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Broadening the Feminist Ideal: Female Expression in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Kathryn

Stockett's *The Help*

Literary feminist criticism has shifted over the years, and its history reflects how scholars have changed their critical approaches in order to fit in with the social, political, and even religious trends and contexts of the time of publication. In his book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Peter Barry explains the timeline and transformation of feminist criticism over the years: "The feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the women's movement of the 1960s...[this movement] was, in important ways, literary from the start in that it realized the significance of the images of women promulgated by literature, and saw it was vital to combat them and question their authority and their coherence" (121). Feminist criticism in the 1970s, then, was more about "exposing what might be called the mechanisms of patriarchy" (Barry 122). In the 1980s feminist criticism became more eclectic (drawing upon the findings of other criticisms) and switched its focus from exposing male versions of the world to exploring the nature of the female word and outlook, and constructing a new canon of women's writing by rewriting the history of literature in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence (Barry 122). The result of this new focus is called gynocriticism. Gynocriticism focuses on books written by women and "the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women" (Barry 123).

As its history reveals, though it has gone through some changes in focus over the years, traditional feminist criticism seeks to dismantle and expose the patriarchy that feminist literary critics view as preventing true female expression and challenging traditional depictions of women. For the most part, feminist critics blame the hardships of women on the patriarchal society in which they live. This idea that women occupying roles—like that of housewife, mother, cleaner, daughter, wife, etc.—is a negative thing because it traps them in a certain role or “box” is one which many feminist critics latch onto. This type of criticism privileges female characters who reject these “boxes,” thus idealizing a certain kind of feminist character as the “ideal” and criticizing female characters whose roles are more “traditional.” However, it is important to also be able to take a step back from this “traditional” type of feminist criticism and work to see female characters who remain in those “constricting roles” as enacting feminist agency in just as valid a manner as characters who might fit the more “ideal” type of female character. These characters are feminist in reference to men and in context of social expectations of women. The script on how feminist criticism is approached and how female characters are viewed through that feminist criticism lens needs to be flipped on its head so that readers can appreciate a wider variety of feminist expression and female agency.

In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and in Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help*, readers get wonderful examples of women who operate in feminist ways, some *within* the roles that traditional feminist criticism would see as roles which trap them and prevent them from expressing their feminist identity to the fullest. Instead of viewing their “confines” as roles which they must escape in order to truly express their feminist identities, these women use the roles that

they are occupying and operate within them, revealing a feminist expression and agency that shines through their “restrictions.”

Chopin’s three female characters in *The Awakening* assert their feminist identities differently from one another, and this diversity in expression reveals the validity inherent in all types of feminist expression. The first character, Edna Pontellier, best fits the feminist idea of “oppressed woman” finding feminist validation in that at first she occupies roles of wife and mother that have left her feeling stifled, in an unhappy marriage with Leonce and in love with another man but then breaks free from them. These characteristics, paired with her departure from social norms (rejecting the typical mother role, having an affair, and moving out of her husband’s home), all contribute to her feminist identity as Chopin depicts it in the text. With Mademoiselle Reisz, her role as a sort of eccentric artist figure immediately denotes her as separate from the typical woman of the time and also a feminist in her own right. She is unmarried, childless, and has devoted her life to her art—her music. Her independence and freedom validate her as a feminist in that her entire lifestyle has intentionally departed from the social norm that would otherwise confine her. Mademoiselle Reisz serves as a transitional character—she is not the “ideal” feminist that Edna is (despite Mlle. R’s departure from several social norms) but she is still a feminist, in this case in spite of facets of her social situation that are out of her control. Finally, while Adele Ratanolle is presented almost ironically by Chopin and through Edna’s eyes as the ideal mother-woman (and therefore anything *but* a feminist character), Chopin offers yet another definition of feminist expression through Adele. Her free manner of discourse and expression, the way that she actualizes her role as a mother, and the way that she operates within the male-defined borders of her identity as a wife and mother, at once

being and contesting the patriarchal ideals, all contribute to the validation of Adele's identity as a feminist as well. While less dramatic than Edna's total rejection of her role and less obvious than Mlle. Reisz's more bohemian and artistic lifestyle, the way that Adele works within her role can also be interpreted as feminist.

In *The Help*, the reader enters into the socially tense and racially discriminatory culture of Jackson, Mississippi, in the 1960s. While the characters in *The Help* are separated by their different races, Skeeter, Aibileen, and Minny are all connected in that they are women trying to operate and live in a society which still prioritizes the "perfect housewife" over the free and independent woman. Skeeter is expected to marry a wealthy man, wear carefully ironed, colorful skirt and sweater sets, and have a few children and raise them well. Aibileen and Minny are the black maids who work in the houses of these white women, and they are also expected to live their lives a certain way. The restrictions on their characters are layered—not only are they restricted because of their race but also because of their sex. When the three women team up "to write, in secret, a tell-all book about what it is really like to work as a black maid in the white homes of the South" (synopsis, back cover), they are able to create a force larger than themselves and start to create ripple-effect changes in the social awareness of their neighbors, their city, and the country.

White socialite Skeeter Phelan is the character who, like Edna Pontellier, represents the feminist criticism "ideal"—she is ambitious, unmarried, does not care about the social rules which govern her friends and family, and ultimately leaves those conventions behind—to the point that she even crosses the line of social decency and enters into the black community that before she had largely ignored. In interviewing black maids and hearing the stories of how they

are repeatedly mistreated, Skeeter uses her agency—illustrated in her ability to write, her college degree, and her wealth—to write and publish “The Help.” The success of the book allows her to leave her family’s home and move away to start a new life for herself in New York. She is a successful feminist in that she is able to break free from the life that is expected of her and take control of her own life and future.

Aibileen and Minny, on the other hand, are examples of characters who exhibit more nuanced forms of feminist expression, and do so within the confines of their roles—dictated by their race, their gender, and the society in which they live. Aibileen has lost her own son and has been shuffled from family to family over the years, raising their small children and cooking and cleaning for the families. However, she is educated—she can read and write very well, unlike many of the other black maids that she knows. She is able to stay in her position as a housemaid for the majority of the book and works alongside Skeeter, writing down and sharing her own stories of working for white families, helping her find more black maids to interview, and helping Skeeter keep the book a secret. It is from this position—one that she is socially, politically, and racially determined to be stuck in for the rest of her life—that Aibileen uses her voice to establish her identity as a strong black woman despite the fact that she is stuck in a low-paying, long-hours job under employers who see her as less than human. Minny, too, is able to help Skeeter find more maids to interview—in many ways, the fact that straight-laced, rule-following Minny is willing to help with the book inspires other women to help as well, as she holds strong sway over the other black women in her community. Also, after being fired from her long-time position with the Holbrook family, Minny finds a job working for Celia Jackson, and does not just work for “Miss Celia” but instead becomes her friend, acting as an almost maternal

figure (despite her class as a black woman meaning that she is Celia's subordinate) to a back-country woman who is floundering in her new world of white socialites. By sharing her own stories and becoming friends with her employer (walking alongside Miss Celia in some of the most trying moments in Miss Celia's life), Minny remains in her role of housemaid yet also reaches a point where her feminist identity becomes more secure and she is able to start to imagine a better quality of life for herself, despite the fact that it is a life which, by all accounts, is still easily considered by outsiders and modern day readers as an oppressed one.

All of these women are examples of feminist characters who assert their agency and feminist identity despite the fact that they live in a society which would otherwise dictate that they suppress their individual identities by "constricting" them in roles which should force them to remain oppressed. Instead, they function within that oppression and are able to express feminist characteristics with great success.

