

**The Help: A Cluster Criticism Analysis**

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### **Introduction:**

The Help was a film directed by Tate Taylor and was a box office hit in 2011. The powerful film set during the Civil Rights movement allowed us, the viewer, to understand some ideas as to how Racist America was back then towards people of color. This film has been one of the most impactful films I have seen so far throughout my life, so I knew that this artifact was one I wanted to research and investigate in the name of Rhetorical Criticism.

For this final project, I chose to explore the film The Help and explored the different types of recurring themes throughout the film. I explored the most used terminology throughout the film, the most recurrent behaviors and items, and the most frequent types of actions from start to finish throughout the two-hour and twenty-six-minute film. However, I first had to explore my research question to conduct such research. My research question for my method of Criticism was, “What are the most common recurring themes and patterns shown throughout the film The Help?”. After asking myself this research question, I began researching throughout the film using a tally method or cluster criticism.

This research question goes hand and hand with our Rhetorical Criticism course, and Rhetorical Theory as I used this research question and connected it to a specific rhetorical method interconnected to this course. Using this research question, I connected what we have learned about the method to a specific film connected, the film “The Help” to a Cluster Criticism Analysis, and I have explored how this methodology can be seen throughout the two-hour film and have researched the most frequent and recurring themes seen from start to finish through the duration of the film and interconnected it to a Cluster Criticism analysis as depicted in our course textbook as well as other scholarly articles and research.

Using my research question, “What are the most common recurring themes and patterns shown throughout the film *The Help*?” allowed me to become a Rhetorical Criticism scholar for several days and even weeks, and it allowed me to interconnect the film to this somewhat perplexing methodology that is still being used to this day.

### **Description of the Artifact:**

The Film “*The Help*” was written and directed by famous director Tate Taylor. The film earned an excellent gross income of roughly “\$169,708,112 in North America and \$46,931,000 in other territories for a worldwide total of \$216,639,112.” (Wiki). This box office hit not only performed well in North America but also dominated on a global level. The movie’s powerful message traveled globally, making other countries feel the emotions we felt watching it for the first time.

The film is set in the 1960s in Jackson, Mississippi. The movie also takes place during the Civil Rights movement, but we only see these central aspects of the film roughly the middle marking point. The film centers around a young white woman named “Skeeter Phelan” played by actress Emma Stone. Skeeter travels back home to Mississippi and dreams of becoming a professional writer. She has always struggled to make it in the writing industry and has had a tough time landing jobs, so she returns home to Jackson to look for some good inspiration in order for her to tell a good story.

Upon arriving in Jackson, Skeeter sparks her interest and decides to tell the stories of Black Maids working for white families. Skeeter chooses to interview these black women who have dedicated their entire lives, and we learn that the official name for these maids is “*The Help*.” Skeeter decides to tell the gripping and sad testimonies of “*The Help*” and looks to a select few for help telling these stories.

Skeeter at first is only able to get Aibileen (Viola Davis), “the housekeeper of Skeeter’s best friend, to talk at first. But as the pair continue the collaboration, more women decide to come forward, and as it turns out, they have quite a lot to say” (Wiki). After gaining Aibileen’s trust, Skeeter can convince Aibileen to get more women on board to tell their stories. After a more extended period filled with hardships and tragedy, we can finally see more women from “The Help” step forward and want to talk to Skeeter. Furthermore, eventually, we can see later in the film gets published and sparks controversy and good old white gossip throughout her hometown before taking off for New York as a published and famous anonymous writer.

That was just a quick synopsis of what the film is truly about. I challenge you, the reader, to step outside your comfort zone and watch this film for free on Youtube, just like I did. I promise you that you will not regret it as this film is filled with emotion and passion and tells a story of what it was like to be Black in America during one of the scariest times in American history.

