THE HELP Film Guide

Film length: 2hrs, 17 minutes  
Film rating: PG-13  
Director: Tate Taylor  
Genre: Drama

Synopsis:
In this adaptation of the best-selling novel, the time is 1961, and the setting is Jackson, Mississippi, where there has been a long tradition of African-American women serving as “the help” for upper-middle class white women and their families. A young college graduate, Skeeter, returns home to be with her ailing mother, and in her ambition to succeed as a writer, turns to the black maids she knows. Skeeter is determined to collect their oral histories and write about a culture that values social facade and ignores the human dignity of many members of the community.

Two maids, Aibileen and Minny, agree to share their stories, stories of struggle and daily humiliation, of hard work and low pay, of fear for themselves and their children in an area where the KKK is still active. But it is a time of change, when the Civil Rights movement is developing and when hope is nurtured by small acts of courage. The film follows the two women as they find support in their faith community and in solidarity with the other maids in the area so they can reclaim their dignity as workers, as women, and as fully human members of the larger community. They realize they have important stories to tell and authentic voices that must be heard. The Help is a film about empowerment of individuals as well as about social justice for a group. It is a moving story depicting dehumanization in a racist culture but also the ability to move beyond the unjust structures of society and to proclaim the value of every human being.

Themes to Engage Through the Film:

• The nature of racism and its impact  
• Moral blindness to daily injustice  
• Development of personhood and personal voice  
• Discernment and ethical choices  
• The importance of faith and hope  
• Solidarity in the face of injustice  
• Small acts of courage as a way to change  
• How the personal and the political connect

Web Link:  
Official Movie Site: www.thehelp.com
Catholic Social Teaching Connections:

**The Life and Dignity of the Human Person:**
- *The Help* clearly exposes the many ways that the human dignity of African-American maids in the South was ignored. They had to suffer daily indignities but were able to claim their own dignity.
- The film demonstrates that all humans, whatever race or background, young and old, have skills, talents and intelligence that should be recognized and utilized for the common good of the entire community.
- The people who use and abuse other human beings do not respect their own dignity and degrade themselves.

**The Principle of Solidarity:**
- Change is possible when people support each other and work together.
- Solidarity is strengthened by faith communities.
- Injustice must be confronted through community solidarity as well as individual acts.
- Loyalty to others and to positive ideals are promoted by the film.

**The Common Good:**
- Injustices such as racism damage the entire community.
- People can be dedicated to the common good even in the face of violence and even death.

**Participation in Family and Community:**
- Children must be given clear messages through action as well as words about human dignity.
- Members of communities should be aware of the norms that govern behavior in that community and be discerning about the morality of those norms: “Everybody does it” does not excuse moral blindness.
- Every person has the responsibility to recognize injustice in a community and to work to change injustice.

The U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops have published important documents on “the sin of racism.” These documents and more information on the Catholic Social Teaching perspective on race, diversity, human dignity and social justice on available online at:

http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity
Questions for Discussion:

1. There has been some criticism about the novel which this film is based on because it was written by a white woman who gave voice to African-American characters. Can you think of other books which have done something similar? Why do you think this is a concern of some members of marginalized communities? Do you think the film gives authentic voices to the minority characters? If you have read the book, how do they compare?

2. Do you think the characters in the film are all fully drawn as human beings? Are Aibilene and Minnie realistic characters? If some characters are stereotypes, does this add to or detract from the message of the film? What characters seem most fully realized? How, and why, do some characters change and develop as the film proceeds? What characters do you find most interesting, and why?

3. What details of everyday life does this film present that give the audience a sense of the experience of living as an African-American woman in the deep South in 1961? What details and specifics did you find most compelling about these women’s lives and why? What details of everyday life does this film present that give the audience a sense of the experience of living as a wealthy white woman in the deep South in 1961? What details and specifics did you find most compelling about these women’s lives and why? Who has power among these women, what kind of power, and how do they use it?

4. Most of the white people in Jackson, Mississippi seem blind to the injustice of racism and to the daily assaults on the human dignity of the African-Americans in their community, a situation that was historically true. Why do members of a society often have blinders on when it comes to injustice in their midst? Is that kind of blindness a reality that exists in any parts of our society today? What does it take to help people discern injustice “where they live,” as the saying goes?

5. What price do the people in this film pay when they confront the injustice of racism? What price would they have paid if they did not confront it? What price must we pay if we confront injustice today? What price do we pay, individually, and as a community, if we do not face current injustices?

6. Social sin involves structures and systems, not just the acts of individuals. In this film, both unjust formal legal systems and unjust informal social systems and structures are presented. Where do you see evidence of such systems and structures in the film? Why is it necessary to change both informal and formal structures to achieve justice? Do such systems reinforce each other? Is it harder to bring about change in legal systems or in social systems? Do we still have informal systems that support racism even though laws have changed?

7. What role does gender have in the story line of this film? What are the strengths and limitations of female roles in 1961 Mississippi? Do the female characters in the film challenge and/or reinforce stereotypes? What role do men play in the story? One historian said the film doesn’t represent the relentless sexual harrassment that African-American female domestics faced regularly from many white male employers. Should this have been an element in the film? What would it have added, or detracted, from this story?

8. What role does class play in this story? What does the treatment of the “white trash” woman who wants to be accepted tell us about social class in the society of that time and place? Is class still a factor in how people are portrayed and treated in current American society, in the news, in films, and in television?

9. Today, many domestic workers are from Hispanic groups and from other recent immigrant communities. Do they face some of the same problems and issues that the African-American women faced fifty years ago? What has changed, and what has not, for domestic workers who clean American homes and businesses and help bring up our children?