Edna Pontellier of *The Awakening* is the character who most closely resembles the feminist character ideal, and the way that Chopin depicts Edna and places her in situations helps to further underscore Edna's feminist identity. First of all, Edna occupies the roles of wife and mother and those roles have left her feeling stifled. From early in the novel, Chopin establishes that Edna is not one of the mother-women by whom she is surrounded—she is not the kind of woman who can live only for and through her husband and children. Indeed, Chopin establishes Edna's indifference towards children early in the text:

[Edna] was fond of her children in an uneven, impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them. The year before they had spent part of the summer with their grandmother... Feeling secure regarding

their happiness and welfare, she did not miss them except with an occasional intense longing. Their absence was a sort of relief, though she did not admit this, even to herself. It seemed to free her of a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her (18).

Perhaps one of Edna's most notable lines in the book is as follows: "I would give my life for my children, but I wouldn't give myself" (47). These words specifically distinguish Edna from the mother-woman ideal of being ultimately self-sacrificing for one's husband and children. It is clear to Edna that her life and identity are not inextricably tied to her children's lives—she does not confuse her own life with theirs. While she has love for her children, she feels no inclination to give up her selfhood for them, which is a clear reflection of her ability to define herself outside of motherhood; with an awareness of her selfhood, there is an awareness that motherhood is not her sole purpose or focus.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese states that "Chopin doubtless intended Edna's rejection of motherhood as a totally self-determining vocation to express her own impatience with women's internalization of the social restrictions under which they lived" (259). Chopin intentionally paints Edna as a woman unhappy with her situation in life; this unsettled feeling in Edna needs to be established early on in the story in order to show the reader that Edna will not be the character to fit into the standards that would have been thrust upon her in the society in which she lived.

Edna is in an unhappy marriage with Leonce and falls in love with another man. The narrator states that "[Edna's] marriage to Leonce Pontellier was purely an accident. In this respect resembling many other marriages which masquerade as the decrees of Fate... The acme of bliss, which would have been a marriage with the tragedian, was not for her in this

world” (18). In many ways, Edna’s marriage to Leonce happened by accident—she enters into the union thoughtlessly, and the reader gets a clear sense that she gets married only because it is what is expected of her. Part of what attracts her to Leonce in the first place is his attraction to her: “He fell in love, as men are in the habit of doing, and pressed his suit with an earnestness and an ardor which left nothing to be desired. He pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her” (18). Additionally, she does not recognize or appreciate Leonce’s positive qualities as a partner, even after her friends point out how lucky she is to have found such a husband. It is clear that she has grown to resent him and the role that she is in as his wife—she wants something more and she sees that the label of “wife” is holding her back from some greater unknown that she desires.

Edna feels as though, while the cards have all fallen into place to establish a steady and functional marriage that most women of the time would have felt pleased by, there is something more that she wants to get out of life. One way that she searches for something more is through her relationship with Robert Lebrun. Joyce Dyer, author of *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*, supports this idea, saying that “For most of the novel ... Edna searches for definition and fulfilment through her impossible dreams of Robert Lebrun” (16). Edna also has an affair with a man named Alcee Arobin while Robert is in Mexico, and that affair is based on physical passion and sexual gratification (unlike her emotional attraction to Robert). She is seeking fulfilment in men—from Leonce to Robert to Alcee, Edna is grasping at finding some meaningful connection that might sustain her, but none of these relationships fulfill her in the way she needs. The fact that she tries to seek fulfilment in relationships with men could be seen as anti-feminist however, her agency in seeking relational fulfilment from relationships outside of her marriage and her ability to understand what makes her feel sexually gratified (even

without emotional connection) both show that she is moving towards a more feminist stance. The combination of her unhappiness with Leonce and her relationships with both Robert and Alcee prove that Edna is a feminist in that she ultimately cannot find happiness or meaning in a relationship with a male companion.

Edna's departure from social norms also denotes her character as clearly feminist. She rejects the roles of mother and wife [as explained above], gives up the practice of calling on her neighbors, then she ends up moving out of her husband's home and stops visiting her children. Around chapter 29, towards the end of the text, Edna decides that she will no longer live in her husband's home and instead takes up her own residence. In chapter 32, Leonce, rather than feeling bothered that she would leave him behind, worries only that people around them will see Edna's absence as a scandal and inspiration for gossip (93). Rather than worrying about his wife, Leonce worries about what society might think, a reaction which serves to emphasize just how outside the norm Edna's actions were for a married woman. She does not just leave behind her sons and her husband to live on her own; she abandons social conventions with little hesitation, entertaining the idea of becoming an artist and going to the horse races (which is not seen as a "feminine" pastime). This is another hallmark of "feminist" that shows that Chopin intends for Edna to represent a type of feminist ideal.

Edna's ultimate feminist expression comes at the end of the story in the form of her suicide. She drowns herself, feeling as though there is no truer way to assert her identity as a woman independent of her husband and children—indeed of all men, as she leaves Robert behind and has ended her relationship with Alcee. Yet, in her last moments, she does think of her husband and children: "She thought of Leonce and the children...they need not have thought that

they could possess her, body and soul” (116). Although her children and husband are in her mind (showing that she’s not completely disconnected from them) she is clear that they hold no true claim over her—they do not own her body or her soul, and in choosing to take her own life she is reclaiming her body and soul for her own. She has little to no remorse over leaving her family without her, showing that she has stepped into an identity so separate from them that they are no longer an influence over her decisions or actions. Edna’s suicide could be viewed as an “easy out” or even a failure, but the fact that she chooses how, where, and when to die shows that she is deliberate in her choice to die—indeed, it is something that she has full control over—and she is exercising agency to the fullest extent. Edna has become aware of and consequently rejected her male-dominated and determined life and she sees no other escape but that of death. And she has the feminist agency to choose to die. She cannot be contained, owned, or pinned down—her body and soul belong to her, and she has authority over what happens to both. In her suicide there is a very clear sentiment in favor of feminism: the feminist urge for freedom is so engrained that the only way to truly escape their situation is to cease living completely. While radical, this idea is one that permeates feminist thought and theory, and can easily be seen as feminist expression on the part of Edna Pontellier.

The second character in *The Awakening* who represents a type of feminist is that of Mademoiselle Reisz (“Mlle. Reisz”). Mlle. Reisz is every bit the “eccentric artist” figure, and many people (in society and in social study) have come to view the female artist as inevitably a feminist. However, it is important to note that Mademoiselle Reisz is a character who falls in between the “ideal” Edna and the subtle Adele in terms of feminist expression. This in-between-

ness is defined by her isolation, her attitudes towards others, her lack of sexuality, and the lack of deliberateness behind these characteristics.

Kathleen Margaret Lant explains, “Mademoiselle Reisz, a pianist, is unmarried, despises children, and behaves rudely to everyone. When she is to play for those assembled for an evening at Grand Isle, the children are sent to bed; she objects, moreover, to the crying of a baby. Mademoiselle Reisz is a woman completely alone, devoted only to herself” (120). Mlle. Reisz is not inclined to act as though she possesses any sort of tendency towards motherly affection, and even the way she acts around adults is not consistent with a docile, soft-spoken lady: “She was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every-one, owing to a temper which was self-assertive and a disposition to trample on the rights of others” (25). Mademoiselle Reisz refuses traditional femininity and adopts stereotypical traits most commonly associated with masculinity (she has no patience for crying babies, is described as having a self-assertive temper, and a “disposition to trample upon the rights of others”); her unmarried state, while possibly not her choice (her disposition is not as friendly as it could be and her physical appearance does not “check the right boxes” as will be discussed below) is still one which sets her apart and isolates her from the traditionally feminist and the traditionally feminine. Chopin’s tone, in describing her as “a disagreeable little woman,” clearly intends for the reader to view Reisz unfavorably. However, Reisz’s identity as an artist shows how she operates within that “restriction” and still expresses herself in a feminist way.

