

## The Bitter Seed: Stockett's Delivery of the Black Reality

Abby Reilly

### Abstract:

This article explores the power of Kathryn Stockett's voice in portraying truth of the Black struggle through fiction. By examining the truth behind the lines, the idea of a voice outside of this harsh reality of segregation, offers hope for not only fictional protagonists, but minority voices in society. Black experience is portrayed in the novel in both historical aspects and plot device. Stockett's work is mindful of the Jim Crow Laws, the Civil Rights Movement, and the politics of the North and South, which allows her position of White privilege, to shed light on this dark reality in American and world history.

*"A bitter seed was planted inside a me.  
And I just didn't feel so accepting anymore."*<sup>1</sup>

Racism exists. And the way that Kathryn Stockett presents this in *The Help*, refutes the generalised acceptance of it as a taboo subject in American culture. One of the most profound indicators of race being a dividing factor is presented through Aibileen's "colored bathroom."<sup>2</sup> 'Separate but equal' was a legal doctrine in US Constitutional Law, up until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Stockett's knowledge of this is used to paint the allegory of the bathroom, and the way it stands for much more than obeying of laws of segregation. Miss Leefolt's repeated use of rhetoric, "Won't that be nice?", "you understand?", "...only that one, right?"<sup>3</sup> reinforces the pressure of white supremacy upon the Black population of America. Aibileen acknowledges – and therefore reinforces - this, as she "say what I know what she [Miss Leefolt] wants to hear."<sup>4</sup> The inundation of questions backs Aibileen into a corner, where she resides. As a Black maid, with little hope of other employment, she is forced into agreeing with her 'boss', and accepts this without belief of change. Stockett emphasises white power through metaphor: "I go on and Clorox the white bathroom again real good."<sup>5</sup> Clorox is a type of bleach, used for cleaning, apt to Aibileen's position as a maid. Yet the emphasis here on bleaching the 'white

---

<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Stockett, *The Help*, (London: Penguin, 2010) p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, p.29.

<sup>3</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, p.29.

<sup>4</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, p.29.

<sup>5</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, p.29.

bathroom', leads to metaphorically representing the power Aibileen has handed Miss Leefolt by succumbing to her demands, time and time again. It is this vulnerability through fear that maintains racism and divide in the novel. As the novel progresses, Mae Mobely, a character of innocence and youth, tries to use Aibileen's bathroom, and her mother, Miss Leefolt, gives her a "pop"<sup>6</sup> on her legs, claiming "this is dirty out here... you'll catch diseases!"<sup>7</sup> Although the Jim Crow Laws and segregation was supposedly 'separate but equal' it is evident here that they were written and executed on grounds of deep hatred, and even an attempt to dehumanise 'colored' Americans. Stockett was raised in Mississippi, so she saw this degrading treatment first hand. In her interview with *The Guardian*, she even cites her family maid when growing up, and the separate bathroom she "has still never been in."<sup>8</sup> This leads her to present first hand empathy and understanding when tackling this issue of race.

Rather ironically, White society depends on the existence of the 'colored' minority. This is presented through the qualities the maids bring to the household, such as raising children and cooking. Minny exploits this 'trust' in an act of revenge, when baking a pie for Miss Hilly, the novel's antagonist. Minny bakes one of her 'famous' pies, for what is believed to be a "peace offering,"<sup>9</sup> but unbeknownst to Hilly, it contains human excrement. The mistreatment of Black maids for nothing more than their service, and value to White demand, is emphasised here, with "what do you put in here, Minny, that makes it taste so good?"<sup>10</sup> Stockett uses the metaphor of the pie, and the obscenity of "eat my shit"<sup>11</sup> in order to convey a larger understanding of peaceful protest, and the loaded motive behind it. Black 'sit-ins' in order to protest against 'White only' areas were common during the Civil Rights Movement, and encouraged by Martin Luther King. However, the obscenity may echo the work of Malcolm X, a much more extreme and considered violent political activist for the same movement. This relates to the opening quotation used, and the notion of the 'bitter seed'; the underlying anger felt by not only Aibileen, but the 'colored' population for their mistreatment and oppressed lives, led to acts of violence in order to stimulate change. The contrast between a simple pie, and the obscene exclamation from Minny, seemingly out of character, illustrates the conditions the Black community had, and have, to endure in order to be heard. Stockett presents the struggles for equality that have been prevalent in history, and metaphorically represents those actions of the Civil Rights Movement that changed American legislation to what is right.

---

<sup>6</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, p.95.

<sup>7</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, p.95.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Day, 'Interview: Kathryn Stockett: "I still think I am going to get into trouble for tackling the issue of race in America"', *The New Review Q&A* (London: Guardian, 2011) <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2011/oct/09/kathryn-stockett-help-civil-rights> [Date Accessed 26/11/18].

<sup>9</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, p.339.

<sup>10</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, p.339.

<sup>11</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, p.339.

Stockett's main plot premise of *The Help* involves an aspiring author, Skeeter, who recognises the unnecessarily cruel treatment of the maids, and wishes to voice this. The opportunity that Skeeter gives to these maids is curated through stories of experience, and published anonymously to bring this hidden voice to the forefront of Southern society: the voice of the minority. If you look at the intentions of Skeeter and hold up a mirror, you will see the intentions of Stockett. When Skeeter is talking to a publisher, Mrs Stein, Stockett uses relevant events at the time regarding this power struggle in Mississippi, in order to emphasise the reality of racial discrimination; "The marches in Birmingham, Martin Luther King. Dogs attacking coloured children."<sup>12</sup> By doing so, it is hard to see the novel as just a piece of fiction, as historical context is brought to the forefront. You almost *believe* the characters are a reality, and that this is a truth. This believability enforced by Stockett is emphasised when Aibileen and Minny hear of Medgar Evers' death on the radio. "The KKK was here... to hunt down a coloured man,"<sup>13</sup> highlights the deliberate nature of Evers' death, and the crossroads between fact and fiction. Stockett's choice of the word 'hunt' evokes shock for the reader, as the fear of being a black person in Mississippi is unearthed: "Who gone protect our peoples?"<sup>14</sup> The sheer brutality present in the 1960s is emphasised here by Stockett, and her choosing to include real-life accounts of hate crime moves a modern audience to realise what life was truly like, and how - although not to this extent - racism is still a societal issue. Medgar Evers is remembered in history books, as a civil rights activist and NAACP member, and Stockett deliberately chose this to prove the constitutional issues with the Southern past. Evers' killer was not convicted until some thirty years after his death. This in itself highlights the issue of white supremacy, and the lack of care for the minority community.

In the biographical piece at the end of the novel, Stockett writes "The distance added perspective."<sup>15</sup> This idea of being situated on the periphery and understanding events from a distance is the approach Skeeter and Stockett take when considering segregated America. One does not need to experience the hardship of a situation in order to understand its implications and disregard for humanity. It is often an outside perspective that illuminates the truth, as is the case with *The Help*.

---

<sup>12</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, p. 107.

<sup>13</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, p. 195.

<sup>14</sup> Stockett, *The Help*, p. 196.

<sup>15</sup> Kathryn Stockett, 'Too Little Too Late' in *The Help*, (London: Penguin, 2010) p. 450.