

Introduction:

"The Help," directed by Tate Taylor, focuses on racial tensions during the Civil Rights Movement and societal norms within the city of Mississippi. While centered around this pivotal historical period, the film primarily explores the experiences of black maids working for white families. It sheds light on mammy culture and stereotypes prevalent for black women during this time, particularly through the lens of their relationships with the families they serve.

The film delves into the language used by characters and the traits they embody, particularly focusing on the relationship between Aibileen and Elizabeth. Aibileen assumes the maternal role for Elizabeth's children, exemplifying mammy culture as she cares for Mae Mobley as her own child, tending to her needs daily. Specific scenes, such as Elizabeth leaving a diaper overnight and Aibileen returning the next morning to change and potty train the child, highlight this dynamic. Despite not being Mae Mobley's biological mother, Aibileen is expected to nurture her, unable to discipline her as she would her own child. The children's attachment to Aibileen reinforces her maternal role, as Mae Mobley declares Aibileen her "real mom" upon Aibileen's departure from her job. This is a clear indication of how mammy culture works in society and how these black women are a part of the family but aren't seen as true maternal figures. We see this narrative in controlling images—they are good enough to help raise their children but not on the same level of being treated as human beings with agency. We see this narrative emerge especially during this time period.

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The stories of the maids are being told from the perspective of an author named Skeeter, who is recounting the experiences of the maids. This is a clear depiction of how mammy culture is shown in the film and how the agency of the black maids is simply an illusion. It shows how their agency is being taken away because their stories are being published and told by Skeeter, which detracts from their own narratives. Skeeter's prominent role reinforces the stereotype, as she seeks out these maids and their stories due to her own childhood relationship with her maid, making the narrative of the mammy prominent in the movie.

The film's exploration extends to themes of mammy culture, intersectionality, and societal norms for black women during this era, drawing from Collins' analysis of controlling images and their impact on black women in society today. Through a comprehensive analysis of narrative and visual elements, including lighting, body language, and coloring, this paper examines how "The Help" portrays black women and reinforces stereotypes, contributing to societal perceptions and the challenges faced by black women both in film and reality. Starting with the focus on the cover of the movie, going into the intro of the movie and Aibileen talking about her understanding of taking care of focus children and clearing explaining what a mammy is, then utilizing scenes with her and the little girl and making sure to highlight the intersections in the film, particularly paying attention to the type of lighting, music and colors that are the women on set are wearing and making sure to highlight how majority of the people on the production are white men.

Description:

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The film "The Help" showcases similarities by highlighting emotions between the maids in the film and the author within the film. When the book is being published, the film portrays the anxious feelings, joy, and fear, ensuring that these emotions are palpable and interpretable by the audience. Another similarity in the film is the relationship dynamic between the black maids and the families they work for during this time. Similar stories of maids and the Civil Rights Movement are incorporated, providing a perspective on the complexities of mammy culture and the stereotypes ingrained in American history. Black women are depicted as devoted caretakers of the white families they work for, specifically the children of those families. Aibileen and Minny are characters that showcase mammy culture.

The film gives an illusion of agency to Aibileen and Minny by allowing them to tell their stories about their experiences as maids in "The Help." However, it is important to acknowledge that Skeeter, a white woman, is telling and publishing stories of black maids, which takes away from their agency. Skeeter profits from their stories, perpetuating the theme of the white savior complex, where someone who is white swoops in to save people of color from their own problems.

"The Help" has significant historical context due to the time period in which the film is set, during the Civil Rights Movement. However, it primarily focuses on a narrative of segregation that is not entirely truthful. The film can be characterized as a feel-good movie that minimizes the effects of segregation and racial discrimination during the 1960s. This narrative does not fully depict the truth about mammy culture or the true extent of segregation during this time period, prompting this analysis.

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These types of films portray black women mainly as caregivers, reinforcing the notion that this is their place in society. Controlling images focus on ways that black women are oppressed and positioned in society. Aibileen expresses a sense of joy from taking care of these white families and their children, perpetuating the controlling image that black women in roles such as nannies or maids during this time period all find true joy in this role. However, it fails to acknowledge that during this time, this was often the only type of work offered to them.

The main producers of this movie are white men, such as Brunson Green, Chris Columbus, and Michael Barnathan. The movie is shown on Hulu and has been out since 2011 and able to watch long as you have a subscription with Hulu. Hulu is owned by Walt Disney Chanel, and Walt Disney owns the ABC News network, which causes the movie "The Help" to be mainstream because several networks are streaming platforms where you can watch this film. This perspective likely contributes to the film's portrayal of a happy time, with the mammy figure being seen as part of the family. Aibileen doesn't seem like a maid but more like an aunt helping out her niece. This perspective aligns with the style of movies typically produced by each of these producers, which often focus on friendship and feel-good stories with white protagonists. Even in the advertising for the movie, the black women are in the background, reinforcing the perspective that the film is told from a white perspective and reinforcing mammy stereotypes.