Moreover, Mlle. Reisz’s physical appearance is not feminine. Chopin describes Reisz: “She was a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty black lace with a bunch of artificial violets

pinned to the side of her hair” (25). The lace and the artificial flower point to an effort at creating an alluring appearance, yet they are outdated and artificial, which is indicative of a *failed* effort at creating a feminine identity for those around her to see. Additionally, Reisz is described as possessing a body marked by “ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity” (25). Mlle. Reisz does not seem to be self-conscious of her awkward body or her manner of dressing and does not carry herself a particular way in order to fit into societal expectations.

Mademoiselle Reisz has devoted her life to her music—she plays the piano incredibly well (25), and sees when people appreciate her art as she says to Edna: “You are the only one worth playing for. Those others? Bah!” (26). Her devotion to her art, her restricted income and paltry living, and the independence inherent in her lifestyle validate her as a feminist in that her entire lifestyle has departed from the social norm that would otherwise confine her.

The third character who provides a form of feminist expression is Edna’s friend and confidant, Adele Ratafong. Adele’s character seems to represent everything that is not feminist: she is a mother while Edna is not, she has no occupation while Mlle. Reisz does, she is young, beautiful and fertile, while Edna no longer wants to have children and Mlle. Reisz is older and childless. Adele’s role as a mother, lack of official occupation, and her younger age set her apart, but they also might easily be put into a box labeled “mother and housewife” and her character written off as non-feminist. However, it is Adele’s subtle rebellion to patriarchal ideology that allows her to both forge her resistance to those male standards and also establish herself as feminist in her own right. From behind and within masculine parameters, Adele manipulates the male-defined borders of her identity as wife and mother, at once being and contesting the

patriarchal ideals. Adele's interior subversion of the patriarchy is far less dramatic than Edna's total rejection and Mlle. Reisz's completely separate lifestyle, yet Chopin offers yet another affirmation of feminist possibility through Adele's character (Streater 406).

Chopin almost presents Adele's character ironically, both through her depiction of Adele and the view she gives the reader of Adele through Edna's eyes. Kathleen M. Streater supports this claim, saying that "Adele ensures that traditional gender roles are both reinforced and parodied — indeed, enforced precisely through parody, Adele's behavior is a little more complicated. By allowing Adele's character to introduce and blend confident sexuality in the mother role, Chopin is distorting the role's defined limit" (408). Adele is pregnant all throughout the story, and the reader sees her interacting with men (Robert and Leonce for example) and using her beauty and sensuality to her advantage—"because we know Adele, in the past, has freely engaged in flirtatious and racy dialogue with young Robert, her actions [feeling faint, acting fragile] also suggest a hint of a femme fatale; i.e., the white arm, the blushed face, the commanding presence" (Streater 408). Adele carries an aura of charm and mystery (confirming the idea of that "hint of a femme fatale" that Streater suggests), and she uses that aura to her advantage in her interactions with men and women. Men pay attention to her. Her ability to leverage a part of her personality into a characteristic which leads others to feel obligated to serve her shows that she's not only self-aware, but also cunning enough to use her self-awareness to her advantage. This self-awareness is an illustration of Adele's feminist character.

Adele's open, confident manner of discourse/expression in the midst of her role as mother is an expression of feminism. Adele is very physically affectionate, and at first it throws Edna off a little bit: "Madame Ratignolle laid her hand over that of Mrs. Pontellier, which was near her.

Seeing that the hand was not withdrawn, she clasped it firmly and warmly. She even stroked it a little, fondly...the action was at first a little confusing to Edna, but she soon lent herself readily to the Creole's gentle caress" (17). Adele is very free with her physical affection, and while this is part of her Creole culture, it is also a feminist expression of affection, in that Adele feels free enough to bestow that affection upon whom she wishes.

Thus, it is clear that Adele's physical beauty is an important aspect of her feminist power as well. While her beauty is described in a way that fits her into the traditional confines of "what a man looks for" in a woman, she uses it to her advantage. She is described from the beginning of the text as beautiful—"possessing the more feminine and matronly figure...she wore dog-skin gloves, with gauntlets that protected her wrists. She was dressed in pure white, with a fluffiness of ruffles that became her. The draperies and fluttering things which she wore suited her rich, luxuriant beauty" (14). She has a graceful beauty and a delicate form, one dressed in "pure white"—an obvious allusion to the virginal and pure—and her physical appearance is everything that is smooth and gently fluttering and calm. While many of these elements (the virginal, the beauty, the ruffled clothing) would traditionally be viewed as functioning only in their appeal to men, it is the ways that Adele uses her beauty to her advantage that are most striking. She exercises her femininity and physical beauty in her role as wife and mother that speaks to a feminist undertone. Katherine Streater points out:

Indeed, for each image of Adele as "Madonna," Chopin confuses its message with a "delicious" image. For example, Edna visits Adele at her home in the city and catches her in the task of sorting laundry, a domestic image that, however, slides away for the reader as Edna proceeds to describe Adele as looking "more beautiful than ever...in a negligee

which left her arms almost wholly bare and exposed the right, melting curves of her white throat” (409).

There is a power in this kind of beauty—not only does she have a natural effect on men, she also has a type of beauty that the women around her notice. This universal beauty and allure are similar to her Creole manner of expression. Her beauty reaches out to others and draws them in towards her, bringing them into her sphere of influence. Adele’s relationship with her husband is another example of a relationship where readers can see her influence at work, especially in the way that she uses her voice in her marriage.

Adele’s relationship with her husband is unique for the time period in which it was published (1899) and is also notable to modern-day readers. Edna observes that Adele listens intently to everything her husband says, yet Edna discerns nothing spirited in the fact that Adele also freely “takes the words out of his mouth.” Indeed, Adele’s ability to finish her husband’s sentences suggests domestic compatibility and familiarity, but this exchange also signifies that in the home sphere, Adele is an equal, perhaps even dominant, partner in her marriage—she quite literally has a voice in her marriage. She is able to break through the familial/marriage conversation of the time which would have excluded her and speak her mind and her opinion freely, even over her husband at times. This assertion of equality with one’s spouse is undeniably feminist.

Thus, it is within the male-defined borders of her identity as a wife and mother that Adele simultaneously fulfills (has children and raises them lovingly, folds laundry, dresses beautifully and shields herself from the sun) and contests (in her sensuous beauty, her flirtatious attitude, her expressions of affection, her personality as a wife) the patriarchal ideals which defined the roles

of women at this point in history. Adele reveals her strength and feminist identity by working the patriarchal system to her advantage. Often, scholars view Adele as lacking selfhood because she has chosen to be a mother; this is exactly the easy stereotyping that Chopin's subtext is rebelling against. Chopin never dismisses Adele's character, so neither should her readers. With Adele, Chopin gives us a vision of feminism that not only addresses patriarchal reality, but addresses women's existence in that reality, allowing for an accessible and life-affirming form of feminism.

While less dramatic than Edna's total rejection of her roles and less obvious than Mlle. Reisz's more bohemian and artistic lifestyle, the way that Adele works within her role is just as validly feminist as Edna's and Mlle. Reisz's. Chopin provides an affirmation of feminist possibility in these very different characters, which helps female readers from all walks of life and social contexts understand that there is a range of feminist identification and see themselves in the women of *The Awakening*. Since the majority of readers' lives will, on a fundamental level, more closely resemble Adele's domestic situation or perhaps Mlle. Reisz's life as a creative, not Edna's unconventional path of rejection, it becomes important to recognize and validate all three women's journeys towards feminism.