### **Cluster Criticism Methodology:**

I chose to investigate and utilize a cluster criticism methodology for my final analysis of this final project. According to our textbook "Rhetorical Criticism Exploration and Practice" by Sonja Foss, "The rhetorical theorist and critic who probably has had the greatest impact on rhetorical criticism as it is practiced today are Kenneth Burke, a "specialist in symbol-systems and symbolic action" (Foss, 2018, p.61). Kenneth Burke was the founder and one of the main researchers behind this type of criticism. This scholarly researcher believed that rhetoric was "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (Foss, 2018, p.61).

Burke believed rhetoric was more than words or a name for a solution but could be a creative strategy. Burke believed rhetoric could be a strategy for dealing with a situation or solving rather complex and confusing problems.

Burke's methodology included the three basic steps of "identifying key terms in the artifact; charting the terms that cluster around the key terms; and discovering an explanation for the artifact" (Foss, 2018, p.64). In simpler terms, Burke's Cluster Criticism approach includes selecting the most frequent words and recurring themes, as shown in the artifact. After selecting the emerged themes, your chart, graph, or create a visual and tally them across the board. Furthermore, after you chart the themes, you create meaning or a message behind them.

However, one of the main rules of Burke's methodology and procedure is that "Your key terms should be nouns, substance words that reference people, places, objects, or ideas. You do not want to select verbs, adjectives, or adverbs (words like climbs, lovely, or slowly) as key terms because they are modifying something or describing the actions someone or something is taking" (Foss, 2018, p.64). Using this method, the key terms should only be nouns, and in order to make the word become one of the charted themes and concepts, they must be recurring throughout your artifact or convey some form of intensity in it. Moreover, this was the procedure I followed for my final project. I selected the key terms and concepts depicted in the film "The Help," then charted and clustered these terms in a table, creating a personal meaning behind each term.

One example of this methodology is in the article "Exploring rhetoric of public diplomacy in the mixed-motive situation: Using the case of President Obama's 'nuclear-free world' speech in Prague" by Juyan Zhang. Zhang used not only one but two methods of rhetorical criticism in his study. Zhang used Cluster Criticism to identify the God terms and

Devil terms in the text to examine further the speech's motives, worldviews, tensions and resolutions, and ethics" (Zhang, 2010, p.291). Zhang used Cluster Criticism to find God and Devil terms to analyze President Obama's nuclear-free world speech. Zhang then clustered the main terminology and discovered, "The cluster criticism analysis revealed several God and Devil terms in the speech. The God terms include 'Prague,' 'Common,' 'Lead,' and 'A more prosperous and peaceful world.' The Devil's terms include 'nuclear weapons' and 'fatalism" (Zhang, 2010, p.292). Zhang used cluster criticism analysis to identify the main positive and negative words in President Obama's nuclear-free world speech. Later in his study, he clustered and tabled them as a whole.

Zhang's scholarly article was a perfect example of a cluster criticism analysis because he followed the three-step process of "identifying key terms in the artifact; charting the terms that cluster around the key terms; and discovering an explanation for the artifact" (Foss, 2018, p.64). Zhang followed the steps in a Cluster Criticism analysis and could do so in the true Burkean fashion. In his scholarly article, Zhang identified the most recurring terms, clustered and analyzed them, and created meaning and explanation for each God and Devil term.

Another example of a Cluster Criticism analysis would be in the scholarly article "Exploring the Determinants of Scientific Productivity: a proposed typology of Researchers" by Jose Luis Ballestros-Rodriguez and Petra De Saa-Perez. These two scholars, in their research, used a Cluster Criticism methodology by Burke in order to be able to create meaning and causation for scientific productivity over the past decade. They used a Cluster Criticism to "sample 471 Spanish academics to examine diverse combinations of human capital attributes – knowledge, skills, and abilities – and two sources of motivation – intrinsic and extrinsic" (Rodriguez & Saa-Perez, 2022, pp. 195-221). These two scholars used cluster analysis on a

collective sample of 471 Spanish academic scholars to see what recurring or diverse combinations of attributes were present in them.

