

Unseen extract 7: *The Help*

Read the extract carefully. It is taken from *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett which was first published in 2009. The novel tells the story of African-American maids working in white Southern households in Jackson, Mississippi during the early 1960s. This extract is narrated by Aibileen who works as a maid for the Leefolt household, cleaning and caring for their toddler Mae Mobley. Here she overhears a discussion of the white women who attend the weekly bridge meeting held at the Leefolt house, which includes Hilly Holbrook, a wealthy Jackson socialite.

Sample question

Explore the significance of discrimination in this extract.

Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed analysis of the ways that Stockett shapes meanings.

Extract

‘Oh Hilly, I wish you’d use the guest bathroom,’ say Miss Leefolt, rearranging her cards. ‘Aibileen doesn’t clean in the back until after lunch.’

Hilly raise her chin up. Then she give one a her ‘ah-hem’s.’ She got this way a clearing her throat real delicate-like that gets everybody’s attention without they even knowing she made em do it.

‘But the guest bathroom’s where the help goes.’ Miss Hilly say.

Nobody says anything for a second. Then Miss Walter nod, like she explaining it all. ‘She’s upset cause the Nigra uses the inside bathroom and so do we.’

Law not this mess again. They all look over at me straightening the silver drawer in the sideboard and I know it’s time for me to leave. But before I can get the last spoon in there, Miss Leefolt give me the look, say, ‘Go get some more tea, Aibileen.’

I go like she tell me to, even though they cups is full to the rim.

I stand around the kitchen a minute but I ain’t got nothing left to do in there. I need to be in the dining room so I can finish my silver straightening. And I still got the napkin cabinet to sort through today but it’s in the hall, right outside where they setting. I don’t want a stay late just cause Miss Leefolt playing cards.

I wait a few minutes, wipe a counter. Give Baby Girl more ham and she gobble it up. Finally, I slip out to the hall, pray nobody see me.

All four of em got a cigarette in one hand, they cards in the other. 'Elizabeth, if you had the choice,' I hear Miss Hilly say, 'wouldn't you rather them take their business outside?'

Real quiet, I open the napkin drawer, more concerned about Miss Leefolt seeing me than what they saying. This talk ain't news to me. Everywhere in town they got a colored bathroom, and most the houses do too. But I look over and Miss Skeeter's watching me and I freeze, thinking I'm about to get into trouble.

'I bid one heart,' Miss Walter say.

'I don't know,' Miss Leefolt say, frowning at her cards. 'With Raleigh starting his own business and tax season not for six months...things are real tight for us now.'

Miss Hilly talk slow, like she spreading icing on a cake. 'You just tell Raleigh every penny he spends on that bathroom he'll get back when y'all sell this house.' She nod like she agreeing with herself. 'All these houses they're building without maid's quarters? It's just plain dangerous. Everybody knows they carry different kinds of diseases than we do. I double.'

I pick up a stack a napkins. I don't know why, but all a sudden I want a hear what Miss Leefolt gone say to this. She my boss. I guess everybody wonder what they boss think a them.

'It would be nice,' Miss Leefolt say, taking a little puff a her cigarette, 'not having her use the one in the house. I bid three spades.'

'That's exactly why I've designed the Home Help Sanitation Initiative,' Miss Hilly say. 'As a disease preventative measure.'

I'm surprised by how tight my throat get. It's a shame I learned to keep down a long time ago.

Miss Skeeter look real confused. 'The Home...the what?'

A bill that requires every white home to have a separate bathroom for the colored help. I've even notified the surgeon general of Mississippi to see if he'll endorse the idea. I pass.'

Miss Skeeter, she frowning at Miss Hilly. She set her cards down faceup and say real matter-a-fact, 'Maybe we ought to just build you a bathroom outside, Hilly.'

And law do that room get quiet.

Miss Hilly say, 'I don't think you ought to be joking around about the colored situation. Not if you want to stay on as editor of the League, Skeeter Phelan.'

Miss Skeeter kind a laugh, but I can tell she don't think it's funny. 'What, you'd...kick me out? For disagreeing with you?'

Miss Hilly raise a eyebrow. 'I will do whatever I have to do to protect our town. Your lead, Mama.'

I go in the kitchen and don't come out again till I hear the door close after Miss Hilly's behind.

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