In *The Help* Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan's character is similar to Edna's character in *The Awakening* in terms of feminist expression. Skeeter is the character who, like Edna Pontellier, represents the feminist criticism "ideal"—she is ambitious, unmarried, does not care about the social rules which govern her friends and family, and ultimately leaves those conventions behind—to the point that she even crosses the line of social decency and enters into the black

community which before she had largely ignored, having only known the maids who worked for her family and her friends' families. In interviewing black maids and hearing the stories of how they are repeatedly mistreated, Skeeter uses her agency—illustrated in her ability to write, her college degree, and her wealth—to write and publish “The Help.” The success of the book allows her to leave her family’s home and move away to start a new life for herself in New York. She is a successful feminist in that she is able to break free from the life that is expected of her and take control of her own life and future.

One of the first ways that Skeeter is set apart from the white women by whom she is surrounded is in her physical appearance. She is “painfully tall. The kind of tall that puts a girl in the back row of class pictures with the boys. The kind of tall where your mother...press[es] the top of your head as if she could shrink you back the years when she had to remind you to stand up straight. By the time I was seventeen, Mother would rather I suffered from apoplectic diarrhea than stand up straight” (67). She has frizzy hair—“To say I [Skeeter] have frizzy hair is an understatement. It is kinky, more pubic than cranial, and whitish blond, breaking off easily like hay” (66)—hers is pale, has a bumpy “pointy, beak-like nose” (67), she’s five foot eleven, and she has “cornflower blue” eyes (67).

She does, partway through the book, start to try and fit in more with the socially expected physical appearance standard before her. After being set up on a date with a young, eligible man by her friend Hilly Holbrook, Skeeter’s mother surprises her with a tool that is meant to help her fix her appearance: “Darling, just try it on your head. It cost eleven dollars. It must be good’... Mother’s been chasing me with the Magic Soft & Silky Shinalator for two days now” (127). The “Shinalator” is Skeeter’s mother’s last-ditch effort to try to mold her awkward daughter into the

socialite she is meant to be: “She rubs the cream in my hair with both hands. I can practically feel the hope in her fingers. A cream will not straighten my nose or take a foot off my height. It won’t add distinction to my almost translucent eyebrows, nor add weight to my bony frame. And my teeth are already perfectly straight. So this is all she has left to fix, my hair” (128). And it works—“Mother smiles, shocked...my hair looks great. The Shinalator actually worked” (130). On the day of Skeeter’s date, she sits under the Shinalator for two hours to produce that silky smooth hair that does not set her apart from everyone else, buys “the flattest shoes [she] can find and a slim black crepe dress” and when she glimpses the final product, she “can’t help but hope” that this new appearance will allow her to fit in somehow (131). But it proves to be an un-lasting “fitting in” effect, as her choice to write her book “The Help” and the relationships she develops with the black women whose stories she writes move her farther and farther away from this life of crepe dresses and shiny hair the more she becomes aware of the deep and systemic brokenness in the racial relations in her society.

The way that she is set apart from her contemporaries (the other young, white women whose society she is a part of) by her physical appearance immediately sets her apart in the readers mind as different, and the reader knows to pay attention to her. These physical distinctions—the ways that she does not fit into the mold of the petite, perfect, poised Southern woman—are feminist in that they set her apart and align her almost more with a male character (especially given the social context that means that men had power and agency in society, much more so than women), with her gangly height and frizzy hair. Her goals in life are also more aligned with those of a man in the 1960s, revealing another aspect of her feminist identity.

As soon as her section starts, it is clear that Skeeter intends to make a living for herself. She wants to be a writer and to live out an independent life, separate from her family and the conventions which govern their lives. Skeeter thinks to herself, “I’ll never be able to tell mother I want to be a writer. She’ll only turn it into yet another thing that separates me from the unmarried girls... 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” (65). The idea of Skeeter pursuing a career and a lifestyle outside of the one set before her by her family and the society in which they live is distressing to her mother. Her desire to get a job and earn her keep is foreign to her mother who would prefer that Skeeter follow the same route in life as her mother: find a man, get married, have a few children, and live out her life in the settled routine of housewife and Southern socialite. Skeeter also prioritized her educational career, earning her degree over four years (unlike her peers who mostly left after a couple of years to get married). For her friends, college was merely a means to find a husband rather than a way to obtain a degree they could use to find jobs—Skeeter’s date midway through the book asks, mockingly, “Isn’t that what you women from Ole Miss major in? Professional husband hunting?” (139). Skeeter’s mother also trivializes her educational accomplishments—“Mother sighs, narrows her eyes... ‘Four years my daughter goes off to college and what does she come home with?’ she asks. ‘A diploma?’ ‘A pretty piece of paper,’ Mother says” (64). But Skeeter is intent on using her degree in a career—she sees more of a future for herself than getting married and having children. While at every turn it seems that Skeeter’s drive to use her talents and create an independent life is being thwarted—by society, her mother, her blind dates—her ability to write her book by interviewing black maids,

reach out to and work with a publisher, and ultimately get a job at a publishing company by the end of the novel show that her drive and her education were not in vain. While they might be seen as more “traditionally male” and outright odd by the people around her in the 1960s setting of the book, the contemporary reader sees that her ability to shed the conventions which would normally bind her to a specific path in life are evidence of her feminist agency and identity.

Skeeter also crosses many lines in society in order to actualize her goal of writing a book exposing the true lives of black maids in the South. Not only does her choice to enter into this community to write this book cross the lines of femininity, it is important to note that there are unspoken rules that govern social existence and behavior in every type of society. This is especially prevalent in the 1960s South, where not only does the system of the rich, white socialite class have its own set of rules, so does society at large—rules governing who can sit where and drink from what water fountain (Jim Crow Laws), rules which meant that black communities were relegated to “certain areas of town,” and systemic oppression that kept black individuals from being able to move up in life, leaving them stuck—not just in these systemic cycles of oppression but also mentally and emotionally. Jim Crow Laws were an official set of rules which governed segregation practices country-wide from the late 1870s until they were overturned in 1954 as the result of a Supreme Court case called *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. This case declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional, and, by extension that ruling was applied to other public facilities, as in the years following subsequent decisions struck down similar kinds of Jim Crow legislation (Britannica). While Jim Crow Laws were, for all intents and purposes, outlawed in 1954, the reality is that segregation practices continued to influence and rule society well into the setting of *The Help*.

While Jim Crow Laws largely kept white and black populations separated from one another, Skeeter still crosses those sociopolitical lines of separation, and her feelings when doing so further illustrate the risk she is undertaking in visiting Aibileen in her home. Skeeter specifically notes how uncomfortable she feels driving to Aibileen's house for the first time: "I guess I thought it would be like visiting Constantine [Skeeter's maid growing up], where friendly colored people waved and smiled, happy to see the little white girl whose daddy owned the big farm. But here, narrow eyes watch me pass by" (121). When she starts her interviews, she emphasizes how anxious and out of place she feels in Aibileen's neighborhood: "I keep my head lowered...feeling as obvious as my vehicle: large and white. I reach...Aibileen's house. I give one last look around...The colored part of town seems so far away when, evidently, it is only a few miles from the white part of town" (167). By entering into a culture and neighborhood with which she is not familiar and really not even welcomed into (except by Aibileen, and even then, only after a long period of refusal), Skeeter is once again asserting her feminist identity. She has the agency and the power to understand what she wants to pursue (i.e., writing the book) and the agency and power to go after it and work to make it happen. This power is indicative of Skeeter's success as a feminist character, as it shows her ability to not only desire an outcome that requires her to leave behind the society that she is familiar with but also to actually make it happen. She writes the book. She publishes the book. She goes out and gets a job in New York and thus crosses a line over into yet another unknown setting. Her agency in seeking and getting what she wants is distinctly feminist.