Rodriguez and Perez also used a Cluster Criticism analysis to explore human capital attributes and the types of motivations each subgroup in the sample may possess. They then charted and created a meaning for each of the most common terms, concepts, or ideas. These scholars found these topics common amongst all of their research groups "Four researcher profiles were identified: (1) high vocational academics; (2) motivated academics; (3) self-starter academics and (4) reactive academics" (Rodriguez & Perez, 2022, pp. 195-221). Based on these preliminary findings, we present conclusions about the functioning and productivity of academic researchers" (Rodriguez & Perez, 2022, pp. 195-221). Rodriguez and Perez found those four recurring themes. Using a Cluster Criticism analysis, they clustered the most recurring themes and then analyzed and created a meaning and purpose for them, just like in Burke's model and methodology.

One final example of a cluster criticism methodology found in scholarly work would be in the scholarly article "Citizens' Perception of modern pig production in Germany: A mixed-method research approach" written by Daniela Weible, Inken Christoph-Schulz, Petra Salamon, and Katrin Zander. In this article, these academic scholars used a cluster criticism approach similar to Burkes to gain diverse perceptions of modern pig production in Germany.

These scholars used cluster analysis to separate these people into groups and find the most recurring topics and concepts involved in each group. These scholars found that "the cluster analysis revealed that citizens can be grouped into three different segments: opponents (22 percent), moderates (43 percent), and the tolerants (35 percent)" (Weible & Schulz, 2016). These scholars used a cluster criticism analysis to determine that the people interviewed could be

separated into three segments: opponents, moderates, and tolerants. Furthermore, the people in these segments all have different viewpoints and ideologies surrounding pig production in Germany. These scholars used a Cluster Criticism analysis to separate the participants into groups and collect data charted and showcased in the graph in the article that showed the most common perceptions amongst all three groups and differences among them.

After reading these three scholarly articles and the textbook, I became more familiar with conducting a cluster criticism analysis. After reading these articles, I understood this methodology better and created a cluster criticism analysis of the film "The Help."

### **My Findings from my Analysis:**

After watching the two-and-a-half-hour film, I found frequent and recurring themes shown from start to finish. Some of my findings of the most common themes that I clustered were Hope, White Privilege, "The Help," "Pie," "and "Civil Rights." I found ample more findings that will be further explained and discussed later in this research paper.

For starters, my first finding was the concept and the utilization of the word "**The Help.**" This terminology was used to describe the black maids responsible for caring for white families as a whole. "The Help" was the most frequent word heard throughout the film, and it was one of the most repeated and recurring terminologies from start to finish of the film's duration. We can hear throughout the film people referring to these maids as "The Help." Moreover, we saw first hands the hardships and challenges that these maids faced from start to finish in the film. They did so much manual labor for these white families that they eventually became known as "The Help," Some maids were referred to in this manner instead of by their actual names as depicted in the film.



Another critical concept I clustered was the usage of white power and **white privilege**. Throughout the entire film, we can see the usage of white power. Some wealthy families in the film would take advantage of the maids, overwork, and underpay them. We could see many maids, such as Aibileen, work for horrible families and barely get the recognition they deserve. Furthermore, most of these white families would be unappreciative of the Help and bark orders at them instead of treating them like people.

Another key concept that stood out was "**Separate but equal**." This terminology was frequent and repeated from start to finish of the film. This quotation and terminology were used to describe the separate bathrooms depicted in white homes. Many white families in the film had separate bathrooms from the Help, which was outdoors. Throughout the film, we could see the maids NOT being permitted to use the bathroom in the white homes but outside the existing homes.

Furthermore, throughout the film, we can see this terminology being utilized to benefit white families and harm the maids. A perfect example would be when Minny Jackson (played by Octavia Davis) tried to use the bathroom in her white boss's house. Minny was told to go outside to use the bathroom and get an "umbrella," even though a tornado was happening outside. Minny was not permitted to use the indoor bathroom but did so anyway and got fired as a result.