The target audience for "The Help" was mainly women, specifically those who are part of book clubs in their community. The historical context of the film has a lot to do with the segregation time period, which spanned from 1865 to 1964. Segregation originated from laws

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called Black codes, which were passed to keep black and white people divided, controlling everything for black people, including where they worked and lived. These laws allowed employers to pay black workers less than the labor they performed. Segregation further developed into official policies, allowing for the separation of schools, homes, and public spaces such as parks, pools, and jails. However, the scenes in the film do not do justice to what was actually happening during that time period; they only provide glimpses of the realities faced by black people.

The accessibility of the film has evolved over time, from being shown in theaters upon its release to now being available on streaming platforms like Hulu, making it more widely accessible worldwide. This accessibility allows for diverse interpretations of the film through different media and platforms. Initially, the media portrayed the film as a positive representation until discourse surrounding its portrayal of racism and segregation emerged. Critics explained how the film fails to genuinely showcase the racial injustices faced by black people and provides false hope regarding the realities of segregation during that time. The movie depicts racism from a glorified perspective of white people in a godlike complex, perpetuating the notion that black maids need saving from themselves and their situations, and that one white person can change how racism affects others. However, the film does not accurately portray the racial injustices experienced during that time.

The film's popularity surged after the murder of George Floyd and during the Black Lives Matter movement, but it faced criticism for not addressing racial injustices effectively. The main problem with the film lies in how it attempts to discuss the 1960s without positioning the maids

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as the main characters or protagonists, thereby detracting from the true purpose of the movie. By having Skeeter tell their story from her perspective, the film fails to focus on how the maids felt during that time and instead presents a narrative from a white perspective. Additionally, the film allows for racist actions to be performed without consequences, as seen when Hilly sends an innocent woman to jail without facing repercussions for her actions. Several black actresses from the film have spoken out about how the movie is tone-deaf, expressing regret for their involvement due to its portrayal of racism and segregation.

The critical conversation surrounding the film mainly revolves around how black women are represented and viewed in the media and the influence of media reproduction on reinforcing dominant ideologies. The main themes recurring in the film include mammy culture, the white savior complex, power dynamics, and the media's creation of certain images to perpetuate dominant ideology in society. The critical examination of the film reveals significant discourse and insight. It fosters conversations about racial injustice and the need for nuanced storytelling, emphasizing the importance of portraying real experiences from the perspectives of those affected. Academia often critiques the film for its one-sided portrayal of racial injustices and the perpetuation of the mammy stereotype, notably evident in scenes where Aibileen cares for the baby girl. Additionally, the portrayal of the friendship between Celia Foote and Minny blurs the lines of traditional employer-employee dynamics, underscoring the film's complexity.

The film's significance lies in its exploration of intersectionality, representation, and its shortcomings. Mammy culture in media influences societal perceptions of black femininity, often relegating black women to the margins. The film's depiction of intersecting identities—such as

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being black women and maids—highlights the compounding effects of race, class, and gender. Set against the backdrop of the 1960s, a period marked by heightened segregation, these identities are further magnified. Despite its intended message, the film falls short in fully capturing the intricacies of these intersectional identities and the depth of racial injustice.

Initial Conclusions:

In conclusion, "The Help" serves as a thought-provoking exploration of racial tensions and societal norms during the Civil Rights Movement era, particularly through its portrayal of mammy culture and stereotypes ingrained in American history. While the film initiates crucial conversations about racial injustice and representation, it ultimately falls short in fully capturing the complexities of intersectional identities and the depth of racial discrimination experienced by black women. The film's reliance on a white perspective, coupled with its portrayal of black women primarily as caregivers, perpetuates stereotypes and fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of the systemic issues at play. Despite its historical context, the film's narrative of segregation minimizes the true extent of racial discrimination during the 1960s. Furthermore, the lack of accountability for racist actions within the narrative undermines its effectiveness in addressing systemic racism. Moving forward, critical conversations surrounding the film underscore the importance of authentic representation and nuanced storytelling in challenging dominant ideologies perpetuated by media.

How do the production decisions, such as casting, directing, and marketing, contribute to the reinforcement of mammy stereotypes in "The Help"?

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In what ways do the experiences and perspectives of black actresses in "The Help" reflect broader issues of representation and agency for black women in the film industry?

How does the reception of "The Help" among different demographic groups, particularly women and communities of color, inform our understanding of its impact on societal perceptions and discussions of race?

To what extent does "The Help" exemplify or challenge the conventions of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking in its portrayal of racial dynamics and intersectional identities, and what implications does this have for future representations in media?

How does the portrayal of friendship and solidarity between black and white characters in "The Help" intersect with and potentially reinforce or challenge existing power dynamics and racial hierarchies?

In what ways does the use of narrative framing, such as Skeeter's perspective as the author, influence the audience's interpretation of the film's themes of race, agency, and representation?

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