Skeeter's character function within the feminist lens is similar to Edna Pontellier, as both are examples of women whose feminist identities are successful in the eyes of their respective

authors and readers. Just as Skeeter successfully leaves behind her socialite background and actually writes her book, Edna leaves behind the roles of wife and mother and actively seeks to find her identity outside of those roles. Just as Edna crosses the barriers of the roles which would otherwise “trap” her and explores art and horseracing and affairs with other men, Skeeter allows her ambition to do something with her education and her life (besides find a husband) to influence her actions to the point where she crosses socio-cultural lines and interacts with black women whom she would not have otherwise met. They are both characters who fit within the typical feminist “ideal”—of a woman who comes to recognize the things which “hold her back” from true feminist expression and actually does something about it. However, it is just as important to take note of characters who, like Mademoiselle Reisz and Adele, are still expressing their feminist identities, just perhaps not in the ways that one would traditionally expect.

Minnie Jackson is a hard-working, sassy woman and Aibileen’s best friend. She speaks her mind and makes her voice heard, even when it goes against those around her. Her feminism is caught in between traditional expression and unexpected expression, drawing a parallel between her character and Mademoiselle Reisz’s character in *The Awakening*. Minny is able to speak her mind and assert her will, make friends with her employer, help Skeeter write her book and recruit maids to tell their stories, use her past actions (and baking) to protect herself and her friends and escape her abusive husband, all actions which show that she is feminist. The fact that she stays in servitude to a white family and remains in an abusive relationship for so long, and even the ways in which readers can see her hold back her voice or her personal expression all show how she is stuck in between the free and traditional feminist expression that Skeeter has

and the unexpected feminism that readers can see in characters like Adele Ratignolle in *The Awakening* and her friend Aibleen, which will be established later.

Minnie's strong will and ability to speak her mind is one of the first aspects of her character that is established. When Aibleen describes Minny, she says, "Minny got a mouth on her. She always talking back. One day it be the white manager a the Jitney Jungle grocery, next day it be her husband, and ever day it's gone be the white lady she waiting on" (8). There are times where the reader can sense that Minny is strong enough to speak out, even against white people who are traditionally the "oppressor" in black society, especially in the time period of *The Help*. Even her physical presence is large: "Minny short and big, got shiny black curls. She setting [on the bus seat] with her legs splayed, her thick arms crossed... Minny could probably life this bus up over her head if she wanted to... I take the seat in front a her, turn around and listen. Everbody like to listen to Minny" (15). Minny's physical presence and her ability to make her voice heard are both indicative of her feminist power. To make one's voice heard as a woman, especially as a black woman in the 1960s in Mississippi, is distinctly feminist.

Minnie's relationship with her boss, Miss Celia Foote ("Miss Celia"), is also unique in that she becomes not just a maid for Celia but also a friend and confidant. After Minny is fired from her longtime position with a white family in Jackson, she takes on the role of housemaid and cook for a rich woman named Celia Foote. However, from the start their relationship is built on a foundation of trust that a secret will not be shared. Celia explains her husband Johnny "doesn't know [she's] bringing in help" (43). Minny accepts the position on the condition that after a period of time Celia will *have* to tell Johnny that she has a maid. The way that she makes the rules in their working relationship shows how Minny can take control of the situation and

give herself power. A couple of months go by, as Minny tries to teach Celia how to cook for her husband and they begin to develop a grudging companionship. But about a week before the deadline by which Celia must tell her husband that she has secretly hired a maid and cook, Johnny comes home in the middle of the day and finds Minny doing his laundry. At first she panics: “tears spring up in my eyes. ‘Mister Johnny, I told Miss Celia to tell you about me. I must a asked her a thousand times—’” (161). But Johnny tells her that he does not mind it at all, and he and Minny agree to keep his knowledge of her existence a secret from Celia. So now her role as confidant is twofold, as not only is she keeping a secret for Celia, she is also keeping a secret for Johnny. Her role as a trusted friend and figure in the life of the Foote family shows how even white people (her employers, eventually Skeeter as well) are able to put their trust in Minny.

She also has the authority over her voice to know when not to keep a secret as well, as she steps in to help Celia when she has a miscarriage. In chapter eighteen, about halfway through the story, Minny talks about standing by Miss Celia as she has her fourth miscarriage. Their friendship crosses the lines of society and class and race and connects them as two women experiencing one of the most heartbreaking things a woman and mother can go through. Their relationship transcends the bounds which otherwise separate them, and for Minny to be willing to help Miss Celia however she needs in that trying time is distinctly feminist. She steps into this distinctly female traumatic experience and stands alongside Miss Celia and supports her, despite the fact that the difference in their race and class means their relationship should remain strictly professional. Minny is assertive enough in the midst of this situation to be willing to leave the conventions of race and class behind, helping Celia woman to woman.

Additionally, Minny agreeing to help with Skeeter's book is what prompts a number of other maids to also be willing to tell their own stories. Up until Minny agrees to help them and goes out to recruit more maids to share their own stories, only Skeeter and Aibileen were actively working on Skeeter's book. The fact that Minny is the one who is able to get others to actually step up and help shows that she has social sway in her community. She is feminist in this respect in that it takes a strong sense of agency and ability to make one's voice and story known and heard in a society that represses female voices.

Perhaps the most memorable narrative in the story has to do with the pie that Minny bakes for her former employer, Miss Hilly Holbrook. The mystery chocolate pie is alluded to throughout the text, but it is in a conversation with Miss Celia that Minny tells her boss what *actually* happened. She explains:

Then I go home. I mix up that chocolate custard pie. I puts sugar in it and Baker's chocolate and the real vanilla my cousin bring me from Mexico... Soon as I put that pie down on the countertop, Miss Hilly smiles, thinking it's a peace offering... I watch her eat it myself. Two big pieces. She stuff it in her mouth like she ain't never eaten nothing so good... That's when Miss Walters [Miss Hilly's mother], she say she getting a mite hungry too and ask for a piece of that pie. I tell her, "No ma'am. That one's special for Miss Hilly"... [then Miss Hilly asks] "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 laughs uproariously and says] "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" (399).

It is clear enough that Minny takes control of her story by giving her former employer a pie laced with her excrement, but the way that Minny, Aibileen and Skeeter use this story in their book to protect themselves shows how Minny's actions are used to the advantage and for the protection of Skeeter and the maids whose stories are in the book.

Minny explains that her actions can be used as “insurance” to protect Skeeter and the maids from getting in trouble for writing the book (432). Minny says, “if we put it in there, then Miss Hilly *can't* let anybody find out the book is about Jackson. She does not want *anybody* to know that story is about her. And if they start getting close to figuring it out, she gone steer em the other way...I'm telling you, Miss Hilly is the best protection we got” (432). Minny takes a huge risk in allowing Skeeter to put the “Terrible Awful” (what she refers to her pie deed as) in the book, but knows that it is something that will protect them all. She uses her past actions to influence future possible repercussions, knowing that Miss Hilly carries such strong social sway that to include a story that is so deeply unflattering, embarrassing, and disgusting about Hilly means that she will use that sway to convince people for the rest of her life that Jackson, Mississippi, is *not* the city in the book. Minny's strength in taking such a risk shows how able she is to use her power as a black woman and housemaid to protect her friends.