Another key finding would be the usage and symbolic utilization of the word "**Pie**." Pie was one of the most common words repeated from start to finish throughout the entire film. We could see people eating Minny Jackson's Jackson's pie and being fans of Minny's Minny's pie, while other people wanted to buy a pie from other maids who were considered "The Help." However, this dessert has a metaphoric criticism behind it. "Metaphor involves transferring, borrowing, or carrying over characteristics that apply to one object to a second object. When we

describe difficulties in romantic relationships using metaphors such as "bumpy road," we are describing a relationship using terms related to a journey" (Foss,2018, p.285) And that is what this dessert symbolizes. It symbolized a hidden metaphor that I was able to interpret. This dessert has two parts: the crust, which is the tough exterior, and the sweet and soft center.

Furthermore, as showcased in the film, this dessert represents this journey. The crust in this film (the hard shell) would be the concepts of white privilege and them being underpaid and overworked. Moreover, for this film, the actual pie (sweet center) would be when "The Help" got the justice they deserved by having their stories published. This metaphor symbolizes a challenging but sweet and rewarding journey for The Help maids from start to finish in the film.



**This photo of Octavia Spencer (Minny Jackson) is showing her holding her famous Pie.**

Another significant finding or critical concept I identified from start to finish throughout the film "The Help" would be the concept of the **Civil Rights Movement**. Throughout the film, we can hear people talking about the dangers of the Civil Rights Movement and hear people in white homes not talk about it because it can "offer guidance and give hope to The Help."

White people in this film needed extra hands, and the maids would provide this help to them. So when the concept of The Civil Rights movement was depicted in the film, many white people were opposed to it, and they did not want the maids to live in that hope that they could be seen as being equal to white people.

Another central concept that appeared a couple of times in the film but is super important, in my opinion, would be the depiction of **police brutality**. As seen in the film, we could see a perfect example of what police brutality could have looked like towards black people during this movement. In the film, one example of police brutality is when a maid named Yule Mae Davis, played by Aunjanue Ellis, gets arrested for theft. In the film, Yule Mae Davis is being dragged away by two white cops, and while she starts screaming for help, we can see her getting slammed onto the hood of the cop car.

Nevertheless, even after getting slammed or pushed onto the car's hood, we can see a white officer pick up his police baton and start beating her. While Yule Mae is being beaten, we can hear Aibileen, played by Viola Davis, say, "Do not fight it, Yule Mae" "Okay, she has had enough" While Aibileen is being forcefully pushed against the bus, she and Yule Mae get off . We could see two examples of aggressive treatment towards black people during this period. Furthermore, this was one of the least frequent but more impactful themes.



**Image of Yule Mae (Aunjanue Ellis) getting dragged away by two police officers while Aibileen (Viola Davis) is being pushed and pressed against a bus.**

Moreover, the film's most impactful finding and the least common theme is the depiction of **Friendships beyond color.** Throughout the film, we can see the friendship and proper treatment towards black people by Skeeter (Emma Stone) and Celia Foote (Jessica Chastain). Throughout the film, Skeeter has had good relationships with Help Maids. Her best friend was her maid, and when Skeeter found out that her maid, who was pretty much her second mother, had passed away, she cried unconditionally in the film.

We can also see Skeeter (Emma Stone) bonding with the maids from start to finish in the film. She would be seen going to the maids' homes, laughing with them, and even have private conversations with them, which were outside of normality at the time. Skeeter (Emma Stone) treats these maids like ordinary people who are not different from her, and when she gets them all to want to be interviewed for her book, it is one of the most impactful scenes in the movie. We could see 20+ maids all gathered in the same home as Skeeter telling Skeeter their stories of being help workers, and we could see them all touching and hugging Skeeter, which was considered unusual during the period that the film takes place. However, it was one of the most beautiful moments of the film.

Another depiction of Friendships beyond color would be when Celia Foote (Jessica Chastain) turns to Minny for advice. Throughout this friendship, we can see Celia cares for Minny as she sits next to Minny when she is eating, hugs and touches Minny, and confides in Minny when no one else will.

