance. However, Stockett gives more importance to Skeeter's friendship

with the maids and proves that she is not the white savior of the story, she is not saving black women because they are unable to do it by themselves. On the contrary, the analysis of Aibileen and Minny shows that they can liberate themselves by fighting with their own means, and therefore the cross-racial collaboration with Skeeter is another way of liberation but obviously not the only one. We can say thus, that Skeeter is saved by the maids instead, for they free her mind and give her the voice she needs to transgress gender and racial frontiers. At the same time, this realization symbolizes Skeeter's liberation from the conservative Southern society in which she lives.

Apart from serving the purpose of breaking away from stereotypes, Stockett's cross-racial representations expand the possibilities of neo-segregation narratives. By having two African American women, which are fully developed characters too, narrating the story in the first person, Stockett goes further than simply giving voice to minorities that were speechless at that time and also explores African American identity in a larger sense. In particular, Stockett wrote this novel to approach her own childhood maid's background, to be closer to her culture, way of thinking, and feelings. Sensibly, Stockett is conscious that it is impossible to know what it felt like to be a black domestic worker for a white family in Mississippi in the 1960s, and in her afterword she declares that it is not "something any white woman on the other end of a black woman's paycheck could ever truly understand" (Stockett 461); the whites' power position made that understanding unattainable. However, she also declares that "trying to understand is *vital* to our humanity" (461), and this is what she does with *The Help*, which is above all an attempt to explain different cultures, consciousnesses, to try to understand the other. This desire to get to know the other has lead the author to a conclusion which she gives us at the very end of the novel and which she highlights in her afterword: "Wasn't that the point of the book? For women to realize, *We are just two people. Not that much separates us. Not nearly as much as I'd thought*" (461, original emphasis). This is what Skeeter learns in the story and what Stockett claims to have learned after writing in the voice of black women: regardless of the race and the differences that separate us, we are all women, people. By reaching this conclusion, Stockett is bringing down both genre and racial frontiers and approaches certain notions of feminism such as sorority and women's empowerment, which her characters symbolize too. We can analyze her words then as a call for women to gather and fight against gender and racial discrimination, which still marginalize and limit them in the 21st century. And what is more, Stockett is

opening the possibilities for neo-segregation narratives to center on women, to examine gender relations in depth and rewrite stories in this light.

Nonetheless, Stockett's cross-racial representations still face the problem of appropriation. In fact, the notions of sorority and empowerment that the black protagonists bring to the fore are connected with second-wave feminism, a basically Western trend of feminism later considered as exclusive by Third World feminist movements, because it failed to adequately account for racial differences, which were unfairly blurred and silenced. Clearly, the risks of perpetuating racial power relations and appropriating the voice of the other are probably always present when facing cross-racial representations, and this is a problem that should always be acknowledged in this kind of narrative. It is, however, my contention that these racechanges can also be very liberating indeed, so that there is an inherent merit in spite of the risks. As the analysis of *The Help* has demonstrated, Aibileen and Minny's voices lead to the affirmation of strong African American identities. Furthermore, this singular perspective on the past of the American country can encourage black women to express themselves, even write down their experiences, as Aibileen and the rest of the maids do in the story. As I see it, the final aim of the text is to offer different accounts and retellings of American history, privileging the versions of those people who were not given the opportunity to speak, such as the African American population. This is enough proof of why white-authored novels such as *The Help*, whose cross-racial representations attempt to understand the other, must be valued positively and considered a significant progress in racial understanding.

In this way, *The Help* proves that neo-segregation narratives can deconstruct gender and racial frontiers, and reveals what Gubar successfully demonstrated in *Racechanges*: that one is not born white or black but constructed as such. This means that there are obvious differences between people, cultures or races, but also that such differences are mostly constructed and can be deconstructed as well if they are explored and examined in detail from an ethical critical point of view. This is something that Stockett is aware of but also concerned about because she thinks the American society is still not ready to discuss transgression and deconstruction of frontiers in public. It is true that many Americans believe that the election of an African American president and the success of African Americans in business and entertainment should prove that

racism is dead or dying in America (Abukhdair). But, as I mentioned throughout this thesis, we still see racist behavior in the news every day, and there are white associations that continue to condemn different races, such as isolated groups sympathetic to Ku Klux Klan's ideology, proving that equality has by no means been achieved yet. As I offered at the beginning of this thesis, many scholars and readers cannot accept the potential for racial understanding in works such as *The Help*, even though, as I hope to have proved throughout my work, a white-authored novel like *The Help*, which claims for racial understanding and cross-racial collaboration, does by no means attack the other but actively helps to fight the reality of racial discrimination. Clearly, and sadly, the United States of America is not a post-racial society yet, but certain literary manifestations, certain careful writers, regardless of their race, can help to spread the message of racial understanding.

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