Finally, the reader sees another example of Minny's feminist characterization by Stockett in the conclusion of the story, where the reader sees her leaving behind her abusive husband and actively choosing a life of safety and comfort living on Celia and Johnny Foote's property. When all the truths come to the surface—Celia hiding her miscarriage, Johnny not telling his wife that he knows she hired a maid, and Minny no longer having to keep a secret from either of them—Johnny and Celia make sure that Minny understands that she holds a permanent place in their

family's life, saying, "You'll always have a job here with us, Minny. For the rest of your life, if you want" (476). The security that the Foote family provides Minny with gives her the authority to leave behind her abusive husband. It takes a tremendous amount of strength on Minny's part to gather up her three children and pursue a different, more safe life. But her role as a mother and her desire to keep her family safe give her the agency as a woman to leave behind a situation that was crushing her, both physically and emotionally.

Clearly, there are a number of ways that Minny's character is clearly painted as feminist. But it is important to note that there are also a number of ways that her characterization as feminist is mitigated, placing her in between feminist and non-feminist. This mitigation places her as a parallel to Mademoiselle Reisz, whose characterization also falls in between completely feminist and unexpectedly feminist characters (Edna and Adele).

One of the first ways that Minny remains in the position of a non-feminist is in her position as a maid for a white family. While the security that the Foote family provides her with in her job and a place to live with her children after they escape their home and Minny's abusive husband is certainly a positive thing, Minny's lack of agency in seeking out another job or a different means of income is indicative of her choice to stay in the "comfort zone" of servitude towards a white family. Working for white families is all she has ever known, and it is all she is trained to do. Despite the fact that she helps to write the book, becomes friends (in a way) with Miss Celia and Mister Johnny, and even breaks free from her abusive husband, she stays in her job as a maid. Part of this is due to the society and time in which she lived, as there were not many other options for a black woman in the 1960s *but* to be a maid. However, the reader can see how Aibileen successfully breaks free from her job and leaves that life behind, which makes

the contrast of Minny's decision to stay in her position indicative of a halt in her feminist expression and agency.

The reader can also see how Minny allows her freedom of expression to be halted by those around her. It is clear that she speaks most freely and openly around other women of color, for example. In her interactions with other women of color, especially other maids, Minny tells stories and jokes—"The whole bus be laughing now cause Minny don't like nobody talking bad about her white lady except herself. That's her job and she own the rights" (15). But at the same time, the reader can see how Minny constantly bites her tongue around other people like her husband and around Miss Celia at first. When she first comes to Miss Celia's house to interview for the maid position and she thinks she is going to be sent home, she quickly (and to Celia's surprise) accepts the position: "Why you think I drove all the way out here to kingdom come, just to burn gas?" I clamp my mouth shut. *Don't go ruirning this now, she offering you a jay-o-bee*" (42). Minny explains that she was taught from the start how she should act when working for a white family: "Sit down on your behind, Minny, because I'm about to tell you the rules for working in a White Lady's house.'...'Rule Number Seven: this is the last one, Minny. Are you listening to me? No sass-mouthing... You sass a white woman in the morning you'll be sassing out on the street in the afternoon.' I saw the way my mama acted when Miss Woodra [her mother's boss] brought her home, all Yes Ma'aming, No Ma'aming, I sure do thank you Ma'aming. *Why I got to be like that? I know how to stand up to people*" (46). But Minny follows these rules. They are the unspoken rules of behavior that govern how she is supposed to act towards white women. She is supposed to hold herself back, to control her tongue and her temper, and to never speak her mind—the fact that she does so shows that she is willing to let

herself be tamped down for the sake of someone else, as well as for the sake of her own job security.

Additionally, the fact that she remains in an abusive relationship with her husband for as long as she does is illustrative of her lack of feminist agency given the fact that she allows herself to be controlled and abused by a man. While the psychological, emotional, and physical toll of spousal abuse obviously carries with it a large amount of stigma, pain, and shame, the fact that Minny (despite her obviously outspoken and go-getter personality around other women) stays in that place of abuse for as long as she does is indicative of her lack of agency. When Miss Celia notices an injury on Minny's face (inflicted by Minny's abusive husband Leroy), Minny immediately denies its origin and claims that she "banged it in the bathtub" (358). In her narration (speaking to herself), Minny recounts what really happened, "Leroy screamed at me all night, threw the sugar bowl upside my head, threw my clothes out on the porch. I mean, when he's drinking the Thunderbird it's one thing, but...*oh*. The same is so heavy I think it might pull me to the floor. Leroy, he wasn't' on the Thunderbird this time. This time he beat me stone-cold sober" (359). Later in the same section she imagines telling Leroy that she's going to leave him—"I've got to make a decision about Leroy, tell him how it is. *Either you quite beating on me, or I'm gone. And I'm not taking the kids either.* Which ain't true, about the kids, but that ought to scare him more than anything" (401). Also, Minny is frozen by the shame of those in her community finding out the truth about her marriage:

He knows about the book [that Minny and Aibileen have helped Skeeter write], everybody does...People probably assume I don't care if he finds out—oh I know what people think. 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...?" 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 god-damn hitting me (485).

The ways that Minny has allowed herself to be oppressed in her marriage, despite her logical knowledge that she is not the kind of woman who should allow herself to be oppressed or abused, but the fact that she allows the fear and shame of her abusive relationship to reign in her mind for so long means that she was allowing Leroy to take her agency, strength, and identity away from her with every swing of his fist or whip of his belt.

It is true that Minny is able to shed some conventions. She crosses the boundaries of her relationships with her white employers, she leaves her husband, she helps Skeeter and Aibileen write the book, and she has a strong will and sense of her own opinions and thoughts. In that sense, she is able to be successfully feminist in a number of ways. But the reality of her situation and her choices—that she bites her tongue so often and holds back her expression, that she stays in her maid position for a white family, and the fact that she stays in her marriage to Leroy longer than is prudent or even physically safe for her and her children show that in many ways her feminist expression is only half-formed. It is successful in some ways, but the ways in which she is un-feminist prevent her from being seen as a feminist in the way the reader considers Skeeter a

feminist in the traditional and expected sense, as well as in the ways it becomes clear that Minny's best friend Aibileen is also a feminist.

Because the label of feminist in literature is typically relegated to feminist characters like Skeeter who reject the "boxes" that society places them in, or even characters like Minny who manage to shed some of the male defined borders that might otherwise confine them (like Minny leaving her abusive husband, for example), it can be more difficult to identify feminist expression in characters whose feminism is more understated, like Aibileen's. But it is key to note that this more unexpected and atypical feminism does not make her *less* feminist. Despite the more unexpected nature of her feminist identity, Aibileen's characterization proves that she is still feminist in her own right. There are three pieces of evidence which show Aibileen's feminism: her role as a mother figure to white children, the ways that she helps Skeeter write the book, and the way that she plans to live out the rest of her life at the end of the book.

Aibileen is not just a housemaid for the white families she works for, she is also a nanny to their children. She raises white babies and cares for them most days of the week, which makes her more of a mother figure to many of her charges than their own biological parents are. She explains, "Taking care of white babies, that's what I do, along with all the cooking and the cleaning. I done raised seventeen kids in my lifetime. 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" (1). In *The Help*, Aibileen works for the Leefolt family and they have a young daughter named Mae Mobley. From the start of the book, it is clear that Mae Mobley depends on Aibileen, not just for care but for companionship and affection: "By the time she a year old, Mae Mobley following me around everywhere I go. Five o'clock would come round and she'd be hanging on my Dr.