Celia also cooks with Minny, and we can see this friendship as one of the film's most treasured aspects as they have grown from strangers to friends. Minny trusts Celia, and Celia trusts Minny, and we can see Celia throw Minny a big grand dinner saying thank you for

everything she has done. It is another beautiful example of my theme of Friendships beyond color.



**Friendships beyond color examples. Celia Foote (Jessica Chastain) bonding with Minny (Octavia Spencer)**

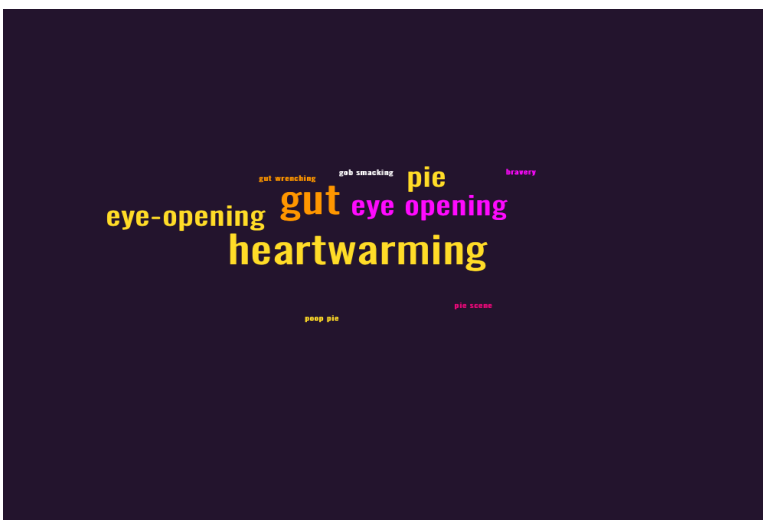
Overall these were some of the most common themes depicted in my study, and now it is time for a bonus section. How did other people perceive the film as a whole? I asked these questions and conducted my study/survey about the film, and here are my findings for my study.

#### **Findings from my own study:**

For this course, I created a Google form about the film “The Help.” I asked six simple questions such as: **Have you seen the film “The Help”?**, **What is one word that comes to your mind when you think of the film “The Help,”** **What is a second word that comes to your mind when you think of the film “The Help,”** **What is a theme you would use to describe the film “The Help,”** **What is a second theme you would use to describe the film “The Help,”** and **Overall rate the film on a scale from 1-5 (one being the worst- five being the best).** After asking these questions, I charted the responses and clustered the most common themes.

For my study, I sent out a Google form and had roughly 41 responses in the age frame from 18-22 years old. After asking them their ages, I asked the participants virtually if they had seen the film “The Help” and roughly 73.2% of the participants of my survey (30 people) had seen the film, while roughly 26.8% (11 people) had not seen the film at all.

After asking my participants, I asked them what words and themes stood out to them in the film and found the most common words amongst all of my responses were **“Gut-Wrenching, Heart-warming, Eye-opening, gobsmacking, etc.”**. Moreover, the most common themes among my respondents were **“Civil rights movement, hardship, racism, adversity, strength, friendship, injustice, civil rights activism, etc.”** After doing my research I realized that some of the terminologies and themes listed in my survey respondents matched my findings and the research I had conducted for this final project. Some of the themes and concepts were nearly Identical to those of my study, and some included new terminologies and words that I did not think of before after my study. Furthermore, attached are photos of the mini scholarly study I conducted and the word cloud I generated after inserting my findings.



**Left: Word cloud of the most common words in my study, Right: Word cloud of common themes in my study.**

**Contribution to Rhetorical Theory:**

The big picture from my research would be that cluster criticisms could be utilized in any media outlet, and we could do a cluster of criticism about anything at any time. We need to go the extra mile and do the research behind it. I believe that my analysis of the film “The Help” serves as a decent research model of how a cluster criticism analysis looks and how it is attributed to the researcher Kenneth Burke.

This two-part analysis is a good layout and example for adequately doing a cluster criticism analysis. Furthermore, to end my scholarly research paper, I will end it with a quote from Aibileen. “You are kind. You are smart. You are important.” – Aibileen.

## References

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