Scholl shoe, draggin over the floor, crying like I weren't never coming back. Miss Leefolt she'd narrow up her eyes at me like I done something wrong, unhitch that crying baby off my foot. I reckon that's the risk you run, letting somebody else raise you chilluns" (2). A tense interaction between Mr. and Mrs. Leefolt that leaves their daughter upset shows how Aibileen cares for Mae Mobley in the midst of conflict:

Baby Girl, she looking at the door her daddy slammed, she looking at her mama frowning down at her. My baby, she swallowing it back, like she trying real hard not to cry...I lay Baby Girl on the changing table, try to keep my mad inside. Baby girl stare up at me while I take off her diaper. Then she reach out her little hand. She touch my mouth real soft. "Mae Mo been bad," she say. "No, baby, you ain't been bad," I say, smoothing her hair back. "You been good. Real good" (18).

The way that Aibileen operates within the traditional role of caretaker and breaks through the narrative of tension/conflict and fear that controls Mae Mobley's life and speaks love and care into her shows how she is able to leverage her mother role and use her voice to shift the trajectory of Mae Mobley's childhood and emotional state.

In Aibileen's narration, it is clear how much she cares for Mae Mobley and she works hard to make sure that Mae Mobley understands that she is loved and valuable, even though her own mother does not make her feel that way: "I get to wondering, what would happen if I told her she something good, ever day?...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" (107). Aibileen takes the time each day to tell Mae Mobley "you kind, you smart, you important" (234). In so many ways Aibileen takes on the role of mother for Mae Mobley—she tells her that she is kind

and smart and important when Mae Mobley's own mother will not. Additionally, emphasizing that Mae is kind, smart and important shows how Aibileen is willing to speak to values in Mae Mobley that are not traditionally stressed for women or girls, especially in the 1960s. For a woman like Aibileen who is such a loving caretaker figure in Mae Mobley's life to speak into her and tell her that she is so many good things goes against the things Mae feels her mother communicates to her. Her mother is the one who doles out slaps on the legs in punishment, will not let her daughter have a second piece of birthday cake because she is chubby, and looks on in disappointment at Mae Mobley's rumpled toddler hair and messy hand and clothes. Children are incredibly perceptive, especially of their parents and other important figures in their life, so Aibileen using her important role in Mae Mobley's life to speak life and truth into Mae Mobley about her inherent worth and value as a human being shows how she is leveraging her power in a feminist way.

It is also important to note that she emphasizes that Mae Mobley is kind, smart, important, but does not make any comments on Mae Mobley's physical beauty, which makes her a feminist role model for Mae Mobley in a lot of ways. Obviously, Mae Mobley is only two years old and society is not placing any huge expectations on her regarding beauty or her body, but the fact that Aibileen takes care to emphasize Mae's inherent value and worth as a human being is notable.

Near the end of the story, when Aibileen is fired, she takes time to once again speak life in Mae Mobley before she has to leave, establishing that Mae has retained the good things she has been taught about her value:

“Baby Girl,” I say. “...Do you remember what I told you?” ...I look deep into her rich brown eyes and she look into mine...And I swear I see, down inside, the woman she gone grow up to be. A flash from the future. She is tall and straight. She is proud. She got a better haircut. And she is *remembering* the words I put in her head. Remembering as a full-grown woman. And then she say it, just like I need her to. “You is kind,” she say, “you is smart. You is important” (521).

Aibileen uses this moment of trauma, as Mae Mobley sees her loving caretaker and friend and comforter leaving her behind, to reaffirm to Mae Mobley her value and worth. This teaching moment is one which shows how deeply Aibileen’s morals run in her—that she can step away from her own turmoil (literally seconds after she has been fired) and focus her care on the young person who needs her—and thus affirms her strong personality and therefore her feminist power.

Aibileen is not a perfect “mother figure,” though. When she shares her stories of being a housemaid and nanny to white families with Skeeter, she recounts her regrets in caring for children when she tells the story of a little boy she took care of before she ended up with the Leefolt family. This reminiscing is prompted by Mae Mobley calling her “mama” when she begins to speak, saying that she is Aibileen’s baby and Aibileen is her real mama (336). She explains, “Now I had babies be confuse before. John Green Dudley, first word out that boys mouth was Mama and was looking straight at me. But then pretty soon he calling everybody including hisself Mama, and calling his daddy Mama too. Did that for a long time. Nobody worry bout it. Course when he start playing dress-up in his sister’s Jewel Taylor twirl skirts and wearing Chanel No. 5, we all get a little concern” (336). She explains that John Green Dudley’s father would beat him with a rubber hose-pipe, “trying to beat the girl out a that boy until

[Aibileen] couldn't stand it no more" (337). In her interactions with Skeeter, she does not even bring up this story:

When we started working on the stories, Miss Skeeter asked me what's the worst day I remember being a maid. I told her it was a stillbirth baby. But it wasn't. It was every day from 1941 to 1947 waiting by the screen door for them beatings to be over. I wish to God I'd told John Green Dudley he ain't going to hell. That he ain't no sideshow freak cause he like boys. I wish to God I'd filled his ears with good things like I'm trying to do Mae Mobley. Instead, I just sat in the kitchen, waiting to put the salve on them hose-pipe welts (337).

Aibileen's care for a young boy whose identity goes completely against what is socially and morally acceptable to his society and her regret over not speaking life into him (the way she does Mae Mobley) illustrate how she understands that her ability to be a mother figure who cares for children means she can cross social bounds in order to show love and care.

Caring for children in any capacity leads one to develop attachment, so to be willing to care for another person's children to begin with is already an act of vulnerability. When the children in her care hurt, Aibileen also hurts, and she wants to help them grow up well as much as she can. While she is by no means a perfect mother figure, Aibileen works hard to love the children in her care as best as possible. This ability to cross the boundaries of biology (caring for children that are not her own), race (caring for white children on behalf of white parents), societal norms (with children whose parents tell them one thing and Aibileen tells them another) and work to care for and love her charges shows that Aibileen is a woman of great power and strength, which

is indicative of her feminist power. Like Adele, she works within her traditional mother role and uses it to express her feminist identity.

Another way that Aibileen's power and strength as a feminist character becomes clear is in her partnership with Skeeter as they work to gather maids to interview, write the book, and deal with the aftermath of its publication. Skeeter has a part time job answering questions for a housekeeping and cleaning column for their local newspaper, but as a white socialite who grew up with black maids, she has never done any housework of her own and is therefore unable to answer the questions. She enlists Aibileen's help to answer the questions, and Aibileen explains how their interactions lead to a sort of friendship between them: "Ever time Miss Skeeter finish asking me about how to clean the-this or fix the-that...we get to talking about other things too. That's not something I done a whole lot with my bosses or they friends. I find myself telling her how Treelore [Aibileen's son] 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" (113). Aibileen is able to develop a sort of companionship with Skeeter despite the many walls which would otherwise separate them (race, class, background, etc.), and this companionship is what allows them to start working on writing the book on black maids in the South and their experiences. They are able to form a friendship with intimacy and trust, and the fact that Aibileen allows such a relationship to form when it goes against socio-political boundaries shows that she sees the value in a community of women, especially one where members can bring their own experiences and opinions and share them with one another.

When Skeeter first introduces the idea about the book to Aibileen, Aibileen is apprehensive. "[Aibileen asks] 'Exactly what kind a stories you think you gone hear?' [and Skeeter replies]

‘What you get paid, how the treat you, the bathrooms, the babies, all the things you’ve seen, good and bad.’ She looks excited, like this is some kind a game. For a second, I think I might be more mad than I am tired. ‘Miss Skeeter,’ I whisper, ‘do that not sound kind a dangerous to you?’” (119). Aibileen gives Skeeter a firm “No ma’am” (120) in response to Skeeter’s pleas to consider the idea. The shift in Aibileen’s willingness to help comes after Hilly Holbrook, an extremely powerful white socialite and longtime friend of Skeeter, pushes an initiative to have segregated bathrooms put into the homes in which black maids work. Aibileen asks what will happen if Skeeter does not like the stories she tells, or what will happen if Skeeter decides to turn on Aibileen. After deliberating, she finally says: “Law have mercy. I reckon I’m on do it” (142). Aibileen is hesitant and scared, but she agrees. She is not only the black maid that Skeeter has enough of a connection with to ask, but is also the first maid to step up and start to tell her stories. When Skeeter asks, “‘I just...I have to ask you. What changed your mind?’ Aibileen doesn’t even pause. ‘Miss Hilly’ she says. [Skeeter] go[es] quiet, thinking of Hilly’s bathroom plan and accusing the maid of stealing and her talk of diseases. The name comes out flat, bitter as a bad pecan” (143). Aibileen steps into her new role of storyteller as an act of rebellion, and the fact that she steps into a realization of the power of her voice shows how she allows herself to also step into a feminist role.

Also notable is the fact that when Aibileen tells her stories, she writes them out beforehand and relays the information to Skeeter based on her own notes. She explains that it “‘can’t be much different from writing [her] prayers every night’” and that she writes for an hour, sometimes two every day (175). And her stories are well-written, too. Skeeter explains, “The typewriter keys are clacking like hail on a roof...Aibileen and I look each other straight in the

eye. I think this might actually work” (176). Aibileen attended school only until the seventh grade, as she explains in her introductory chapter: “I been writing my prayers since I was in junior high. When I tell my seventh-grade teacher I ain’t coming back to school cause I got to help out my mama, Miss Ross just about cried. ‘You’re the smartest one in the class, Aibileen,’ she say. ‘Ant the only way you’re going to keep sharp is to read *and write* every day.’ So I started writing my prayers down instead a saying em. But nobody’s called me smart since” (26).

Aibileen uses her intelligence and ability to write well to her advantage by taking control of her narrative and passing off her stories already-written to Skeeter. She gets to tell her stories in her own voice whereas the other maids just tell their stories to Skeeter verbally while she transcribes them on her typewriter.

Aibileen’s role as a housemaid may cause a reader to think that she is not able to express feminist characteristics. She is in servitude to a white family and does what her white boss bids her to. And really, this is the only future she had ever envisioned for herself. Kaila Philo explains:

In *The Help*, after all, the reader is given some insight as to why Aibileen became a maid in the first place when she reveals to Skeeter that she knew she would become a maid ever since she was a little girl: “‘Mama was a maid,’” Aibileen explains. “‘My granmama was a house slave’” (69). Through these words, it is fair for the reader to assume that Aibileen herself began domestic servitude at a young age, but at the very least, the knowledge of her own fate stole something from her childhood, further limiting her opportunity (14).

Yet readers can see how Aibileen works within these limitations—of vocation and education—to still create a strong feminist characterization for herself. She writes her stories, she makes her

voice heard, and she actively seeks ways to influence those around her in a positive way. The ways that she works within those bounds are what make her feminism less obvious to the reader in the beginning of the story, but feminist recognition in Aibileen grows over the course of the novel.

In the same way, Aibileen's ability to take risks grows over the course of the story as well. When she first starts to help Skeeter write the book, Aibileen invites Skeeter into her home and hosts all the other maids that eventually join the cause and tell their own stories. Skeeter describes the first time that she and Aibileen meet to start interviewing for the book: "I knock softly. There are footsteps...Aibileen opens the door. 'Come on in,' she whispers and quickly shuts it behind me and locks it. I've never seen Aibileen in anything but her whites [her maid's uniform]. Tonight she has a green dress with black piping. I can't help but notice, she stands a little taller in her own house" (168). Aibileen is shaking as she pours tea for the two of them, and Skeeter notes the way the teapot lid rattles as she pours, and Aibileen explains, "'Sorry,' she says and holds the top down. 'I ain't never had a white person in my house before'" (168). Just as Skeeter must cross boundaries in order to enter into Aibileen's house, Aibileen crosses boundaries by inviting a white woman into her home. This is a dangerous act, so the reader sees how Aibileen not only goes against the social norm but also establishes her own power in the relationship by hosting Skeeter, giving herself the proverbial "home court advantage." Taking hold of these social norms—the informal integration of their two races by inviting Skeeter into her home (something that is illegal, as the two would be charged with "integration violation" if they were caught together) and in establishing her own power—show that despite the fact that

she is confined in many ways, she is able to assert her power and step into her own authority, even in her interactions with a white woman like Skeeter.

Finally, in the conclusion of the story the last character the reader hears narration from is Aibileen. Her voice not only opens the novel but also completes it, meaning that she has narrative power in both setting the tone in the beginning and leaving the reader with a profound sense of having gained meaning and knowledge from the story. Aibileen's time as a maid wraps up in her final chapters as well, as she is fired from her job as a housemaid after being falsely accused of stealing silver, part of the aftermath of the book's publication. But despite the fact that her loss of employment is out of her control and also that she must leave Mae Mobley behind and venture into the unknown of life outside of being a housemaid, she is filled with a sense of hope about the future.

Aibileen realizes that because of the book and the housekeeping paper column she has taken over on Skeeter's behalf, she is able to support herself now, and she feels hope and joy and she's not afraid at the idea of starting over. She explains that while she is, in her opinion, too old for a fresh start in life, she is able to see that there is a possibility of a future and a life outside of servitude to white families—and she feels able and willing to pursue that future. She states in the final lines of the book:

I stand at the bus stop like I been doing for forty-odd years. In thirty minutes, my whole life's...done. 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. Maybe I ain't too old to start over, I think, and I laugh and cry at the same time at this. Cause just last night I thought I was finished with everything new" (522).

Aibileen's ability to consider a life for herself outside of the one she has always known shows her feminist power in that she is not stuck in one position—she has the agency to continue to live her life the way *she* wants.

Aibileen's feminism is an understated one. She is not as bold and brash as Minny, nor is she a rule-breaker and path-maker in the same way that Skeeter is. But in her own subtle way she is a feminist like these other characters, and in many ways this more understated and gradually-revealed feminism is more powerful, as the reader sees Aibileen grow in her feminist identity over the course of the book, much like the reader's own potential journey growing in feminist expression and understanding.

Feminist expression comes in many forms—sometimes it is obvious, as with Edna Pontellier and Skeeter Phelan, sometimes it is mitigated by circumstances or personality traits as with Mademoiselle Reisz and Minny Jackson, and other times it is unexpected as with Adele Ratignole and Aibileen Clark. But in a world where feminist literature and criticism tends to focus solely on the kind of feminism that leaves behind all male-defined conventions, it is easy to prioritize feminist characters like Edna and Skeeter as the feminist ideals. These ideal characterizations can also often leave the less dramatically feminist characters behind, relegating them to a category of characters who are “not feminist enough.” But it is important to understand that these characters may still be just as validly feminist as their dramatic feminist counterparts. Feminist expression can surface in literature in various ways, but it must be acknowledged as equally valid regardless of the character from which said feminist expression originates.

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